

# BLACK CITIZENSHIP

## IN THE AGE OF JIM CROW



**Black Americans gained monumental new liberties after the Civil War and the end of slavery.** The era known as Reconstruction brought freedom, citizenship, and, for men, the right to vote. By the early 1900s, these liberties had been sabotaged by a repressive racial system known as Jim Crow.

This exhibit chronicles the long strides forward, bruising setbacks, and heroic struggle for equality that took place during these years.

Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

NEW-YORK  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY  
MUSEUM & LIBRARY

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Portrait of Dred Scott by an unidentified artist  
New-York Historical Society

# FIGHTING TO BELONG

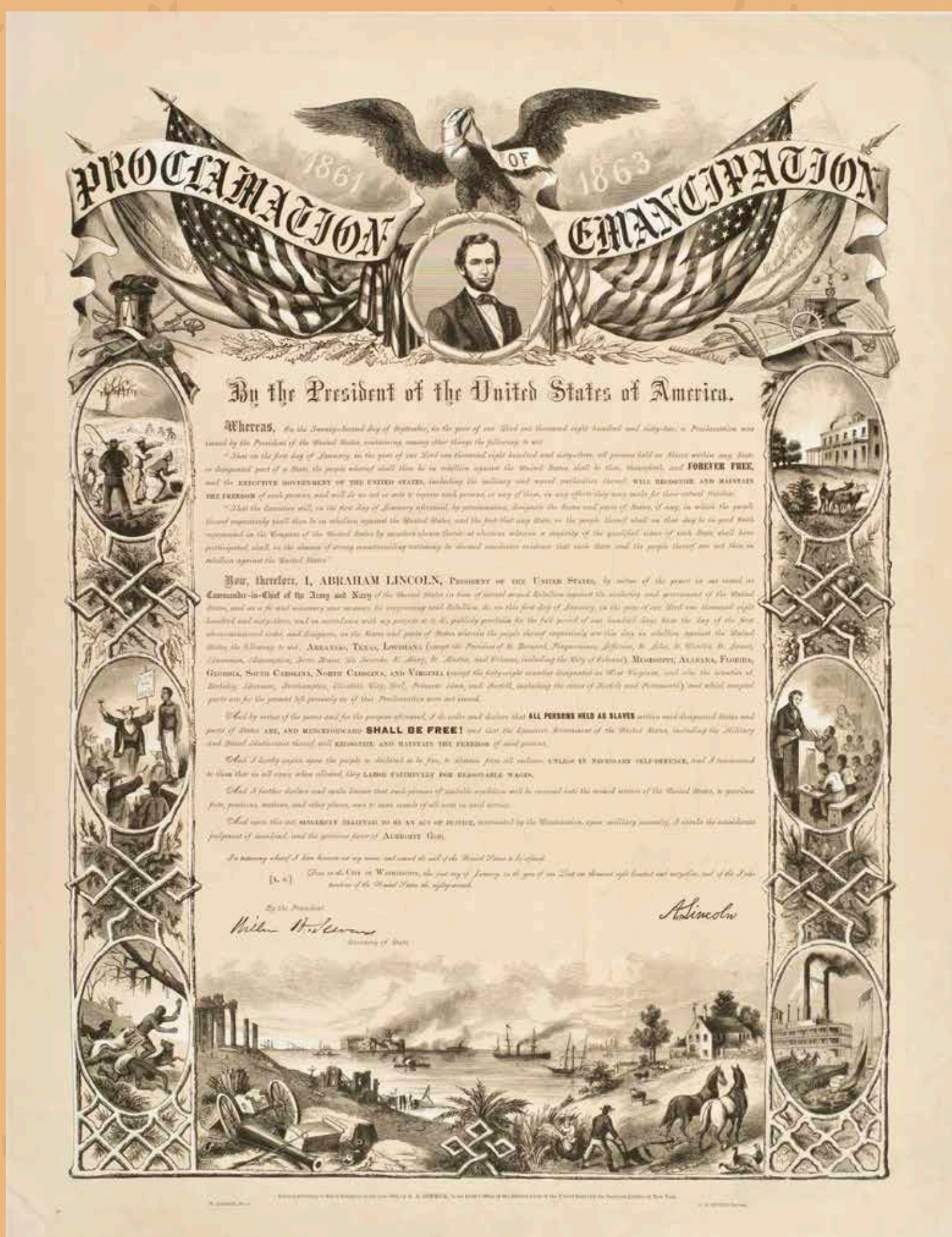
Dred and Harriet Scott sued for their freedom from slavery. Their lawsuits had a chance of success because the Scotts had lived in free states with their owners.

Dred's case reached the Supreme Court in 1857. The justices decided against him, saying that he could not sue because he was not a citizen. Further, they ruled that no African American could ever be a US citizen. The decision angered abolitionists, emboldened slave owners, and widened the breach between North and South.

