

# The Mudcat

The Online Mississippi History Newsletter for Students

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## Presidential Reconstruction in Mississippi



Above: William Sharkey. MDAH Museum Division Collections.  
Right: Pardon for William Parker. MDAH Archives and Records Services.

Following the Civil War, newly freed black Mississippians struggled to find opportunity and equality as some whites refused to accept **freedmen** as equals. For many, re-entering the Union was the solution for this political and social unrest.

The federal government did not recognize the state's

**civil government** by May 1865. Governor Charles Clark, whom the U.S. military police soon arrested, appointed **Whig** party members William Sharkey and William Yerger to meet with President Andrew Johnson to reconstruct Mississippi's government. This left the state under U.S. military rule and

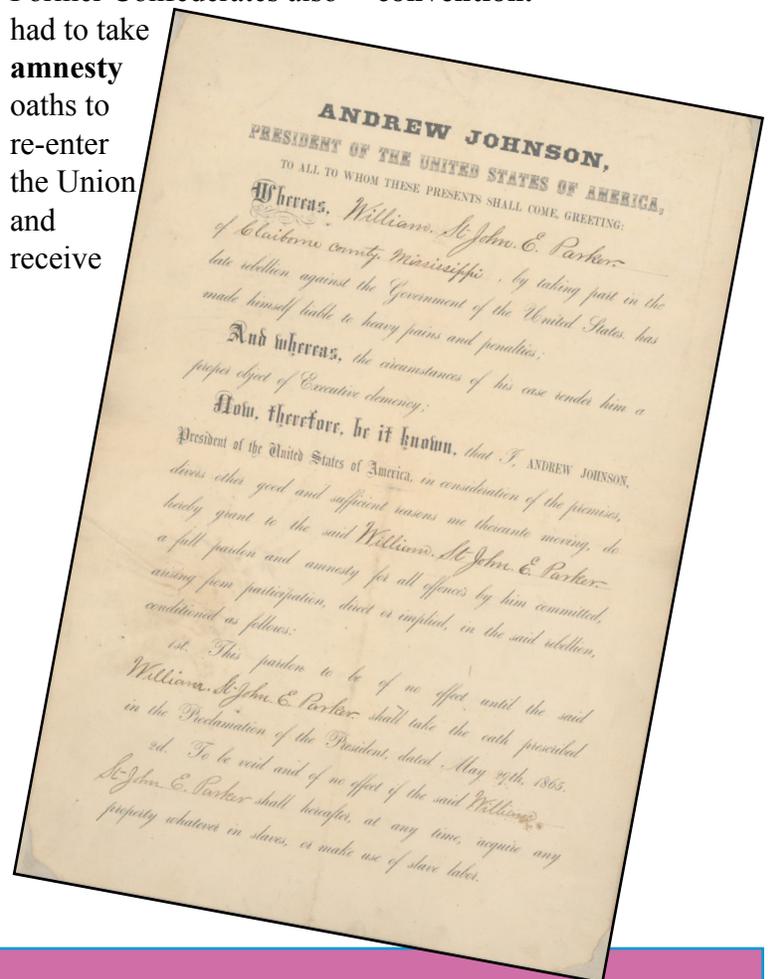
awaiting the president's reconstruction plan.

The president had three requirements: **annul the secession ordinance**, adopt the Thirteenth Amendment that **abolished** slavery, and give voting and property rights to literate African American men. Former Confederates also had to take **amnesty** oaths to re-enter the Union and receive

presidential pardons.

The president said those who took the oaths could elect delegates to a state constitutional convention.

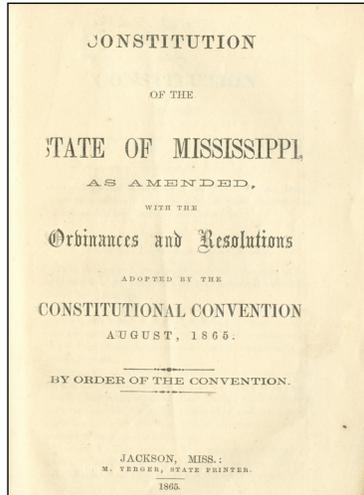
President Johnson made Sharkey provisional governor to direct the state's reconstruction program and **constitutional convention**.



# The Constitutional Convention and State Elections

Mississippi was the first southern state to hold a convention to create a constitution under Reconstruction. Delegates were elected and the convention met with seventy-one Whigs and eighteen Democrats on August 14, 1865.

