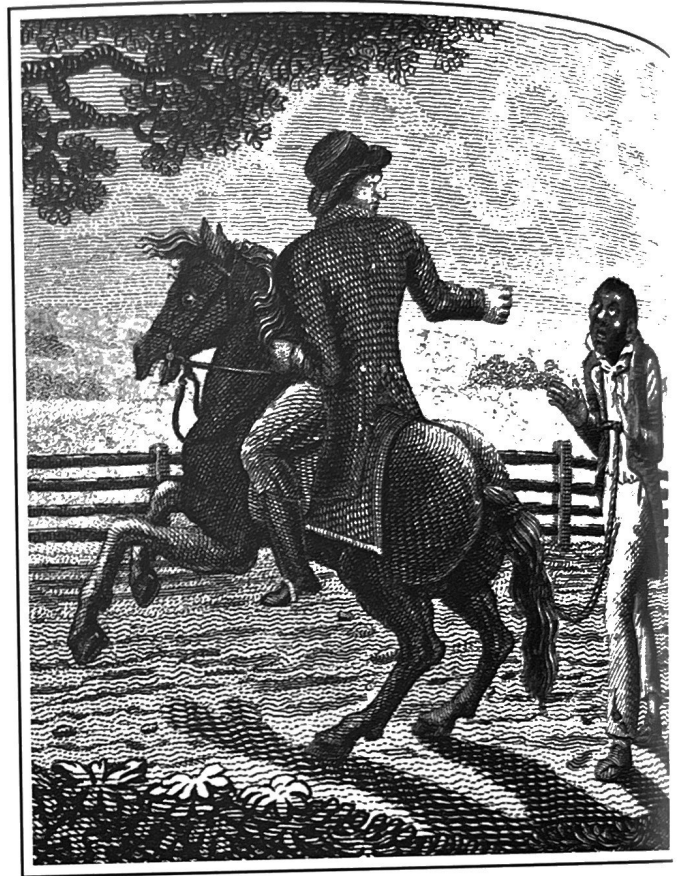


# HOW FREE IS FREE?

*If I cannot do like a white man I  
am not free.*

—former slave Henry Adams to  
his master, 1865



“Freedom,” a black minister once said, “burned in the black heart long before freedom was born.” For many African Americans, the end of the Civil War was not only an end to their lives as an enslaved people, it was also the start of a new life full of promise and peril. No longer did they need to fear their masters’ power. The early morning bells that summoned them to their work and often measured out the hours of their day lay silent. They were free to move about, to visit, to worship, and to work as they chose. Yet, as one former slave from Virginia recalled, the feelings of freedom were more complex than simple exhilaration:

They [African Americans] were like a bird let out of a cage. You know how a bird that has been long in the cage will act when the door is opened; he makes a curious fluttering

for a little while. It was just so with colored people. They didn't know at first what to do with themselves. But they got sobered pretty soon.

Beneath the joyous celebrations were questions and doubts. What did it mean to be free? How did one live as a freedman? Could the former slaves survive without their masters' help? Would their former owners and other white Southerners recognize and respect black rights? Would they be safe? These and other concerns lessened the joy of the former slaves as they set out to create new lives for themselves among a hostile white community.

### **“SLAVERY IS DEAD”**

At the end of the war, the editor of a Georgia newspaper expressed the feelings of many white Southerners when he declared:

The different races of man, like different coins at a mint, were stamped at their true value by the Almighty [God] in the beginning. No contact with each other—no amount of legislation or education—can convert the negro into a white man. . . . The negro cannot claim equality with the white race.