Then, in 1860, Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, won the presidency. Southern states in favor of expanding slavery seceded and formed the Confederacy. The nation erupted into war. African Americans tried to join the Union's military but were turned away until the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation allowed black men to enlist.

When the Civil War ended, black soldiers made up ten percent of the North's forces.

Following the Union's victory in 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution permanently abolished slavery in the United States. But the Dred Scott decision still barred black Americans from US citizenship.



President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, declaring that most persons held as slaves in the rebellious states were free.  
New-York Historical Society



Thomas Waterman Wood, *A Bit of War History: The Recruit*, 1865. Metropolitan Museum of Art

*Abraham Lincoln*  
"Let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States."  
—Frederick Douglass, 1863



Harriet Tubman nursed the Civil War's wounded and sick and led an intelligence-gathering band of black scouts and river pilots.

Alison Saar, *Swing Low: A Harriet Tubman Memorial*, 2007. New-York Historical Society



# RECONSTRUCTION BEGINS

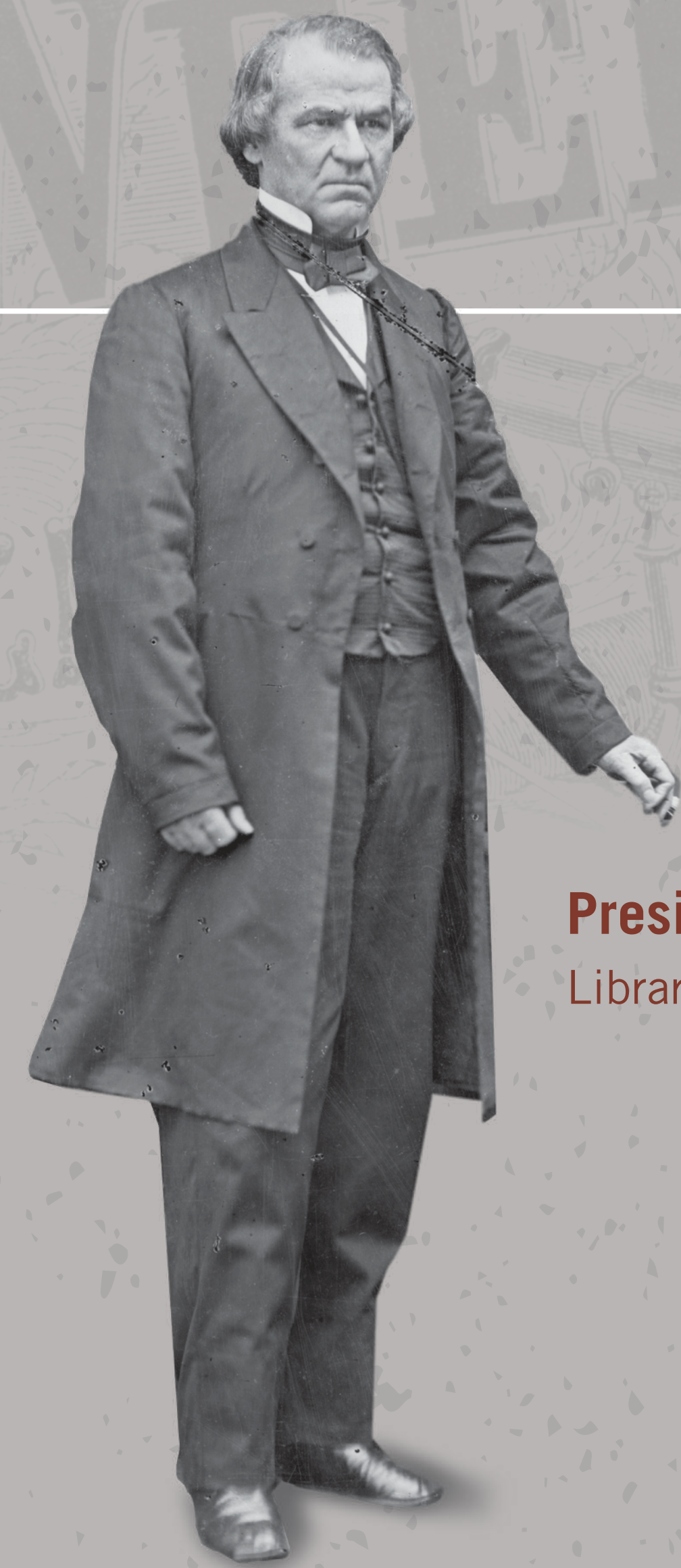
## 1865–1870

**Just days after the war ended, a Confederate sympathizer killed President Lincoln.** Vice President Andrew Johnson, a Tennessee Democrat and former slave owner, became president. Congress was controlled by Republicans. Many of them were abolitionists. The White House and Congress began a tug-of-war over the rights of African Americans and the nation's future.

