

The Right to Vote

What opportunities does the right to vote provide?

Up until the Civil War, in most places, the right to vote in the United State was restricted to white males 21 years and older. Each state, not the federal government, established its own voter qualifications, but by far, adult white males accounted for almost all of the ballots cast. In the Dred Scott decision in 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that slaves were property of their owners, were not citizens and had no legal rights at all. A decade later, African Americans were not only free, but they were free citizens, and in Iowa, the path had been set to grant them the right to vote.

African-American Suffrage

The first two constitutions adopted by the people of Iowa limited the suffrage (right to vote) to white males 21 years and older. While slavery might have been illegal in Iowa, many state laws discriminated against African-American residents. The “black codes” that required African Americans to post financial bonds to live here and denied them the right to serve on juries were designed to discourage them from migrating to Iowa. A strong majority in the state opposed intermarriage between whites and African Americans and held that African Americans were not as intelligent as whites.

The Civil War began to reshape white attitudes toward African Americans. Iowa soldiers fighting in the South saw first-hand the evils of slavery. Freeing slaves where the Union Army took control weakened the strength of the Confederate Army. Furthermore, after the southern surrender, the Republican Party was eager to grant African Americans the right to vote because they anticipated their votes would be strongly Republican, the party of Abraham Lincoln and the opponents of their former masters.

At the behest of Alexander Clark, an African American and Iowan who fought in the Civil War, Iowa voters (entirely white males) went to the polls and approved a constitutional amendment striking the word “white” from voting requirements in 1868. A man, African American or white, could vote in Iowa if he was 21 years old and a resident. At the same time, the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution forbade any state from denying the vote to anyone on the basis of race, color or previous condition of servitude (slavery). Until the Great Depression in the 1930s, blacks tended to adhere to the Republicans who had fought to end slavery and grant them their freedom. New Deal programs that provided direct relief to the desperately poor, which included both whites and African Americans, won over many African-American voters to the Democrats.

Supporting Question

How did African Americans obtain the right to vote?

- [“First Vote” Illustration, November 16, 1867 \(Image\)](#)
- [Alexander Clark’s Speech at the “Colored Convention” in Des Moines, Iowa, 1868 \(Document\)](#)
- [Portrait of Governor William M. Stone, 1868 \(Image\)](#)
- [15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, February 27, 1869 \(Document\)](#)
- [“The Fifteenth Amendment,” 1870 \(Image\)](#)
- [Distribution of the Colored Population of the United States in 1890, 1898 \(Map\)](#)
- [Voter Registration Literacy Test in Alabama, 1964 \(Document\)](#)
- [African-American Demonstrators Outside the White House, March 12, 1965 \(Image\)](#)
- [Oral History Interview with African-American Politician Robert G. Clark, Jr., in Pickens, Mississippi, March 13, 2013 \(Video\)](#)
- [Oral History Interview with African-American Activist Charles Siler about Life in Louisiana, May 10, 2013 \(Video\)](#)

*Printable Image and Document Guide

Additional Resources

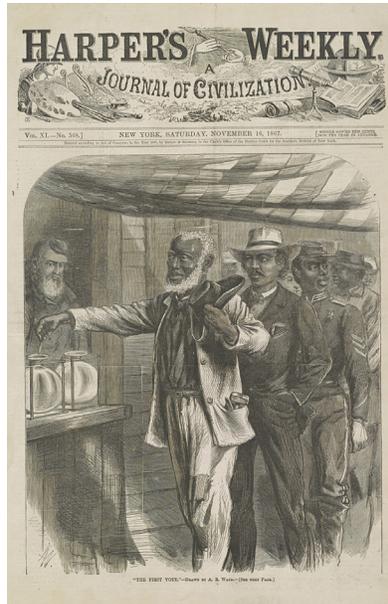
[Jim Crow and Segregation Primary Source Set](#): This Library of Congress online resource contains classroom material about the use of Jim Crow laws to oppress African Americans in the south and segregation throughout the United States.

[15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution](#): This Library of Congress web guide provides an overview of the 15th Amendment and its impact on African American men who were granted the right to vote.

[Oral History Interview with Rosie Head](#): In this video interview, Rosie Head describes her early life in Greenwood, Mississippi, where her family lived and worked on a plantation. She discusses how her parents faced racial discrimination in their work and how they were cheated by the plantation owner and then blacklisted. In 1964, Head joined the Civil Rights Movement in Tchula, Mississippi, and she recounts the various ways she was involved in the movement: registering voters, working with Freedom Summer volunteers, helping to establish the Child Development Group of Mississippi and campaigning for black candidates for political office.