The convention **repealed** the state's 1861 secession ordinance. While they did not adopt the Thirteenth Amendment, they did declare that slavery was destroyed. The status and voting rights of freedmen was left to the legislature. But because President Johnson wanted to maintain white rule, he was lenient in accepting



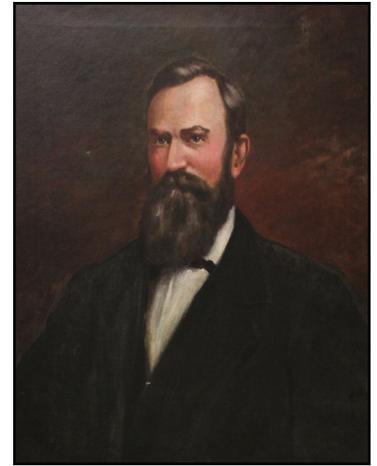
*Mississippi Constitution of 1865. MDAH Archives and Records Services.*

the new state constitution even though it did not adopt all of his initial requirements. Elections for postwar leadership were held in October.

Conservative Whig Benjamin G. Humphreys was elected governor, while Sharkey and James L. Alcorn were elected to the U.S. Senate. But after arriving in Washington, Sharkey and Alcorn were denied congressional seats because the state did not fully accept presidential reconstruction concerning newly freed blacks. Congress wanted to expand the freedmen's rights. As a result, Mississippi was not represented in Congress at the start of the state's new government in October 1865.

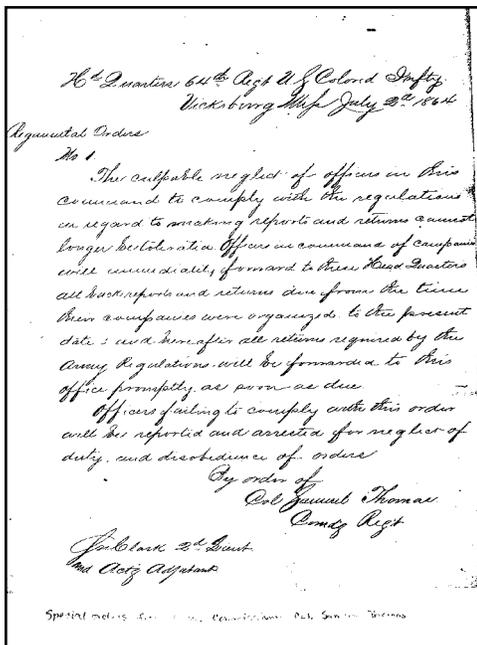
Despite Congress's disapproval, the Missis-

sippi legislature continued to operate and make laws restricting the freedmen's rights.



*Benjamin G. Humphreys. MDAH Museum Division Collections.*

# The Freedmen's Bureau



*An order from Assistant Commissioner Col. Samuel Thomas regarding officer regulations. MDAH Archives and Records Services.*

The U.S. Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (also known as the Freedmen's Bureau) in March 1865 as part of the War Department. President Johnson appointed General Oliver O. Howard the lead **commissioner** to manage ten assistant commissioners

in the former Confederate states. Although white refugees received help, the bureau mainly aided freedmen by providing food and clothing, assisting with education, regulating labor contracts, and encouraging legalized marriages.

Assistant Commissioner Colonel Samuel Thomas opened the Mississippi office in Vicksburg in June 1865. He had been a colonel in the U.S. Colored Infantry, a regiment of African American soldiers during the Civil War. Because of his military experience, Thomas chose officers from African American regiments as acting assistant commissioners. He also

made sure there was a bureau office in every county.

The bureau faced issues such as travel and conflict with the U.S. military. The biggest problem was race. Some white civilians were uncomfortable with seeing African American soldiers and physical violence sometimes occurred. Because of resistance to the freedmen's rights, the bureau could not continue to function. It officially closed in 1872. Although the Mississippi office faced many problems and closed in 1869, it helped over 400,000 freedmen and whites in the state.

# Investigate More

You can visit sites and museums across the state to learn more about Presidential Reconstruction in Mississippi!