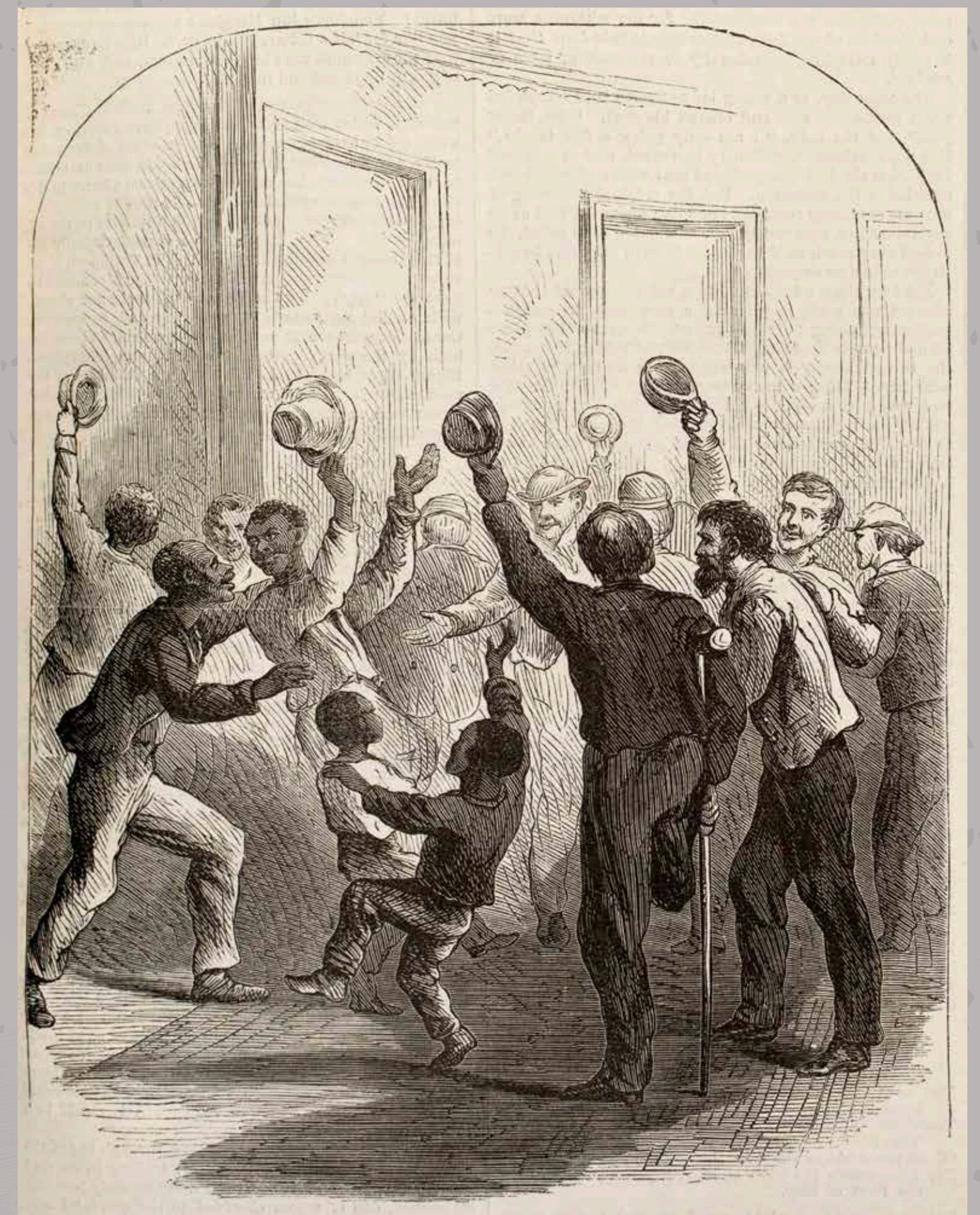
President Johnson treated the white South with leniency. He crippled the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency set up to help former slaves. He made it possible for white Southerners to reelect former Confederates and pass state laws restricting black rights. When vigilantes terrorized African Americans, government officials looked the other way.

Congress responded by placing Southern states under military control and enacting civil rights legislation over Johnson's veto. Congress also passed the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. This secured equal rights before the law for all—and citizenship for anyone born in the US, including African Americans. As a condition for rejoining the Union, Southern states were forced to ratify the 14th Amendment and grant the vote to all their male citizens, regardless of color. In 1870, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution extended suffrage to all black men, nationwide.

Despite the turmoil of the Johnson years, or perhaps because of it, by 1870 African Americans were members of the national community.

