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## THE PROMISE OF RECONSTRUCTION

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The lawlessness in the South since the Civil War has varied in its phases. First, it was that kind of disregard for law which follows all war. Then it became a labor war, an attempt on the part of impoverished capitalists and landholders to force laborers to work on the capitalist's terms.<sup>1</sup>

W. E. B. DU BOIS

NEWLY EMANCIPATED FLORIDIANS rapidly grasped the connection between economic justice and electoral politics. African Americans believed that access to inexpensive farm land, the right to bargain with employers, free public schools, and the elective franchise were the keys of liberty. This was a broadly democratic vision that subordinated the whims of the powerful to the needs of the many. A black Floridian testified in 1867 that “[freedpeople] are all seeking lands for themselves and building houses to live in. Some have been fortunate enough to make five or ten bales of cotton and many bushels of corn. . . . We are all looking for the day when we shall vote, to sustain the great Republican Party.”<sup>2</sup>

The major outlines of the African American freedom struggle in Florida emerged in the early moments of Reconstruction in Marion County. A Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands agent, Jacob A. Remley, observed that African Americans in that rural county were organizing themselves “for religious worship [and] the mutual relief of one another in sickness and pecuniary distress.”<sup>3</sup> The agent noted that African Americans held an Emancipation Day ceremony attended by over one thousand black citizens in order to celebrate freedom and remember slavery.

African Americans sought the federal bureau's intervention to negotiate fair labor contracts with growers and to purchase land. Remley was clearly impressed: "I have daily applications from the Freedmen on the subject, and, it is the opinion of the Location Agent that at least five hundred Homesteads will be entered in this county."<sup>4</sup> In response to physical attacks by vengeful whites who would not accept the end of slavery, African Americans in Marion formed armed militia units to defend their communities. Remley was astonished to discover that "the freedpeople exhibit a knowledge of their political situation and their relations to it, which could scarcely be expected from a people heretofore prohibited from acquiring a knowledge of such matters." Large planters in the area were stunned that they could not persuade former slaves to vote as they directed them to.<sup>5</sup> African Americans emphasized mutual aid, labor struggle, historical memory, armed self-defense, and independent voting as cultural and political acts of survival and resistance in the years immediately following the Civil War.

Black Floridians chose the elective franchise as a primary weapon in the new war to guarantee their rights, and they initially looked to the Party of Lincoln to assist them. Shortly after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, a former slave by the name of Joseph Oats was elected by his Tallahassee peers to participate in a national delegation of African Americans who petitioned President Andrew Johnson for the right of suffrage.<sup>6</sup> Oats and his counterparts asked the new president to remember that he walked in the footsteps of the Great Emancipator. Frederick Douglass, the delegation's leader, bluntly told Johnson: "Your noble and human predecessor placed in our hands the power to assist in saving the nation, and we hope that you, his able successor, will favorably place in our hands the ballot, with which to save ourselves."<sup>7</sup> African Americans believed that the right to vote was an indispensable vehicle in the long and difficult road they would have to travel to gain true freedom.<sup>8</sup> A black Union soldier stationed at Jacksonville at the end of the Civil War made his case succinctly: "There is only one thing I want, that is *my vote*."<sup>9</sup>

Powerful forces opposed democracy in Florida. Individuals inside and outside the state hoped to transform Florida into what the *Fort Myers Press* and others called the "American Italy," a center of tourism and a commercial gateway to the world.<sup>10</sup> Florida was to become a land of fruit groves, resorts, and industries built on the backs of the freedpeople, who would toil for low wages with minimal citizenship rights that would in any case

be controlled from above. The Florida booster took many shapes and forms; nevertheless, whether he or she was Democrat, Republican, Wall Street financier, or state guidebook writer, the emphasis was on low wages, high profits, and white domination. As one white Republican official reasoned: “Colored labor is the cheapest, and therefore just the kind suited to the South in its present condition. This fact must have weight also with capitalists, for other things being equal, the returns from an investment must increase in proportion to the cheapness of the labor employed.”<sup>11</sup> The state’s boosters were obsessed with Florida’s investment climate relative to other states’—especially California’s—and touted cheap labor as the state’s great selling point.<sup>12</sup>