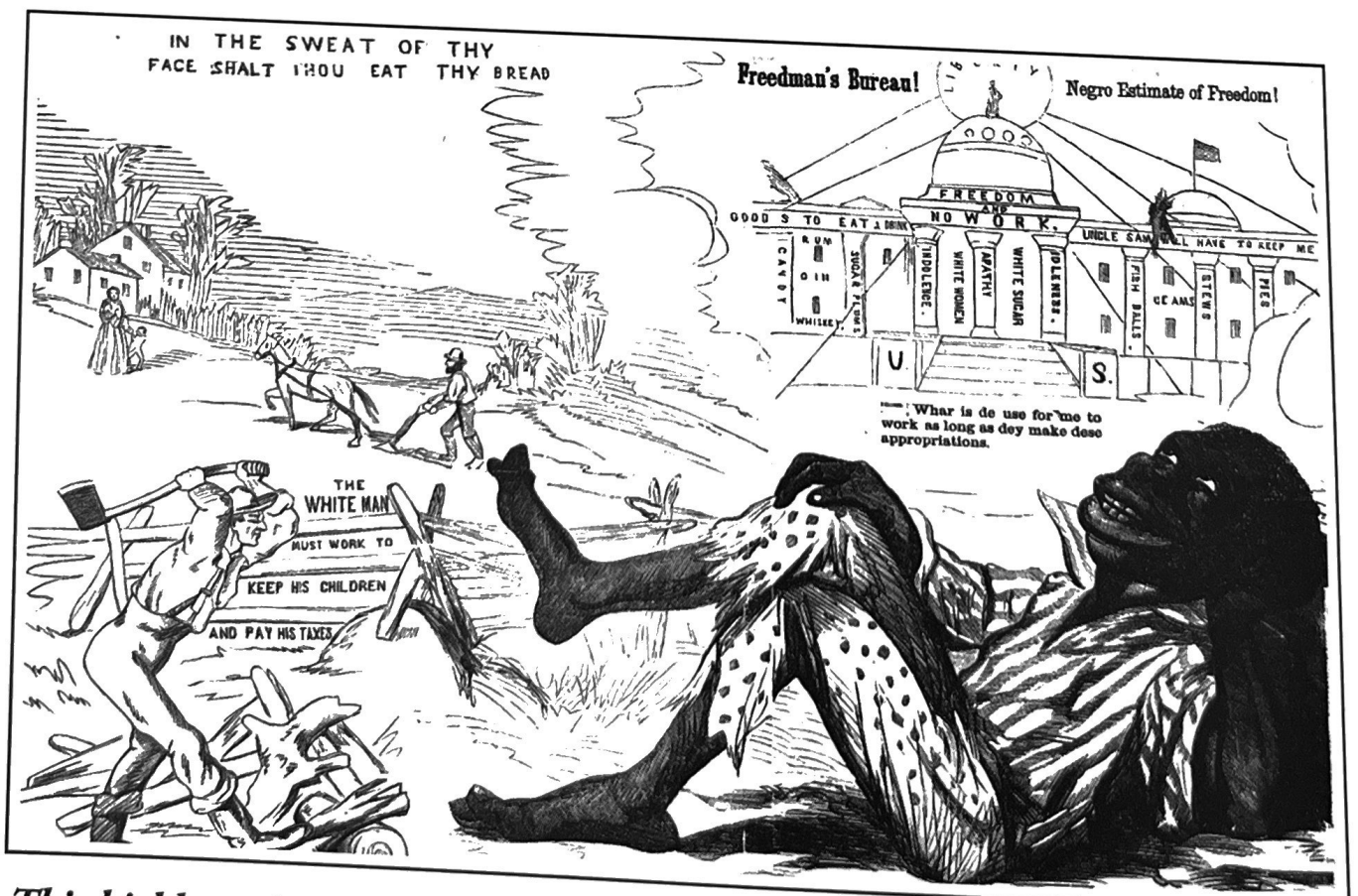
*A recently freed family sets out to create a new life, faced with an uncertain future.*