[“The Negro Suffrage Issue” Essay from *The Annals of Iowa*](#): This essay by G. Galin Berrier in 1968 looks at the African-American suffrage movement after the Civil War between 1865 to 1868.

“The First Vote” Illustration, November 16, 1867



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Waud, Alfred R., “The first vote,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 16 November 1867

Description

This illustration shows African-American men in outfits indicative of their professions standing in a line waiting for their turn to vote. The text below the image reads, “The First Vote.” This print was published in *Harper’s Weekly* on November 16, 1867.

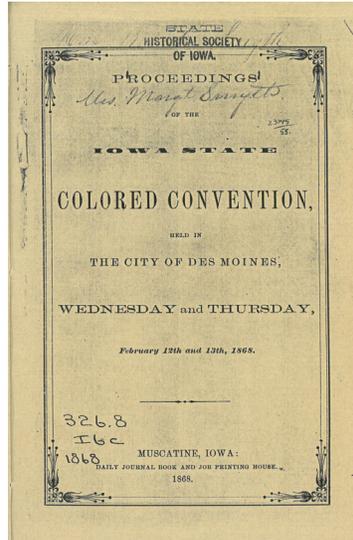
Text-Dependent Questions

- Look closely at the clothing of each man in the line. Why is each man dressed differently? What does their clothing represent?
- This image illustrates the first election in Virginia in which African Americans could participate in order to elect delegates to help rewrite that state’s constitution. Why would it be important for African Americans to vote in this election?
- What might be the drawbacks of having to vote out in the open where everyone can see who you voted for?

Citation Information

Waud, Alfred R., “The first vote,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 16 November 1867. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Alexander Clark's Speech at the "Colored Convention" in Des Moines, Iowa, 1868



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Clark, Alexander, pp. 1, 10-12, 1868

Description

Alexander Clark, an African-American barber turned lawyer from Muscatine, became a hero of African-American rights in the state of Iowa. In this address to the "Colored Convention" in Des Moines, Clark calls for the Iowa Legislature to approve and then place before the voters the removal of the word "white" from voting laws within the Iowa Constitution. The vote passed, and Iowa became the first state in the nation to have a successful grassroots movement for African-American suffrage. Later in 1868, Clark successfully filed a lawsuit against the Muscatine Board of Education where his daughter was admitted into a formerly white-only school after the Iowa Supreme Court's ruling on the lawsuit.

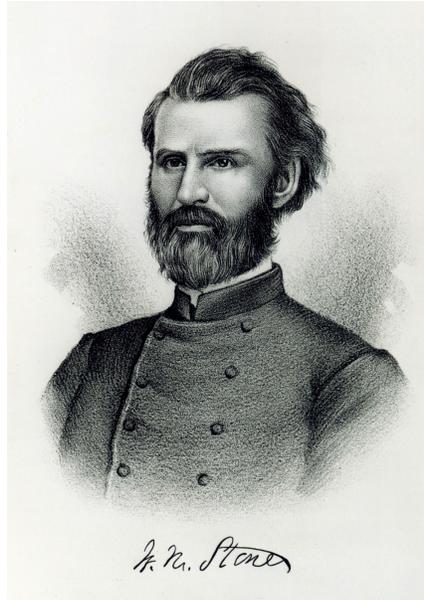
[Full Transcript of Alexander Clark's Speech to the "Colored Convention"](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts from Alexander Clark's Speech to the "Colored Convention"](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- What founding document does Alexander Clark refer to in his speech? How does he say this document supports the cause of African-American suffrage?
- Clark asks for suffrage equality, but what equality does he say he is not asking for? What impact might that have on the daily lives of Iowans?
- According to the [third excerpt](#), what injustice would be happening if African-American suffrage was denied to Iowa citizens?

Portrait of Governor William M. Stone, 1868



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1868

Description

This portrait is of William M. Stone, who would serve as Iowa's Republican governor during the end of the Civil War. Before being elected, he was a decorated officer in the Union Army, and at one point, had been a prisoner of war during the Civil War. Stone also was a lawyer and held several governmental offices during his lifetime. During the Republican convention of 1865, a prominent issue was African-American suffrage. The Republican Party largely supported political equality for African Americans, though most believed that social equality was not to be obtained. In 1866, the Iowa Legislature began amending the state's constitution to remove the word "white" from the suffrage article, as well as articles about census taking, districting of representatives to the legislature and the state militia. In 1868, the men of Iowa 21 years of age or older — who were the only ones with the right to vote at that time — voted for African-American suffrage with 56.5 percent of the vote.