Florida boosters conceived of suffrage restriction—the act of preventing black workers from voting—as a strategy to promote a version of economic development that would be controlled from the top. In this regime of white business supremacy, African Americans were to be kept as powerless and poorly paid as possible. A fierce battle raged across Florida as white Floridians dueled with African American men and women over the meaning of freedom and the shape of Florida’s new economy.<sup>13</sup>

Transplanted northerners obsessed with creating a society that ran along “business lines” would over time help transform the Republican Party into a white-controlled organization that excluded black citizens from real political representation. Wisconsin immigrant Harrison Reed, who became Florida’s first Republican Reconstruction governor, was the archetypal Florida booster. According to historian Richard Nelson Current, Governor Reed did not support black suffrage and “wanted to join with . . . other prewar Floridians to form a party that could reconstruct the state in the way that would be best for business.”<sup>14</sup> Reed denounced black workers who refused to vote the way their employers did as “ignorant tenants” and sought to replace them with immigrants from “Minnesota and other Northwestern States.”<sup>15</sup> After succeeding in the state’s 1868 Constitutional Convention in limiting the number of elective offices in Florida, Reed wrote triumphantly to the conservative railroad magnate David Yulee, “Under our Constitution the Judiciary & State officers will be appointed & the apportionment will prevent a negro legislature.”<sup>16</sup> Republicans and Democrats would increasingly join hands across the political divide to dilute the effectiveness of the ballot in Florida.<sup>17</sup>

When African Americans in Florida fought for higher wages, voted independently, or tried to buy good land, they were targeted for repression.

Florida boosters associated equal citizenship with insurgency, high taxes, and “wasteful” methods of small farming that interfered with an imagined future of tourism, large farms, and extractive industries (especially timber, turpentine, and phosphate mining). Politics, the workplace, and legal segregation were fatally intertwined. Prophets of the New South who urged diversified industry, outside investment, and an end to dependence on cotton succeeded in Florida as in no other state.<sup>18</sup> Racial oppression would underwrite this growth strategy and create a Jim Crow system as brutal as anywhere in the Cotton South.<sup>19</sup>

## DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

At the dawn of Reconstruction, Harriet Beecher Stowe journeyed to her newly purchased St. John’s River plantation intent on building a new Florida. The author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* noted, “My plan of going to Florida, as it lies in my mind, is not in any sense a worldly enterprise . . . My heart is with that poor people whose course in words I have tried to plead, and who now, ignorant and docile, are just in that formative stage in which whoever seizes has them.”<sup>20</sup> Stowe believed ex-slaves needed the right to work more than they needed the right to vote. Like her brother Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Stowe believed that reconciliation between former slave and slave master should take precedence over politics:

Henry takes the ground that it is unwise and impolitic to endeavor to force negro suffrage on the South at the point of the bayonet. His policy would be, to hold over the negro the protection of the Freedman’s Bureau until the great laws of free labor shall begin to draw the master and servant together; to endeavor to soothe and conciliate, and win to act with us, a party composed of the really good men at the South.<sup>21</sup>

The author asked her youngest brother, the Rev. Charles Beecher, to set up a “line of churches” along the St. John’s River to train African Americans in the regimens of obedience and correct religious practice. The Episcopal Church, Stowe felt, was “the best system for training immature minds such as those of our negroes. The system was composed with reference to the wants of the laboring class of England, at a time when they were as ignorant as our negroes now are.”<sup>22</sup> A white Episcopal minister from New York who settled in Florida concurred in Stowe’s assessment, noting,

