



CARPETBAGGERS & SCALAWAGS

During and immediately after the Civil War, many northerners headed to the southern states, driven by hopes of economic gain, a desire to work on behalf of the newly emancipated slaves or a combination of both. These “carpetbaggers”—whom many in the South viewed as opportunists looking to exploit and profit from the region’s misfortunes—supported the Republican Party, and would play a central role in shaping new southern governments during Reconstruction. In addition to carpetbaggers and freed African Americans, the majority of Republican support in the South came from white southerners who for various reasons saw more of an advantage in backing the policies of Reconstruction than in opposing them. Critics referred derisively to these southerners as “scalawags.”

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REPUBLICAN RULE IN THE SOUTH

In the two years following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and the end of the Civil War in April 1865,

Lincoln's successor Andrew Johnson angered many northerners and Republican members of Congress with his conciliatory policies towards the defeated South. Freed African Americans had no role in politics, and the new southern legislatures even passed "black codes" restricting their freedom and forcing them into repressive labor situations, a development they strongly resisted. In the congressional elections of 1866, northern voters rejected Johnson's view of Reconstruction and handed a major victory to the so-called Radical Republicans, who now took control of Reconstruction.

DID YOU KNOW?

African Americans made up the overwhelming majority of southern Republican voters during Reconstruction. Beginning in 1867, they formed a coalition with carpetbaggers (one-sixth of the electorate) and scalawags (one-fifth) to gain control of southern state legislatures for the Republican Party.

Congress' passage of the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 marked the beginning of the Radical Reconstruction period, which would last for the next decade. That legislation divided the South into five military districts and outlined how new state governments based on universal (male) suffrage—for both whites and blacks—were to be organized. The new state legislatures formed in 1867-69 reflected the revolutionary changes brought about by the Civil War and emancipation: For the first time, blacks and whites stood together in political life. In general, the southern state governments formed during this period of Reconstruction represented a coalition of African Americans, recently arrived northern whites ("carpetbaggers") and southern white Republicans ("scalawags").

CARPETBAGGERS

In general, the term "carpetbagger" refers to a traveler who arrives in a new region with only a satchel (or carpetbag) of

possessions, and who attempts to profit from or gain control over his new surroundings, often against the will or consent of the original inhabitants. After 1865, a number of northerners moved to the South to purchase land, lease plantations or partner with down-and-out planters in the hopes of making money from cotton. At first they were welcomed, as southerners saw the need for northern capital and investment to get the devastated region back on its feet. They later became an object of much scorn, as many southerners saw them as low-class and opportunistic newcomers seeking to get rich on their misfortune.

In reality, most Reconstruction-era carpetbaggers were well-educated members of the middle class; they worked as teachers, merchants, journalists or other types of businessmen, or at the Freedman's Bureau, an organization created by Congress to provide aid for newly liberated black Americans. Many were former Union soldiers. In addition to economic motives, a good number of carpetbaggers saw themselves as reformers and wanted to shape the postwar South in the image of the North, which they considered to be a more advanced society. Though some carpetbaggers undoubtedly lived up to their reputation as corrupt opportunists, many were motivated by a genuine desire for reform and concern for the civil and political rights of freed blacks.

SCALAWAGS

White southern Republicans, known to their enemies as "scalawags," made up the biggest group of delegates to the Radical Reconstruction-era legislatures. Some scalawags were established planters (mostly in the Deep South) who thought that whites should recognize blacks' civil and political rights while still retaining control of political and economic life. Many were former Whigs (conservatives) who saw the Republicans as the successors to their old party. The majority of the scalawags were non-slaveholding small farmers as well as merchants, artisans and other professionals who had remained loyal to the Union

during the Civil War. Many lived in the northern states of the region, and a number had either served in the Union Army or been imprisoned for Union sympathies. Though they differed in their views on race—many had strong anti-black attitudes—these men wanted to keep the hated “rebels” from regaining power in the postwar South; they also sought to develop the region’s economy and ensure the survival of its debt-ridden small farms.

The term scalawag was originally used as far back as the 1840s to describe a farm animal of little value; it later came to refer to a worthless person. For opponents of Reconstruction, scalawags were even lower on the scale of humanity than carpetbaggers, as they were viewed as traitors to the South. Scalawags had diverse backgrounds and motives, but all of them shared the belief that they could achieve greater advancement in a Republican South than they could by opposing Reconstruction. Taken together, scalawags made up roughly 20 percent of the white electorate and wielded a considerable influence. Many also had political experience from before the war, either as members of Congress or as judges or local officials.

Article Details:

Carpetbaggers & Scalawags

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Website Name

History.com

Year Published

2010

Title

Carpetbaggers & Scalawags

URL

<http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/carpetbaggers-and-scalawags>

Access Date

April 07, 2016

Publisher

A+E Networks

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