Freedom and Farmland

How Black Codes restricted work and access to land after the Civil War

USH.C.1.2.B "Explain the reasons for adoption of Black Codes immediately following the Civil War and their limitations on economic opportunities and property ownership."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two reasons lawmakers adopted Black Codes, circle two restrictions on work or land, and draw an arrow from each circled restriction to a sentence explaining its economic effect.

A Family Seeking Work and Land

1. In 1865, a freed family in Mississippi might look for paid work and a place to farm. Slavery had ended, but many white lawmakers and plantation owners wanted to keep a dependable supply of low-cost farm labor. They also wanted to preserve the power they had held over Black workers before emancipation. State legislatures across the South passed Black Codes, laws aimed at controlling the lives and work of formerly enslaved people. These laws differed by state. They did not restore slavery in name, but they used the law to narrow the choices that freedom was supposed to bring.

2. Some Black Codes required freedpeople to sign yearly labor contracts. A worker who left an employer before a contract ended could face a penalty, even when the job paid poorly. Vagrancy laws treated people without recognized work as offenders. Those who could not pay fines might be hired out to employers to work off the debt. These rules made it risky to search for better wages or work independently. By limiting workers' ability to leave, lawmakers helped landowners hold on to a workforce when formerly enslaved people were seeking control over their own labor.

3. Land offered one possible route to independence: a family could grow food and earn money without relying entirely on a plantation owner. Yet Mississippi's 1865 Black Code barred freedpeople from renting or leasing land outside incorporated towns. A family that could not lease rural farmland would have fewer chances to farm for itself. Low wages and penalties also made saving to buy land harder. This was not a nationwide ban on Black property ownership; the rules varied among states. Still, limits on work and access to land kept many freedpeople from turning legal freedom into economic independence.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did many white lawmakers and plantation owners support Black Codes, and how could yearly labor contracts serve their goal?

2. How could a vagrancy law and the penalty for an unpaid fine limit a freedperson's choice of work?

3. Why would Mississippi's restriction on leasing land outside towns limit a freed family's economic opportunities?

4. Even without a nationwide ban on Black property ownership, how could Black Codes make it harder for freedpeople to buy land?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a five-sentence letter to a relative who thinks freedom alone guarantees an independent farm. Explain why lawmakers adopted Black Codes, show how two different rules could affect your family's choices about work and land, and suggest one goal your family could still pursue.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USH.C.1.2.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two reasons lawmakers adopted Black Codes, circle two restrictions on work or land, and draw an arrow from each circled restriction to a sentence explaining its economic effect. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did many white lawmakers and plantation owners support Black Codes, and how could yearly labor contracts serve their goal?	**They wanted to preserve control over Black workers and keep low-cost farm labor. Yearly contracts made it difficult for workers to leave for better jobs.**
2	How could a vagrancy law and the penalty for an unpaid fine limit a freedperson's choice of work?	**A person without recognized work could be fined, then hired out to an employer if unable to pay. This made searching for other work risky.**
3	Why would Mississippi's restriction on leasing land outside towns limit a freed family's economic opportunities?	**It kept the family from leasing rural farmland where they could grow food and earn money independently.**
4	Even without a nationwide ban on Black property ownership, how could Black Codes make it harder for freedpeople to buy land?	**Labor restrictions could hold workers in low-paid jobs, while penalties could cost them money. Both made saving to buy land harder.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Freedom did not erase the efforts of white lawmakers and landowners to keep cheap labor and control over Black workers. A yearly labor contract could tie our family to low-paid work instead of letting us seek a better job. In Mississippi, the 1865 rule against leasing land outside incorporated towns would block us from renting a rural farm. We could look for paid work and try to save for property, though low wages would make that difficult. Other states had different rules, so we should not assume every family faced the same land restriction.

Accept other passage-supported links between lawmakers' goals, specific restrictions, and economic effects. Students should not claim that every state banned Black land ownership.