

# Freedmen and Women

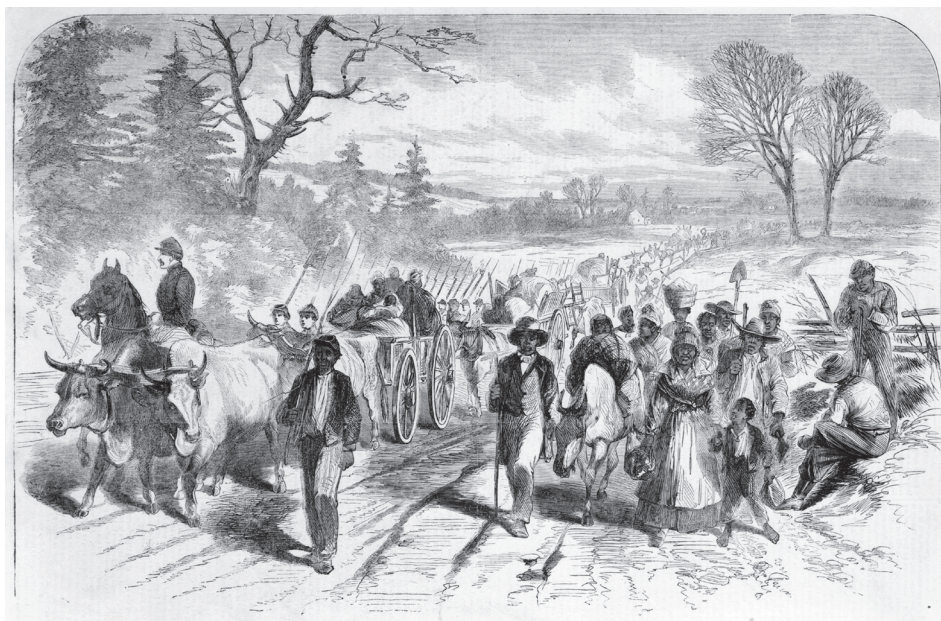
**1865/1866:** And now the war is over. This is a joyous time. The horrors of slavery have ended. In millions of gestures, large and small, Black people in America resisted slavery from its very beginning in 1619. You won your freedom and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery once and for all. All through the summer of 1865 there have been parades and celebrations. It's a time of unbelievable excitement, but also apprehension. What exactly does freedom mean? What kind of lives will you have now? True, you are free to leave the plantation. You are free to go North. Free to travel. Free to seek out lost family members who had been sold off. But you're also free to starve, free to be attacked by angry whites seeking revenge, free to be kicked out of your homes by defeated plantation owners.

Consider all the problems you face: Even though you have lived your entire lives in the South working to make white people rich, you yourselves own nothing. The shack you live in is owned by your former owner. Same with all the tools, work animals, and seed. Even the clothes you have on are owned by your ex-master. Most important, you own no land. For the last 250 years, enslaved Black people were robbed of their labor and their knowledge in order to make white people rich and now in "free-

dom" you own absolutely nothing. Without land you will always be dependent, always forced to serve the property owners. You want to farm your own land, and grow food for your family.

And there are other problems: At least 90% of you are illiterate. Under slavery it was a crime to teach a slave to read or write. Some learned anyway, but most had no opportunity. Most of you own no guns. Almost all firearms are owned by your former masters and the whites who fought for the Confederacy. (Remember, however, that the Union Army still occupies much of the South, and some Union soldiers used to be held in slavery, like you.) Also you have no political rights: You can't vote or hold office.

Long ago, your people were kidnapped in Africa, stuffed into the bellies of stinking slave ships, stripped of your language, dumped in a strange land, punished for practicing your religion, frequently separated from your family members, and forced to labor with a whip at your back. The wealth of this country, both South and North, is because of *your* labor, *your* skills, *your* knowledge. You've suffered too much—and whites have profited too much—for you to be forced to wander the countryside as beggars. This is not your idea of freedom.



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*Freed African Americans heading into Newbern, North Carolina. Harper's Weekly, Feb. 21, 1863.*