“I can heartily say that the colored man has my sympathy, that his condition commands it, and that I am anxiously solicitous to make him useful to himself and his employer. To effect this, kind feelings between him and the white man are essentially necessary; and I most earnestly hope that all who wish well to the poor African, will, in their efforts to benefit him, bear this in mind.”<sup>23</sup>

Work discipline, racial reconciliation, and submission to white authority—this philosophy eventually united former abolitionists, clergy, Republicans, northern editors, and southern entrepreneurs into a common world view that emphasized varying degrees of black subordination. Harriet Beecher Stowe posed the question commonly asked by Yankee investors and plantation owners alike: “Who shall do the work for us? Is the inquiry in this new State where there are marshes to be drained, forests to be cut down, palmetto-plains to be grubbed up, and all under the torrid heats of a tropical sun.”<sup>24</sup> Stowe assumed that African Americans were biologically better suited for toil in hot and humid weather than whites were.<sup>25</sup> The only problem, she believed, was that generations of toiling for no wages had destroyed the freedpeople’s work ethic.<sup>26</sup> She was going to have to teach them.

Stowe quickly became embroiled in a dispute with two African American domestic workers, “Minnah” and “Judy.” Neither woman was a stranger to the regimen of the plantation. Minnah’s back was severely scarred with lash marks that were, as Stowe admitted, “the tyrant’s answer to free speech.” But Stowe was unable to compel Minnah to work properly. “Such a heap of clothes to be washed all in one day! It was a mountain of labor in Minnah’s imagination,” Stowe marveled, “and it took all our eloquence and our constant presence to keep her in good humor. We kept at Minnah as the only means of keeping her at work.”<sup>27</sup> Stowe lamented that the newly emancipated domestic workers did not understand the value of a full day’s work. “Democracy never assumes a more rampant form than in some of these old negresses,” Stowe complained, “who would say their scree to the king on his throne, if they died for it the next minute.”<sup>28</sup>

The author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* portrayed Minnah as “kinky” and “argumentative” while referring to Judy as “a fat, lazy, crafty, roly-poly negress.”<sup>29</sup> Judy incurred Stowe’s wrath by downing her scrub brush and iron in order to fix regular meals for her husband, who was a foreman on the plantation. In Stowe’s eye’s, Judy had erred by letting family responsibilities take priority over domestic work. Stowe tightened up on work

discipline and began her “lessons” anew. While Minnah and Judy saw domestic labor as only one component of the day’s work rhythm—one that would have to be integrated with the tasks a black woman was expected to perform for her family and community—Harriet Beecher Stowe envisioned domestic labor as a total commitment.

Stowe demoted the troublesome Minnah to field labor and subsequently hired a “trained, accomplished, neat” African American cook from Jacksonville, but lost her also. The black woman left for Jacksonville to take up a better-paid position as a cook in a large hotel. “Such has been the good fortune of all the well-trained house-servants since emancipation,” Stowe blustered. “They command their own price.”<sup>30</sup> What the former antislavery advocate could not see was that the African American women were not interested in receiving lessons in how to work. They wanted fair pay, dignity, and a measure of control in the domestic workplace. After all, they were the ones doing the work. Most reform-minded whites seemed oblivious to this fact. “Instead of being teachable and submissive,” another white employer in Stowe’s neighborhood complained, “[Susy] is pert, makes answers and excuses—and still does not do what is required until after a good deal of insistence.”<sup>31</sup> From a newly freed worker’s perspective, however, this kind of negotiation over the terms of employment was perfectly logical. An African American minister affirmed, “It has been said that the Negro here will not work, that they are becoming indolent and vicious. The facts are, they have become tired of working without pay . . . those who have considered it their God-given right to swindle the negro out of the hard earned money due him are left without help.”<sup>32</sup> African American women creatively tried to expand the meaning of freedom in their workplaces, and dared to test out the new possibilities of emancipation.<sup>33</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s belief that African Americans were incapable of self-directed work coincided with the beliefs of native white southern employers.<sup>34</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois noted: “It was accepted as absolutely true by most planters that the Negro could not and would not work without a white master.”<sup>35</sup> A year before Stowe arrived in Florida, the state legislature took this ideology to its logical extreme. In tandem with their counterparts in the former Confederacy, Florida’s lawmakers passed a “Black Code” that subjected African Americans to forced labor as well as vagrancy and compulsory apprenticeship laws. The whipping post was the dominant method of punishment. Florida’s Black Code also mandated segregation in public transportation as well as in religious and public meetings. Interracial