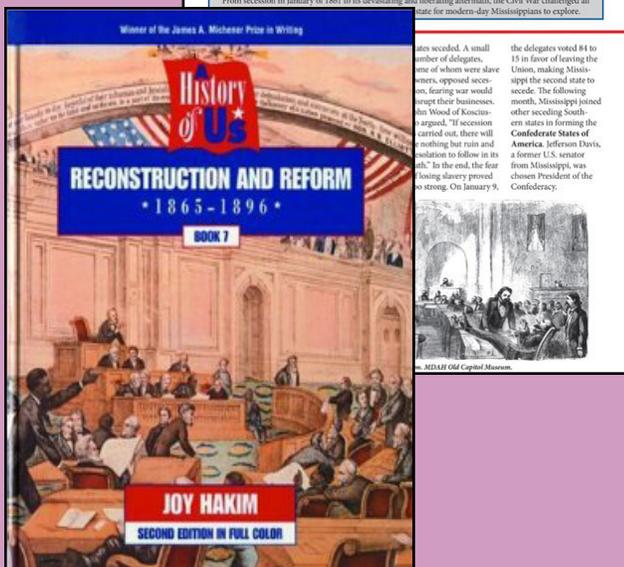
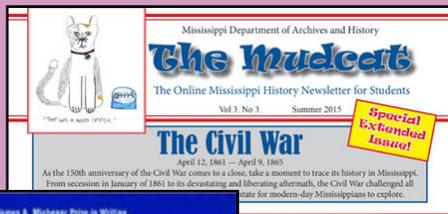
Learn more about James L. Alcorn at Alcorn State University in Lorman, Mississippi. The university was founded to educate the descendants of slaves and was named in honor of Alcorn, who served as governor in 1871.



Visit the Smith Robertson Museum in Jackson. Exhibits explain how African Americans transitioned from free men in Africa, to slaves, to freedmen in Mississippi and the nation. Call 601-960-1457 to plan your visit.



Find out what led to Reconstruction in the Civil War issue of *The Mudcat* available at <http://www.mdah.ms.gov/new/learn/students/the-mudcat-newsletter/>. For more information about laws from the era, visit your local library and check out *Reconstruction and Reform* by Joy Hakim.



Go back in time to learn about events, people, and places from the Reconstruction Era at [www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/index.php](http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/index.php). Find out more about Mississippi during the Reconstruction Era on the Mississippi History Timeline at <http://www.mdah.ms.gov/timeline/zone/5/>.

## Did you know...

- In April, 1866, four women from Columbus, Mississippi, decorated Union and Confederate soldiers' graves. This is one of the many traditions that led to Memorial Day.
- The *Vicksburg Colored Citizen*, founded in 1867, was the first African American newspaper in Mississippi.
- The lumber industry helped revive Mississippi's economy after the Civil War.

# Show What You Know!

## Vocabulary

**Abolished:** to formally end.

**Amnesty:** an official act of forgiveness.

**Annul:** to declare that something never legally existed.

**Civil Government:** a government whose power is given to persons chosen by the people.

**Commissioner:** a person appointed to a role for a particular function.

**Constitutional Convention:** a meeting to write a new constitution or revise an old one.

**Freedmen:** enslaved people who have been freed.

**Repeal:** to revoke or annul an existing law.

**Secession Ordinance:** the document declaring a state's formal withdrawal from the Union.

**Whig:** a member of the American political party who believed that the legislature should have more power than the president.

**Jumble Time!** Unscramble the words and place the letters in the boxes in the correct order to spell the winning word in the pink rectangle below!

REDFNEME

\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

BODELASHI

\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

YMTANES

\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

IILCV NTERMNOVGE

\_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

RSSEOCIMIMNO

\_\_\_\_\_   \_\_\_\_\_

NALUN

\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

## Create a Catfish Competition

How **would you like to see a catfish of your own creation on the cover** of the *Mudcat*? If you're an artist — or even if you're not — **craft a cool catfish graphic**, send it in to the *Mudcat*, and **YOUR catfish could win a coveted spot on the cover** of the next issue! Send all entries via mail or email to:

Outreach Programs Coordinator  
 Museum Division, MDAH  
 P.O. Box 571  
 Jackson, MS 39205-0571  
 Phone: 601-576-6997  
[outreachprograms@mdah.ms.gov](mailto:outreachprograms@mdah.ms.gov)

Congratulations to  
 Dorian R. from  
 Jackson for  
 creating this  
 issue's catfish cover art!

**Jumble Time Answer Key:**  
 1. Freedmen 2. Abolished  
 3. Amnesty 4. Civil  
 Government 5.  
 Commissioner 6. Annul  
 Winning Word:  
 Reconstruction