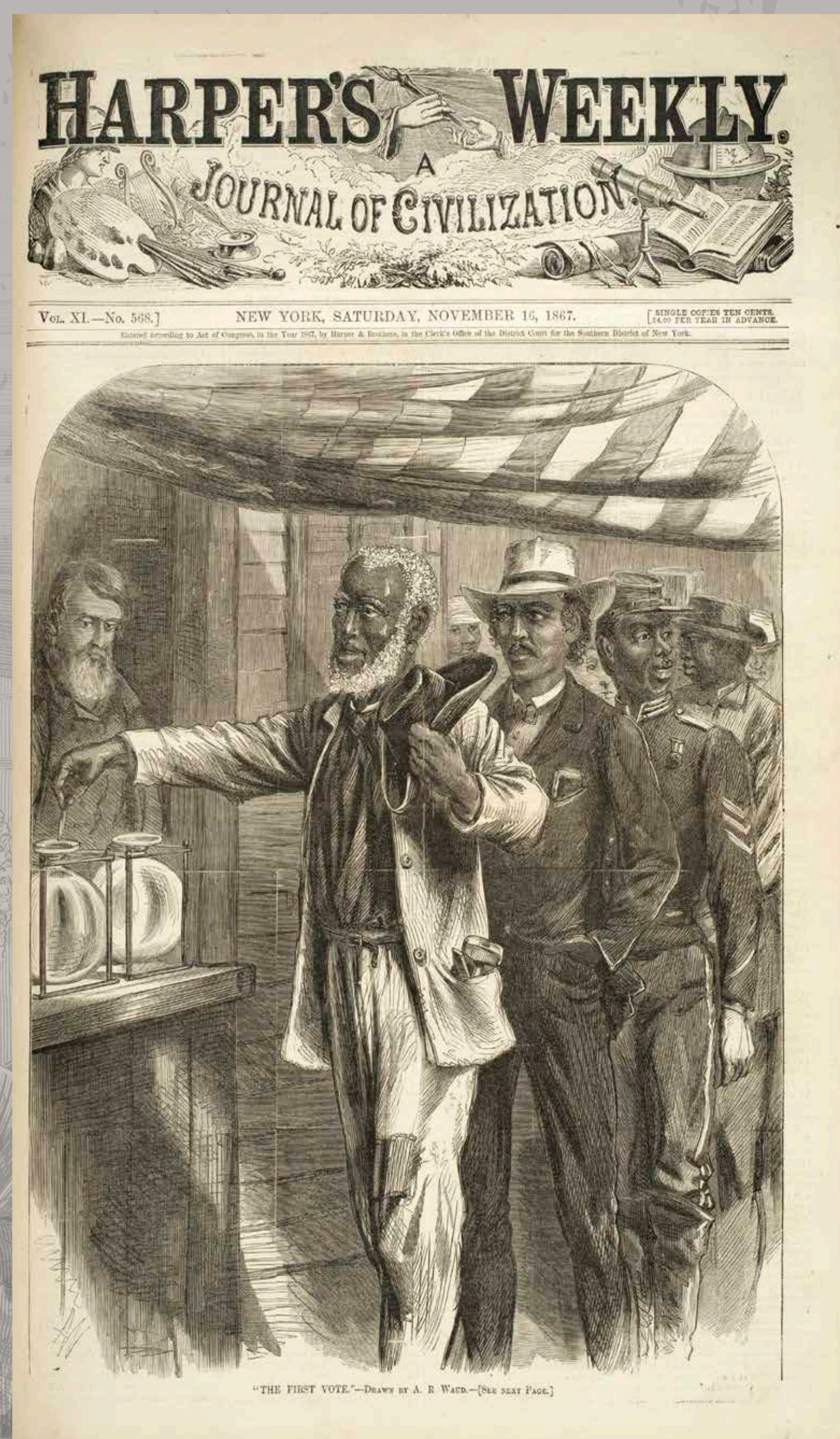


**President Andrew Johnson**  
Library of Congress



**This celebration cheered passage of the 1866 Civil Rights Bill, which became the basis for the 14th Amendment.**

New-York Historical Society Library



**"The First Vote," 1867**  
New-York Historical Society Library



# PRIORITIES OF FREEDOM



Sergeant Samuel Smith of the US Colored Infantry with his wife Mollie and their two daughters

Library of Congress

**America was founded on revolutionary principles.** Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Democracy and equality. African Americans newly freed from slavery defined what these concepts meant to them. They took steps they had previously only dreamed of, often against the determined opposition of whites.



Newly freed African Americans learned to read and write.

New-York Historical Society Library

## LIFE

Now able to move freely, former slaves searched for loved ones who had been sold away. They chose their own surnames and decided where to build new lives. Couples made unrecognized marriages official.

## LIBERTY

Freed blacks hoped to own land and control their own labor. They believed the federal government should assist them, since they had helped build the nation and fight the war. But President Johnson chose not to redistribute confiscated land to African Americans, instead returning it to former Confederate owners. Most blacks remained poor and economically dependent on white landowners.

## PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

African Americans eagerly sought out opportunities long denied to them. They learned to read and write so they could start businesses, read the Bible, and send letters in search of relatives. They built schools and universities, sometimes with help from Northern supporters. They established independent black churches, creating a base of social and political power in the process.