marriage was forbidden, and assault on a white woman carried the penalty of death. White legislators denied black citizens the ballot, noting with satisfaction that their counterparts in Connecticut and Wisconsin had in effect recently done the same thing.<sup>36</sup> These infamous statutes would be struck down by the biracial democracy during Reconstruction. Nevertheless, the state would resurrect many of them as the foundations of legal segregation were laid in the final two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe's pen once thundered with righteous indignation about slavery, but she was strangely silent about Florida's draconian Black Codes, calculated to bring a return to slavery in her adopted state. Conversely, Stowe was positively joyous about the potential of Florida, publishing her observations in widely read publications such as the *New York Tribune*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's Magazine*, and encouraging northern migration to Florida. Stowe approved "all the money circulating in the State [that] comes from Northern immigrants," and she sought to provide these affluent immigrants with useful advice.<sup>38</sup> Like many of her northern contemporaries who were sympathetic to the freedpeople, Stowe could not envision African Americans as independent citizen workers with the ability to chart their own destinies. At best, she conceived of black people as a dependent working class. "We give the judgment of a practical farmer accustomed to hire laborers at the North and South," Stowe wrote, "and as a result of five years' experiment on this subject, he says that the negro laborer *carefully looked after* is as good as any that can be hired at the North."<sup>39</sup> Going one step further, an "Ex-Milwaukeean" farmer in Florida remonstrated, "They [black workers] are great, overgrown children, and the height of a darky's ambition is to sit on a jury or attend a political meeting."<sup>40</sup> He went on: "It is this uncertain condition of farm labor that has bankrupted very many northern men, who have come south since the war to raise cotton with 'free labor.'"

Democracy would have to take a back seat to development. James Woods Davidson, author of *The Florida of Today: A Guide for Tourists and Settlers*, lectured: "The future fortunes of the negroes are largely in the hands of the controlling race, and they themselves will probably have little to do in shaping it; and doubtless the less they have to do with it the better."<sup>41</sup> The Florida booster sold an image of Florida as the "Land of Flowers" where "sick Yankees" and wealthy Europeans would spend their money.<sup>42</sup> The *Edinburgh Courant* wrote: "What Italy is to Europe, Florida is to the States of America, but in a much more pronounced degree."<sup>43</sup> A developer from Leesburg boasted, "Our climate is unequalled by Southern

Italy, nor can Naples boast of bluer skies than ours, or Florence of sweeter moonlight than falls so softly on the unruffled waters of our lovely lakes.”<sup>44</sup> At the bottom of this entrepreneurial plan rested a disfranchised and powerless black population whose low wages and hard work would underwrite the booming agricultural, service, and shipping sectors.<sup>45</sup> In this scheme, the new Florida was to rest on compulsion not cooperation. One Florida booster wrote, “Some of the niggers are industrious and are doing well—in many cases they are doing better than the whites as they stand this hot climate better than the whites, but take them as a class, they are lazy and worthless, and will not work unless compelled by necessity.”<sup>46</sup>

In all post-emancipation societies the path of economic growth has had a decisive impact on the practice of democracy.<sup>47</sup> Just how “free” would newly freed black workers be? Larger industrial and agricultural interests sought to divert former slaves from exerting real political power because they believed that their investments were threatened by popular rule. The New York and Mobile Turpentine Company’s 1866 corporate prospectus presented this argument clearly:

