Freedom and Its Limits

Examine how Reconstruction laws changed rights and daily life

USH.C.1.1.C "Examine the meaning and effects of the Reconstruction Amendments (13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments) and the Civil Rights Act of 1867, assessing the extent to which each enabled social, political, and economic change."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline what each law or amendment protected, circle limits on its impact, and label one social, one political, and one economic effect S, P, or E.

Rights on Paper, Change in Practice

1. After emancipation, a freed family could leave a plantation, but freedom alone did not supply land or a fair contract. The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in 1865, abolished slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime. The federal Civil Rights Act of 1866 declared most people born in the United States citizens and protected rights to make contracts, own property, and use courts regardless of race. Some officials refused to enforce these rights. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, established national citizenship and required states to provide equal protection of the laws. Neither measure gave families farmland.

2. In 1867, Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts, not a Civil Rights Act. The federal Civil Rights Act was passed in 1866. The Reconstruction Acts placed most former Confederate states under military oversight and required new state constitutions that allowed Black men to vote before those states regained representation in Congress. The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, prohibited denying a citizen the vote because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. It did not guarantee voting rights to women. Poll taxes, literacy tests, and intimidation later blocked many Black voters. Legal protections could open political doors without keeping them open.

3. Imagine a Black carpenter in the South in 1870. Because slavery was abolished, he could seek wages instead of being owned. The 1866 law could help him sign a work contract or bring a case in court, but employers might still offer low pay. Equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment gave him a basis to challenge unequal state laws, although winning a case could be difficult. Voting protections and the 1867 rules for rebuilding state governments could give him a voice in elections, but threats might keep him from the polls. Together, these changes expanded freedom without ensuring safety or wealth.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Thirteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 create different economic possibilities for a freed worker? What remained uncertain?

2. How did the 1866 act and the Fourteenth Amendment change a person's legal standing? Give one reason those protections might not have worked in practice.

3. How did the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and the Fifteenth Amendment expand political power for Black men? What limited that change?

4. Why would calling the 1867 Reconstruction Acts the Civil Rights Act blur the difference between the changes these laws made?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write one paragraph evaluating whether new legal rights meant equal opportunity for the carpenter in 1870. Use evidence from at least two different measures in the passage, include a social, political, and economic effect, and explain one limit.

ANSWER KEY

Freedom and Its Limits

HIGH SCHOOL · USH.C.1.1.C

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline what each law or amendment protected, circle limits on its impact, and label one social, one political, and one economic effect S, P, or E. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Thirteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 create different economic possibilities for a freed worker? What remained uncertain?	**The Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, allowing a worker to seek wages. The 1866 act protected the right to make contracts, but neither ensured fair pay or land.**
2	How did the 1866 act and the Fourteenth Amendment change a person's legal standing? Give one reason those protections might not have worked in practice.	**The act declared most U.S.-born people citizens and protected access to courts; the amendment established national citizenship and required states to provide equal protection. Officials might refuse to enforce rights, or a court case might be difficult to win.**
3	How did the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and the Fifteenth Amendment expand political power for Black men? What limited that change?	**The 1867 acts required new state constitutions allowing Black men to vote, and the Fifteenth Amendment barred vote denial based on race, color, or previous servitude. Intimidation, poll taxes, and literacy tests later blocked many voters.**
4	Why would calling the 1867 Reconstruction Acts the Civil Rights Act blur the difference between the changes these laws made?	**The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1866 and protected rights such as making contracts and using courts. The 1867 Reconstruction Acts set rules for rebuilding state governments and expanding Black men's voting.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

New legal rights expanded the carpenter's opportunities, but they did not give him equal opportunity in practice. The Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, changing his social status from an enslaved person to a free person. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 protected his right to sign a work contract, which could help him earn wages. The Fifteenth Amendment protected his vote from denial based on race, giving him a chance to influence elections. Still, an employer could offer low pay, and threats could keep him from voting. The laws opened choices that he might struggle to use.

Accept other passage-based limits, including weak enforcement or difficulty winning a case. Students should distinguish the Civil Rights Act of 1866 from the Reconstruction Acts of 1867.