## DEMOCRACY AND EQUALITY

African Americans took to heart the self-evident truth in the Declaration of Independence: All men are created equal. Black men exercised their new right to vote and ran for elected office. Their participation in local elections and state constitutional conventions created the first interracial governments in the United States. Black women, unable to vote, joined political clubs and electoral campaigns.



Hiram Revels served as the first black Senator, one of 2,000 African American officeholders during Reconstruction.

New-York Historical Society Library



# RECONSTRUCTION ENDS

## 1870–1877



In *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, artist Winslow Homer captured the shifting social relations in the South. Smithsonian American Art Museum



This Ku Klux Klan robe belonged to Joseph Stewart of Tennessee. The Klan was founded in 1865 in order to reinforce white power by terrorizing African Americans. The familiar white robe came later.

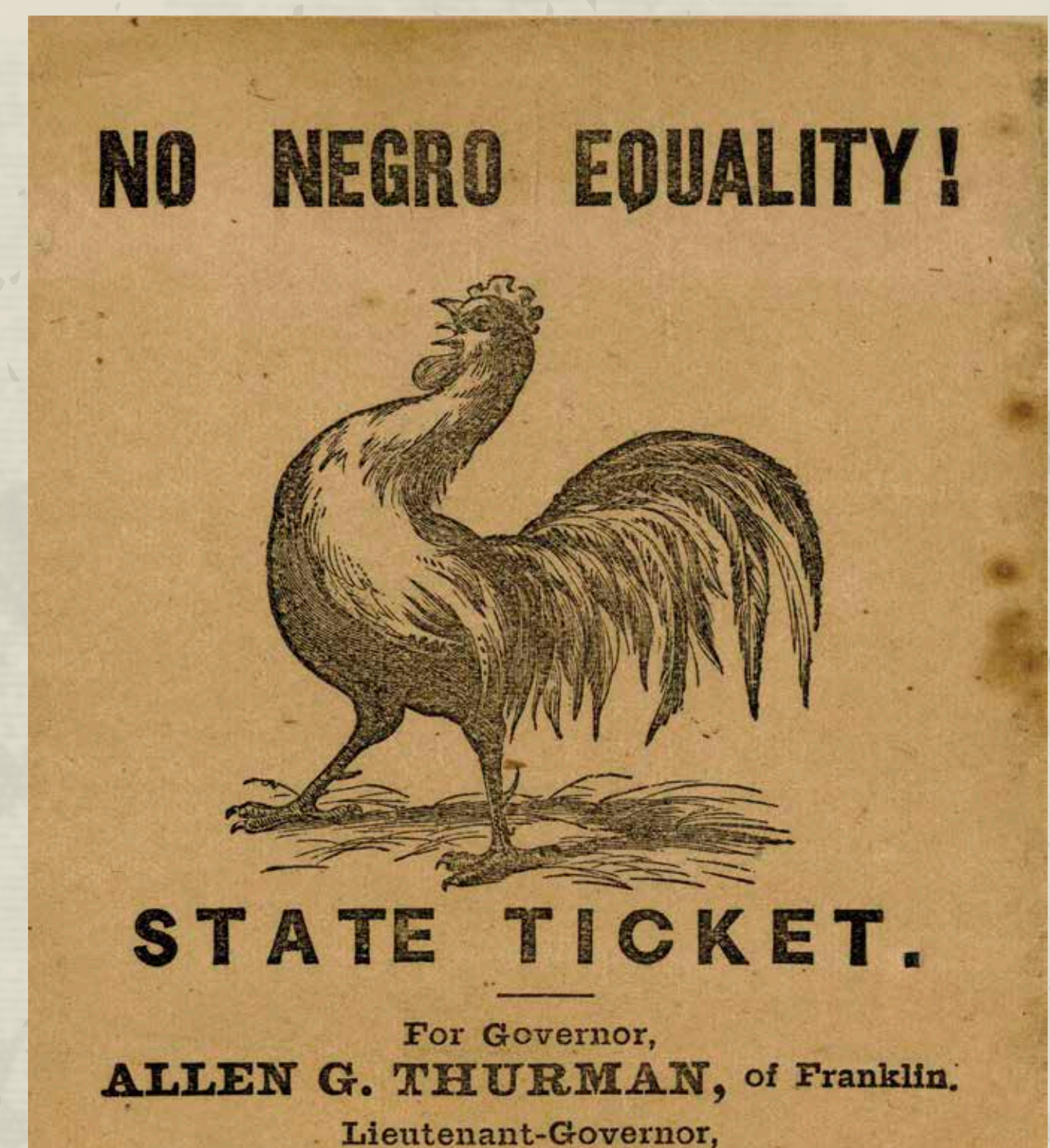
Chicago History Museum

**The Reconstruction struggle for black freedom and equality produced historic advances.** Though falling short of the hopes of African Americans, these gains still aroused deep hostility among those accustomed to white rule.

Southern Democrats took extreme steps to reinstate white supremacy. They ousted black office holders and used violence and threats to stop black men from voting. Little by little, Democrats pushed Republicans out of state governments and retook power.