The labor question, now nearly settled, has rendered all branches of industry in the South uncertain during the past year. This difficulty we no longer anticipate, as the freedmen, realizing that “liberty” does not mean “idleness,” but that to work is a necessity, remain more permanently on the plantations. The Southern men themselves are ready to treat fairly with their former slaves, and Northern men understand more fully the proper way in which to manage the peculiar disposition of the blacks. . . . Politics yield to business, and every one is striving to rebuild his shattered fortunes.<sup>48</sup>

Oliver Martin Crosby’s book *Florida Facts: Both Bright and Blue* epitomizes the philosophy of the Florida booster. *Florida Facts* was an investment guide for ambitious settlers and capitalists. Crosby wrote: “The Negro question in the South to-day is as unsettled as are the labor, socialistic, and emigration questions in the North, and with many characteristics in Unison. . . . The Negro Problem will assume a new form to even the most rabid abolitionist, after a residence in Florida.”<sup>49</sup> Independent African American laborers represented a threat to economic development. “While the African is as necessary in clearing away forests and in hard manual labor as the Irishman is at the North, now that he is free he has no

idea of working more than is barely necessary to keep him in pork and grits.”<sup>50</sup> Citing a northern employer who had relocated to Florida only to face off with an uncooperative black work force, Crosby asserted, “With all the progress claimed for the colored man, it will be ages before the negro as a rule is a thrifty, honest laborer, and a town where negroes are in the majority has an ‘incubus’ indeed.”<sup>51</sup> In Crosby’s New South, race, labor, politics, and economic growth were intertwined. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Florida Facts* was not a native Floridian; he wasn’t even a southerner. Indeed, Oliver Martin Crosby wrote “From a Northerner’s Standpoint” in order to aid “Intending Settlers, Tourists, and Investors” hoping to make their fortunes in Florida. His work was part of an avalanche of guidebooks, corporate prospectuses, and travel narratives that contributed to an emerging white consensus that the economic expansion of Florida depended on the subjugation of black labor.

#### FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHTS OF LABOR

Freedpeople articulated a distinctive political philosophy during Reconstruction that contrasted sharply with that promoted by outside financiers, plantation owners, and corporations. Black Floridians emphasized landownership and labor mobility as bulwarks against oppression. In the port towns, black workers organized unions, enforced work rules, and fought for shorter hours.<sup>52</sup> African American farm laborers attempted to use the short-lived Freedmen’s Bureau to bargain fair contracts with employers. African American workers believed that they would have to place firm limits on the power of former Confederate leaders, wealthy landowners (often the same individuals), and corporations in order to achieve a meaningful freedom. Leon County representative John Wallace invoked these values in an address he delivered before an audience of black union longshoremen in Pensacola. Wallace “pictured out, in glowing terms, the readiness of the rich to oppress the poor laborer. The [longshoremen] were present in large numbers, and declared that [former Confederate navy secretary] S. R. Mallory should not go to the Senate by their votes.”<sup>53</sup>

Land, labor, and freedom were discussed in tandem, and black Floridians decried the trend of giving land and power to corporations and large landowners. African Methodist Episcopal minister and state representative Charles Pearce told congressional investigators that black farmers

in Leon County “cannot get homes very well; the lands are owned by large land owners who are unwilling to sell their lands.”<sup>54</sup> A black correspondent in Jackson County reported that African Americans there tried to secure land to build small farms, but were often displaced by railroads and larger landowners.<sup>55</sup> When state legislators considered a bill in 1872 that would give more privileges to corporations, African American legislators from black-majority Leon County thundered back as a body:

Capital needs no legislation in order to provide for its use. Capital is strong enough to take care and provide for itself, but corporations are a dangerous power, especially large or consolidated corporations, and the American people fear them with distrust.

