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## Introduction

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## Introduction

*by Dennis J. Mitchell*

In an effort to address the backlog in the publication of *The Journal of Mississippi History*, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) and the Mississippi Historical Society decided to publish three vintage issues. This third issue that addresses the Reconstruction era follows two earlier vintage issues on the early history of the state and the Civil War. In selecting articles for these vintage issues, we have used *Journal* articles published before the 1970s.

Reconstruction has undergone a completely revised interpretation since these articles were first published. Initially, it was viewed by most of the nation's leading historians as a period of corruption and domination by Radical Republicans and freedmen who were unprepared to exercise their new political rights. The South was finally redeemed when it threw off its Northern shackles and reestablished the political dominance of white Democrats.

Modern historians reject this view. Today Reconstruction is seen as a time of significant social and political progress for African Americans. The great tragedy of the era is that these positive changes were short-lived due to racist attitudes that were pervasive throughout the nation during the nineteenth century. In the South, these beliefs led to white vigilantism and voter intimidation to block black voter participation.

Nevertheless, some of the earlier articles published about Reconstruction are still insightful for the modern reader. During his long career at Mississippi State University, John K. Bettersworth

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provided Mississippians with many glimpses into the complicated, often overlooked aspects of Mississippi's Civil War and its aftermath. Betterworth's editing of James A. Lyon's wartime journal establishes that not all Mississippians supported the Confederacy, and the minister's bitterness toward the Confederate leadership establishes the difficulty of the "Reconstruction" sought by Lyons and his son.

Winbourne Magruder Drake's analysis of the 1865 Mississippi Reconstruction Convention provides insight into a confused and somewhat murky period of the state's history when Mississippi attempted to re-enter the Union. Writing as professor Drake did in a segregated society, he is too generous in his estimate of the "moderation" of the members of the convention. Nonetheless, his article provides a valuable account of the convention for the benefit of today's readers, who may wish to consult more recent scholarship on this subject.

William B. Hesseltine, lead author of the article on the postwar careers of Mississippi's Confederate leaders, was a legendary professor at the University of Wisconsin, where he trained a generation of prominent historians and produced numerous works of historical significance. His co-author, Larry Gara, was lesser known but gained notoriety for being fired in 1962 from Grove City College after being labeled a communist. The amazing aspect of this article, given Hesseltine's passivism and Gara's radicalism is that they failed to hint at any criticism of the former Confederate leaders for the direction in which they led Mississippi after the Civil War.

Nollie W. Hickman taught at Perkinston Junior College (now Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College) and Northeast Louisiana State College (now University of Louisiana at Monroe) and researched the timber industry of the Piney Woods. The industry that he described grew during the Reconstruction period to be the second most important economic engine in the state after cotton. As he demonstrated in this article, Hickman mastered his subject and no details escaped his attention.

Student volunteers from Millsaps College (Emma McRaney, Angel Williams, Connor Dunne, Gwyneth McDonough, Braxton Thomas,

and Madison Brennan) transcribed these vintage articles. Two volunteers – Julia Marks Young, the retired director of the MDAH Archives and Records Services Division, and Amanda Kaminer, an adjunct professor in the Department of History and Political Science at Mississippi College – painstakingly proofread each article for accuracy. MDAH director emeritus Elbert Hilliard also did a final reading of the articles, noting minor changes that were needed to accommodate various provisions of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. In some instances, commas have been inserted as needed to separate independent clauses, and brackets have been used to indicate editorial changes. In a few instances, additional information has been included in incomplete footnote citations.

One difficulty of reprinting older articles is that some of the language used in the articles is not only outdated, but sometimes offensive. While the Mississippi Historical Society would never publish a new article using such language, we have reprinted these articles verbatim to reflect the scholarship as it was presented at the time. Each article is a product of its time and place, but is included because it contains relevant information that I used to write *A New History of Mississippi*.

I hope you enjoy reading about the history of Reconstruction in these articles that were first published more than half a century ago.