At the same time, Northern support for Republicans, and for black rights, crumbled. Distracted by an economic depression, Northerners grew tired of the South's troubles.

An electoral stalemate during the 1876 presidential election led to a disastrous compromise. Democrats agreed to support Republican Rutherford B. Hayes for president. Republicans agreed to withdraw remaining federal troops from the South. This ended Reconstruction, twelve years after it began.



Ohio state election ballot, 1867

National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



Unity, 1876

American Social History Project, CUNY



# THE RISE OF JIM CROW

## 1877–1900



White Democrats used both illegal and legal measures to stop African Americans from voting.

New York Public Library

After Reconstruction ended, a forbidding system of racial discrimination pervaded the country. Jim Crow made it all but impossible for African Americans to exercise their new rights.

The South produced the most extreme displays of Jim Crow. Black passengers rode in segregated train cars. Black voters faced high fees that few could pay and literacy tests that few could pass. Sharecropping and convict-labor systems forced black workers into slavery-like conditions. Lynchings surged, and those responsible were rarely charged.

Jim Crow took different forms outside the South. Northern businesses flooded the nation with commercial art and goods that presented black people as inept, ridiculous, lesser, or dangerous. These falsehoods were legitimized by historians and scientists. While many Northern blacks could vote, they faced discrimination in housing and public accommodations.

Throughout the country, African Americans resisted Jim Crow's ruthless landscape by banding together, fighting back, and taking care of their own. But in 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that public facilities could be segregated on a "separate but equal" basis. This decision solidified white dominance for years to come.