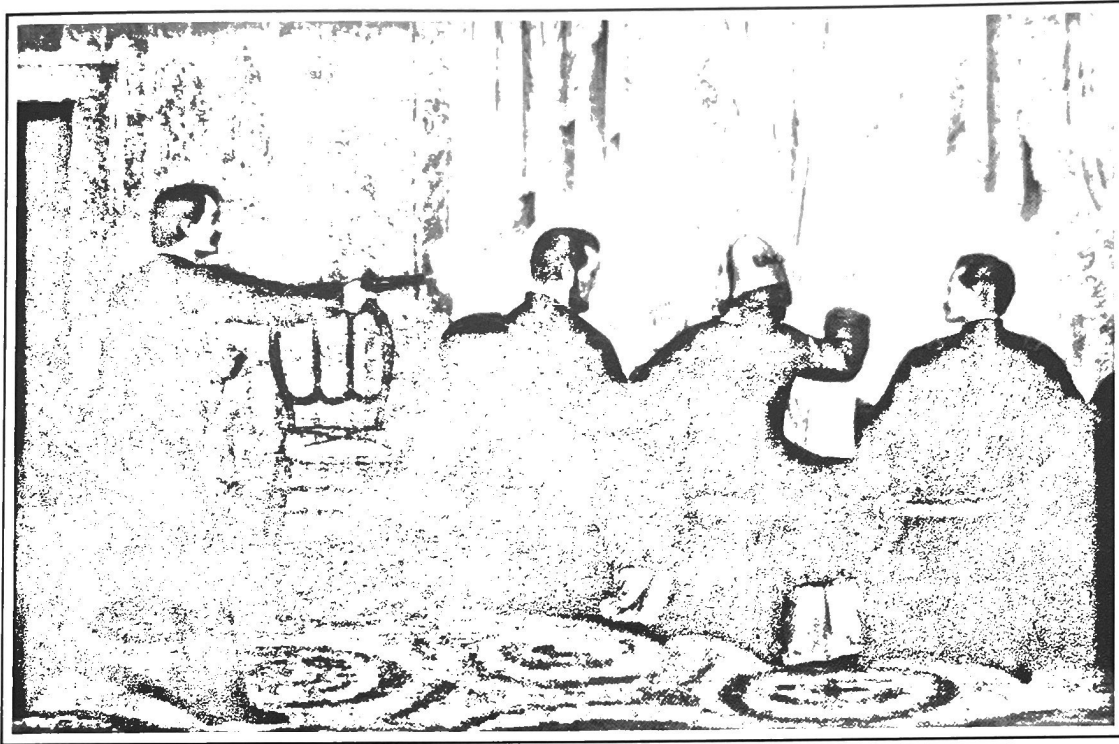
The editor of a Cincinnati newspaper put the matter even more bluntly when he wrote, "Slavery is dead, the negro is not, there is the misfortune. For the sake of all parties, would that he were."

Many white Southerners did not believe that their former slaves were able to take on the responsibilities of freedom. South Carolinian Julius J. Fleming stated that newly freed African Americans "do not understand the liberty that has been conferred upon [given to] them." The director of the Freedmen's Bureau, former Union general Oliver O. Howard, warned his black audience in 1865 that freedom was "apt [likely] to be misunderstood." As Howard explained to his listeners, they were not to expect the same kind of treatment that white citizens enjoyed.

But many freedmen, such as former slave and minister Henry Turner, had a very clear idea of what freedom meant. It was not just being free from the shackles of slavery. It was also the opportunity to



*This highly racist political cartoon shows white men hard at work while a black man relaxes under the protection of the government and the Freedman's Bureau. The cartoon reflects a Reconstruction belief that the U.S. government gave freedmen more power than whites and allowed them to be lazy.*



*Confederate sympathizer and assassin John Wilkes Booth takes aim at an unsuspecting Lincoln in the presidential box of Ford's Theatre.*

enjoy their “rights in common with other men.” Many African Americans hoped President Lincoln and other Northern leaders would help protect those important rights.

### **A FATEFUL EVENING**

On Good Friday, April 14, 1865, President Lincoln was looking forward to a relaxing evening away from the exciting but exhausting days that had just passed. The war had ended six days earlier. Since then, Lincoln’s life had been a whirlwind of activity. His only thoughts, though, were to accompany his wife to a performance of the comedy *Our American Cousin* at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. But Lincoln’s evening ended tragically. At 10:15 P.M., John Wilkes Booth, a twenty-six-year-old actor sympathetic to the Confederacy, sneaked up behind Lincoln and shot him in the back of the head. Booth then jumped from the presidential box to the stage,