We want no Tom Scotts, Jim Fisks or Vanderbilts in this State to govern us, by means of which they would influence legislation tending to advance personal interests. The great curse of Florida has been dishonest corporations, rings and cliques, with an eye single to their central interest, and if this bill is suffered to pass this Assembly, in my opinion we may look for a continuation of abuses and a usurpation of the rights of citizens who may be opposed to the evil machinations such as are generally exerted by consolidated bodies.<sup>56</sup>

This resolution touched the core of Reconstruction-era black politics. If African Americans could find a way to stop capital from crushing the people, then Florida—as in the days of the Seminole and African alliance—could become a sanctuary from the tyranny of modern-day slave masters. A black reporter enthusiastically wrote: “Florida is destined to become the Negro’s new Jerusalem. . . . Her close proximity to Cuba, Hayti and Jamaica, makes her the great gateway between the negro tropical belt and the great Temperate Zone of the white race in the United States. . . . Here then the oppressed colored people of Georgia and intelligent and well-to-do colored men of the North must come and pitch their tents.”<sup>57</sup> When Rev. N. B. Sterett’s church was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan in Americus, Georgia, he found a safe haven in Quincy’s black community, where he was protected from white violence.<sup>58</sup> The vision of a new land that would welcome the oppressed was part of the core ideology of the black freedom struggle in Florida.

African Americans based their hopes on Florida’s large public domain—Florida had more than twice as much public land than any other southern state.<sup>59</sup> Black Floridians urged their counterparts to set up homesteads and find freedom. Bishop T. M. D. Ward of the African Methodist Episcopal

TABLE 1  
Population of Florida, 1860–1930

	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
1930	1,035,205	431,823
1920	638,153	329,487
1910	443,634	308,699
1900	297,333	230,730
1890	224,949	166,180
1880	142,605	126,690
1870	96,057	91,689
1860	77,746	62,677

SOURCE: U.S. Census Reports.

(AME) Church exulted during a visit to Florida: “The state is destined to be the home of the colored man and if the lust for power does not lead him to betray liberty, he will always wield an influence for good.”<sup>60</sup> One correspondent wrote of black Floridians: “They all believe that there is a bright future to dawn upon this land of flowers, and they are doing all they can to encourage immigration from other States. Florida can afford homes for thousands of colored families, where they can have advantages which they cannot have in other states.”<sup>61</sup> “I wish that the great mass of my own race, now struggling for a living in the cold regions of the North and West could be told of this land of promise,” wrote Rev. John R. Scott; “here they may secure beautiful and happy homes, and the means for educating their children.”<sup>62</sup>

Enhanced opportunities for landownership offered an alternative to white domination. When Francis Ellen Watkins Harper visited the state in 1870, she was told that nearly nine thousand African Americans had already become landowners.<sup>63</sup> “While I was in Florida a story was told to me,” wrote Harper, “of a man whose mistress, no longer able to grasp his right arm as her property, took away his tools; deprived of them he borrowed others and went to work, and in a short time bought some for himself, and he, as I understood, was the possessor of at least seven hundred acres of land.”<sup>64</sup> The sparseness of settlement in southern Florida provided opportunities even when landownership was not a possibility. Black farm workers were sometime able to negotiate higher wages in the southern part of the state and near the Everglades, where large landowners had difficulty recruiting labor.<sup>65</sup>

White Floridians believed that African Americans should become more faithful wage laborers—not landowners. Employers condemned ministers who preached about the iniquity of the wealthy, and Leon County plantation heiress Susan Bradford Eppes railed at one minister for teaching the verse: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>66</sup> After delivering a sermon in Alachua County, a black minister was accosted by two white men and criticized for the contents of his message. The minister’s account is revealing:

After he spoke to me he said, “I was just speaking to the Judge about your sermon last night and he said, ‘I think you ought to have gone a little further and said to your people that they ought to be faithful to their employers.’” I then ascertained from him that he was running a large farm and had a great many of our people employed and he thought they did not do enough for the money they were getting. Then I understood why I did not go far enough for him.<sup>67</sup>