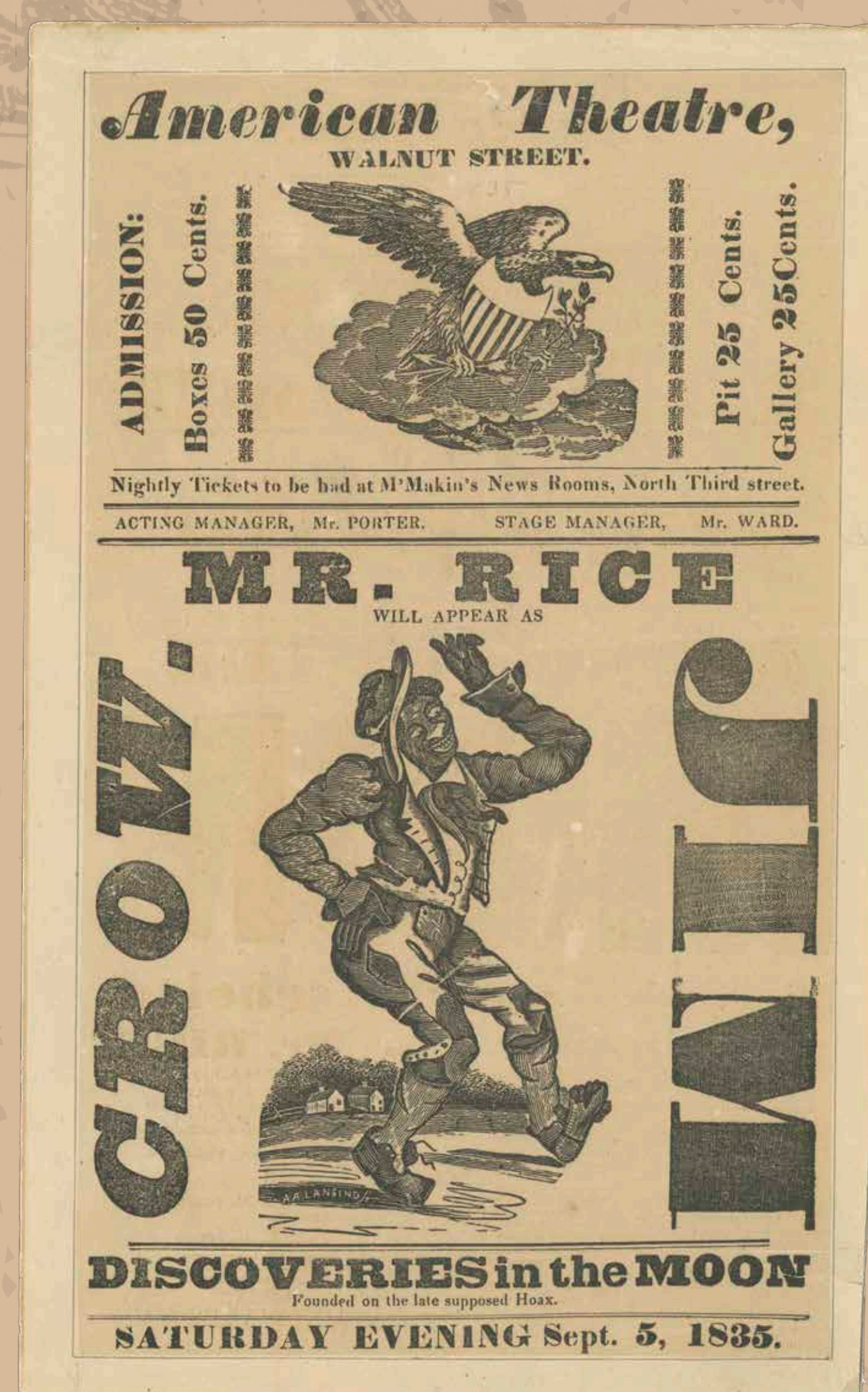
Southern chain gang, 1900

Library of Congress



Segregated transit signs

National Museum of American History,  
Smithsonian Institution

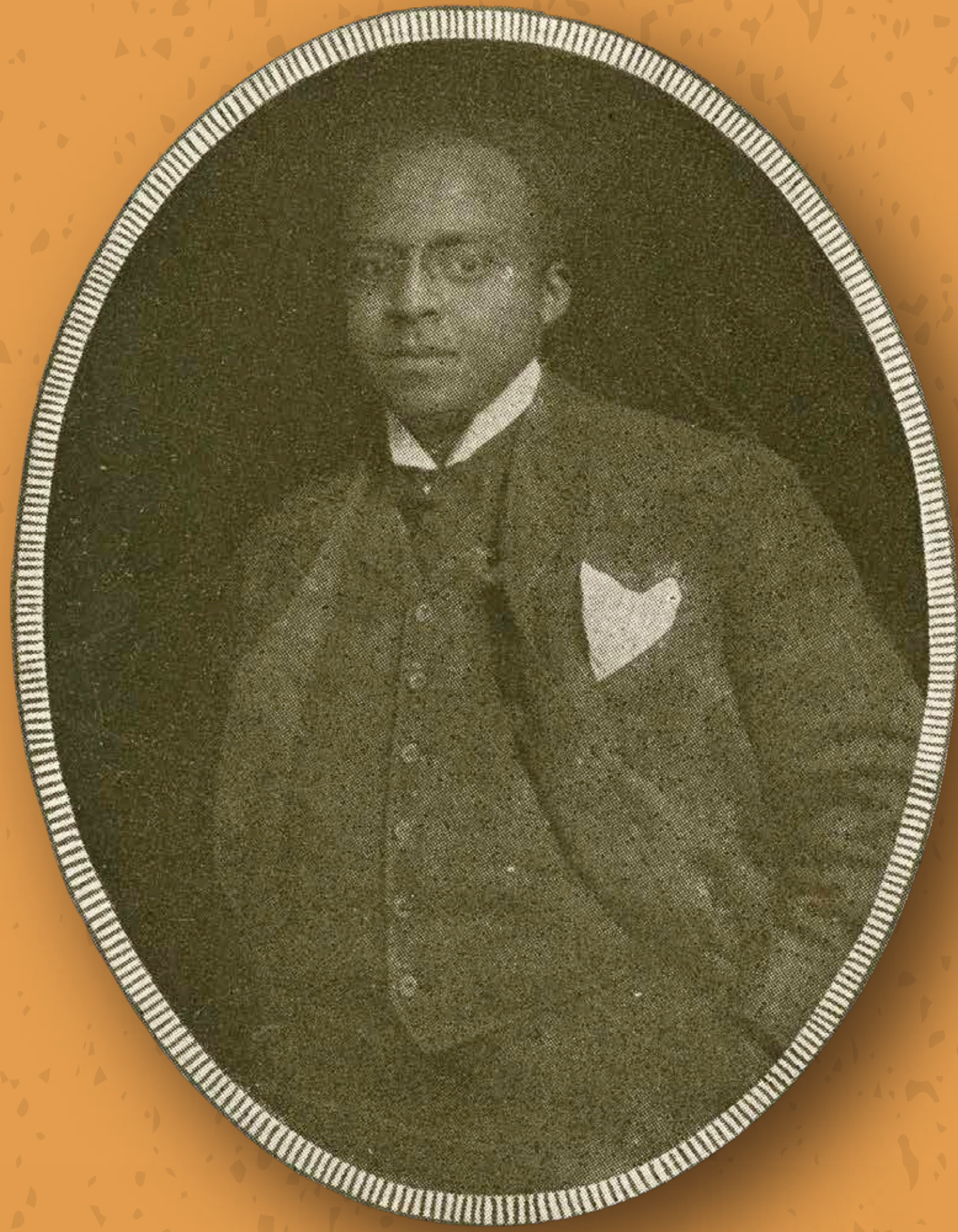


Jim Crow was a blackface minstrel character created in the 1820s by New Yorker Thomas Rice, a white stage performer. The character's name later became attached to legal and social measures meant to subjugate African Americans and guarantee white dominance.

