Who Controls the Work?

Land, labor, and freedom after emancipation

SS24.US1.13c "Explain how ownership of one's own labor and land were equated with freedom by freedpeople, and describe emerging labor systems that sought to limit this freedom in the former Confederacy."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two ways freedpeople defined freedom, then circle two barriers to that freedom. Draw an arrow from each barrier to the freedom it limited.

Freedom to Work and Farm

1. After emancipation in 1865, a freed family might ask two practical questions: Who decides where we work, and who owns the ground we farm? Under slavery, enslavers claimed both the labor of enslaved people and the crops it produced. Freedom meant choosing an employer, negotiating pay, keeping earnings, and refusing work that split families apart. Many freedpeople also sought land of their own. A farm could provide food and income without a former enslaver directing each day. Owning land was not guaranteed by emancipation, however, and most freed families lacked the money to buy it.

2. With little land available to them, many freedpeople became sharecroppers. A landowner provided a plot, and a family worked it in exchange for a share of the crop. This arrangement could let a family farm together rather than work under a daily supervisor. Yet the family did not own the land. To get food and supplies before harvest, many families bought on credit, often at high interest. After harvest, the crop share might not cover the debt. Some agreements required the family to plant cotton instead of food crops, limiting its ability to feed itself and earn money independently.

3. Other freedpeople worked for wages, but the right to choose an employer faced legal barriers. In several former Confederate states, Black Codes passed in 1865 and 1866 punished people who had no job contract or were labeled vagrants. Fines could lead to forced labor if people could not pay. Some laws also restricted when workers could leave a contract. Federal action later overturned many Black Codes, but unfair contracts and debt remained obstacles. Freedom on paper did not always give freedpeople control of their time, earnings, or land. Their demands for wages they could keep and farms they could own were demands for power over their lives.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did keeping wages change the meaning of work for freedpeople compared with slavery?

2. Why could owning a farm give a freed family more control over its life?

3. How could sharecropping both support and restrict a freed family's freedom?

4. How did the Black Codes turn the absence of a job contract into a threat to freedpeople's control over their labor?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you advise a freed family choosing between a sharecropping agreement that requires store credit and a wage contract with a penalty for leaving early. In 80 to 110 words, recommend one agreement, explain a risk in each, and propose one contract change that would increase the family's freedom. Use evidence from the passage.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 10 · SS24.US1.13c

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two ways freedpeople defined freedom, then circle two barriers to that freedom. Draw an arrow from each barrier to the freedom it limited. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did keeping wages change the meaning of work for freedpeople compared with slavery?	**Under slavery, enslavers claimed enslaved people's labor and its products. Keeping wages meant freedpeople could benefit from their own work.**
2	Why could owning a farm give a freed family more control over its life?	**A family could grow food and earn income on its own land without a former enslaver directing its work.**
3	How could sharecropping both support and restrict a freed family's freedom?	**It could let the family farm together without a daily supervisor, but the family did not own the land. Debt or requirements to grow cotton could limit its choices.**
4	How did the Black Codes turn the absence of a job contract into a threat to freedpeople's control over their labor?	**People without contracts could be punished as vagrants. Those unable to pay fines could face forced labor, limiting their ability to choose when and where to work.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would choose the wage contract, but only if the pay and end date were written clearly. Wages might let the family save toward land, while sharecropping could leave them owing money after harvest. The wage contract still threatens freedom because a penalty for leaving could trap workers with an unfair employer. I would ask to remove that penalty and allow either side to end the agreement with notice. This change would protect the family's power to choose where to work. If the employer refused, I would reconsider sharecropping, but I would check the credit terms first.

Accept either recommendation if the student explains a risk in each agreement, proposes a specific change that increases control over labor or earnings, and supports the reasoning with the passage.