Members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church played an important role in rural communities by promoting small farm ownership, independence, and the dignity of labor.<sup>68</sup> The “Industrial and Political” platform forged by a state AME convention in 1871 unanimously adopted a resolution praising African Americans for their efforts to avoid plantation labor and achieve autonomy:

Whereas labor is the basis of all wealth, and wealth is an absolute necessity of civilized society, and a peaceful condition of society, and security of life and property, a jealous regard for the rights of labor, are among the imperative duties of a well ordered government;

Resolved by the convention of ministers and laymen of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Florida, that we congratulate our people upon the rapid progress they have made in the past six years, and upon the increase of mixed industry, homestead and small farms in opposition to the ruinous plantation system. . . . we proudly point to these facts as a refutation of the slanders by our natural-born enemies, the democrats, that the freedmen do not work.<sup>69</sup>

African American ministers used the language of emancipation to exhort black Floridians to purchase their own homes and farms. Rev. Robert Brookens told his people in Baldwin: “In the first place a man without a home is a slave to the man that he rents from. . . . Now while our people are following up these lordly farmers they could all get settled

on some Government land that is near them and build Good houses, and let their families stay there and improve them.”<sup>70</sup> A white observer confirmed that black Floridians wanted to avoid toiling for Florida’s lordly farmers: “He longed to purchase one of God’s acres, where he could build his castle, and read his title clear.”<sup>71</sup> Black Floridians struggled to become landowners and small farmers, but these endeavors were fraught with difficulties. African Americans never gained a majority in the state legislature, and successive white-dominated Florida legislatures deeded hundreds of thousands of acres of land to English land syndicates and railroads.<sup>72</sup> Would-be farm owners faced significant barriers to landownership, even during the life of the Reconstruction-era Southern Homestead Act.<sup>73</sup> “Our people are steadily securing small homesteads for themselves,” wrote Rev. A. P. Miller from Lake City, “but not as generally as one might wish.”<sup>74</sup>

Conversely, the state’s boosters argued that black landownership discouraged wealthy growers from moving into Florida. The author of *A Guide into the South: An Open Gate to the Laborer, Large Returns to the Investor* tried to assure his readers that African Americans played no role in farm ownership or civic life in the state: “To those not understanding but who fear the presence of the Negro race we will state that the Negro is not in the way. He is not a land owner, except in a few instances, but lives, as a rule, in the quarter of the town set aside for him. . . . If you do not need him he does not bother you.”<sup>75</sup> Financial observers claimed that African Americans who staked out their own homesteads robbed the state of export income. A Marion County booster griped: “The lands now under cultivation on these homesteads will probably average fifteen acres to the homestead, making 18,000 acres which have been brought under cultivation within the last four or five years, mostly by the freed people. Yet this has not added to the material wealth of the county, but has been the cause of a less production of agricultural products, especially of corn.”<sup>76</sup>

Black Floridians also believed in the necessity of a strong, state-supported educational system that would help produce an autonomous citizenry. Education for all was to be a cornerstone of the Negro’s New Jerusalem. William Cullen Bryant spoke with a teacher in St. Augustine who told him, “the colored people were so eager to learn that she gave, last summer, lessons to the washerwomen at ten o’clock in the evening, after the labors of the day were over, and found others waiting at her door for their daily lessons at six o’clock in the morning, before their work was begun.”<sup>77</sup> Black Floridians working through church and civic organizations had to scrimp and scrape to supplement the state’s educational system by

raising money from hard-pressed members. By 1871, the African Methodist Episcopal Church alone had organized forty-eight Sabbath schools responsible for educating over 2,500 children.<sup>78</sup> After a fund-raising event held by the AME in St. Augustine in which church members pledged to raise \$400 for education, a black correspondent wrote: “We are poor this year, but we hope in the future to be able to do more.”<sup>79</sup> Emanuel Fortune reported that African Americans in Jackson County took up arms to defend their schoolhouse from whites who tried to physically destroy black education in their county.<sup>80</sup>