New-York Historical Society Library



# BUILDING BLACK HARLEM



**Philip Payton**

Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library

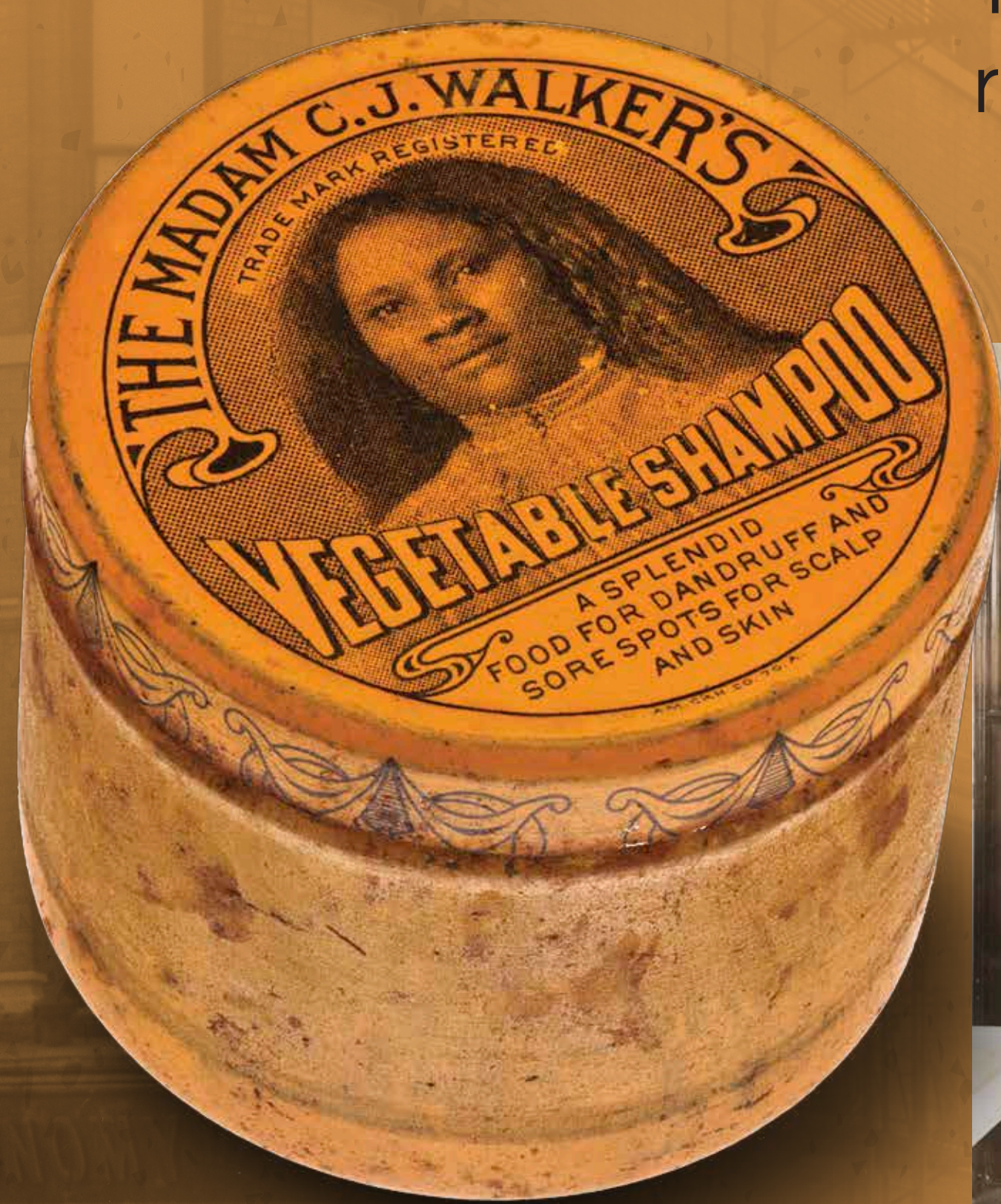
In 1900, Harlem was a white neighborhood of New York City, and landlords evicted black renters to keep it white.

The tide turned quickly after black entrepreneur Philip Payton began buying Harlem buildings and renting only to black tenants. Large numbers of African Americans moved to Harlem, seeking the safety and community of a black neighborhood. They came from the South, from the Caribbean, and from downtown neighborhoods plagued with race riots.

Harlem became an epicenter of black cooperation. Mutual aid organizations like the White Rose Mission provided services for black female migrants who needed resources and a place to stay. St. Philip's Episcopal and other churches provided fellowship and spiritual guidance. Black-owned businesses, from small shops to Madam C.J. Walker's beauty empire, saved Harlem residents from the abuse often met in white establishments. New political organizations coordinated marches to protest racial violence. At a Harlem intersection known as the Speaker's Corner, Hubert Harrison spoke to large crowds about class consciousness and racial pride.

## Hair product

New-York Historical Society



**Madam C.J. Walker's salon  
on West 136th Street**

Museum of the City of New York



**Teachers of the White Rose Mission**

Columbia University Library