Conservative Democrats saw black education as a dangerous proposition because it led to bad work habits and high taxes. A white editor insisted: “No, education does not solve the [Negro] problem. This fact is now so well recognized that many of our people are getting tired of paying taxes to give the negro an education which tends rather to his ruin than to his betterment. He is spoiled as a laborer. He leaves the country to seek the town, and ekes out a precarious living ‘in ways that are dark and tricks that are vain.’ He looks upon ordinary everyday work as degrading, and hankers after a ‘perfeshun.’”<sup>81</sup> The code phrase “getting tired of paying taxes” became a way of talking about race without mentioning race itself.<sup>82</sup>

#### INTELLIGENCE SHALL RULE THE COUNTRY INSTEAD OF THE MAJORITY

Conservative or “Bourbon” Democrats favored the same powerful institutions that African Americans most distrusted: plantations, large employers, and railroads. As a result, the Democratic Party failed to recruit large numbers of African Americans to its banner.<sup>83</sup> Democrats confirmed suspicions that they were the defenders of unearned privilege with crude depictions of slavery as a benevolent institution. A white political operative in Jefferson County explained why the Democrats repelled most black voters:

A few of us have made an effort to direct political opinion among the newly enfranchised and if the old champions of Whigism and democracy of former days would give us the reins free and untrammelled, we could direct the storm but on the contrary we can never have a political meeting, that some political fossil does not regale the past with its political bearings (entirely unpalatable to the Negro). As well as Slavery and its blessings, generally winding up with a sigh for the good old days again. Thus every effort however well directed is lost by these vain regrets.<sup>84</sup>

African American women also foiled Democratic recruitment efforts. Like their sisters elsewhere in the South, black women viewed the elective franchise as a resource to be wielded for the good of the community, not just the individual.<sup>85</sup> Women defended polling places from white incursion, inflicted violence on black men who offered to sell their votes, and threatened would-be Democratic husbands with divorce.<sup>86</sup> When Gethro Robinson tried to vote for the Democrats in Madison County, “his sister pulled him out of line, and told him if he voted that way that she would get help and give him a good beating.”<sup>87</sup> African American women also engaged in the art of public humiliation to shame black men into supporting the Party of Lincoln. On one occasion, female activists confronted a man leaning toward the Democratic ticket. Brandishing a black baby dressed up in chains, “they made a fearful noise, crying and screaming and told [the man] he was selling their children all into slavery.”<sup>88</sup> African American women used their identities as mothers, wives, and sisters to convince black men that they too had a stake in electoral politics.<sup>89</sup>

Agricultural employers found that African American workers held distinctive political opinions that they could not effectively control. Some plantation owners halted operations, as one observer wrote, “chiefly because the planters did not wish to encourage more negroes to come into the country, as they were already so formidable a political element.”<sup>90</sup> A transplanted New Yorker complained: “It is always something of an astonishment to find how well posted these otherwise ignorant negroes are on political matters, local events, or any important occurrence; they seem to have a secret sort of freemasonry by which they learn everything going on.” This observer explained, “In all their camps were individuals who did the reading and writing; read the newspapers aloud, read the letters received by their less intelligent companions, and wrote the letter and postal-card replies.” He then snarled: “Ignorant, but very cunning and unscrupulous, they would be a terribly dangerous element of society, were it not for their well-known fear of fire-arms, and their naturally peaceful disposition.”<sup>91</sup> Frustrated in their bid for black support, conservatives turned ever more decisively in the direction of coercion and suffrage restriction.

The duel for labor control became an all-out war in Florida. At the forefront of the conservative scheme for economic improvement was the idea of a powerless and landless African American labor force.<sup>92</sup> One of the instruments chosen to achieve this goal was the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>93</sup> Black Floridians testified that KKK violence was directed by plantation owners