Text-Dependent Questions

- William Stone served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and at one point was a prisoner of war. How could William Stone's past have shaped his views on African-American suffrage?
- At the time of William Stone's election as governor of Iowa, the Iowa Republican Party believed that African Americans should have political equity but not social equity. Refer to [Alexander Clark's speech](#) at the "Colored Convention." Did Alexander Clark's request align with the Iowa Republican Party's beliefs? Why do you think that was necessary?
- In 1868, during Governor Stone's term in office, the Iowa Legislature amended the state's constitution to remove the word "white" from the suffrage article, which if passed would allow all men over 21 years old the right to vote. Over 56.5 percent of Iowa voters approved the amendment to Iowa's constitution. How did this change the life for people, both white and African American, living in Iowa?

15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, February 27, 1869

346 FORTIETH CONGRESS. Sess. III. Res. 11, 14, 15, 16. 1869.

Ryan-Hitchcock, admiral, be authorized and directed to inquire into the utility and practicability of the Ryan-Hitchcock mode of marine fortifications, and that they report to Congress at the next session thereof.
APPROVED, February 19, 1869.

Feb. 27, 1869. [No. 14.] A Resolution proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.
Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, (two thirds of both houses concurring.) That the following article be proposed to the legislatures of the several States as an amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which, when ratified by three fourths of said legislatures, shall be valid as part of the Constitution, namely:

ARTICLE XV.
SECTION 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.
SEC. 2. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.
SCHUYLER COLFAX,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.
B. F. WADSWORTH,
President of the Senate pro tempore.

Attest:
EDWARD McPHERSON,
Clerk of House of Representatives.
Geo. C. GORHAM,
Secretary of Senate U. S.
Received at Department of State February 27, 1869.

March 1, 1869. [No. 15.] Joint Resolution conferring the Consent of Congress provided for in section ten of Title 32, Ch. 317, of the Statutes at Large, approved July second, eighteen hundred and sixty-four.
As it resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the consent of the Congress of the United States is hereby given to the Northern Pacific Railroad Company to issue its bonds, and to secure the same by mortgage upon its railroad and its telegraph line, for the purpose of raising funds with which to construct said railroad and telegraph line between Lake Superior and Puget Sound, and also upon its branch to a point at or near Astoria, Oregon; and the term "Puget Sound," as used here and in the act incorporating said company, is hereby construed to mean all the waters connected with the straits of Juan de Fuca within the territory of the United States.
APPROVED, March 1, 1869.

March 1, 1869. [No. 16.] Joint Resolution in Relation to the Meeting of the House of Representatives at the first Session of the Forty-first Congress.
Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the time for the first regular meeting of the House of Representatives of the Forty-first Congress be, and is hereby, postponed from twelve o'clock meridian, on the fourth day of March, eighteen hundred and sixty-nine, to the hour of three o'clock in the afternoon of the said day.
APPROVED, March 1, 1869.

Courtesy of Library of Congress, "15th Amendment to the Constitution," U.S. Congress, 27 February 1869

Description

The 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified on February 3, 1870, and prohibited federal and state governments from denying any citizen the right to vote based on that person's "race, color or previous condition of servitude." The amendment was important in that it not only gave African Americans the right to vote, but also allowed the most African Americans in history to be elected into public office.

[Transcript of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- The Civil War ended in 1865 and slavery was abolished later that same year. Discuss how these events led to the ratification of the 15th Amendment.
- Why would the 15th Amendment be important for all men?
- A year before the 15th Amendment was ratified, [Alexander Clark successfully lobbied for the word "white" to be removed from Iowa's state constitution](#). Discuss how the Iowa decision might have impacted the national amendment.

Citation Information

"15th Amendment to the Constitution," U.S. Congress, 27 February 1869. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

“The Fifteenth Amendment,” 1870



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Kelly, Thomas, “The Fifteenth Amendment,” 1870

Description

This print shows a parade surrounded by portraits and vignettes of African-American life, illustrating rights granted by the 15th Amendment.

[Transcription of “The Fifteenth Amendment”](#)

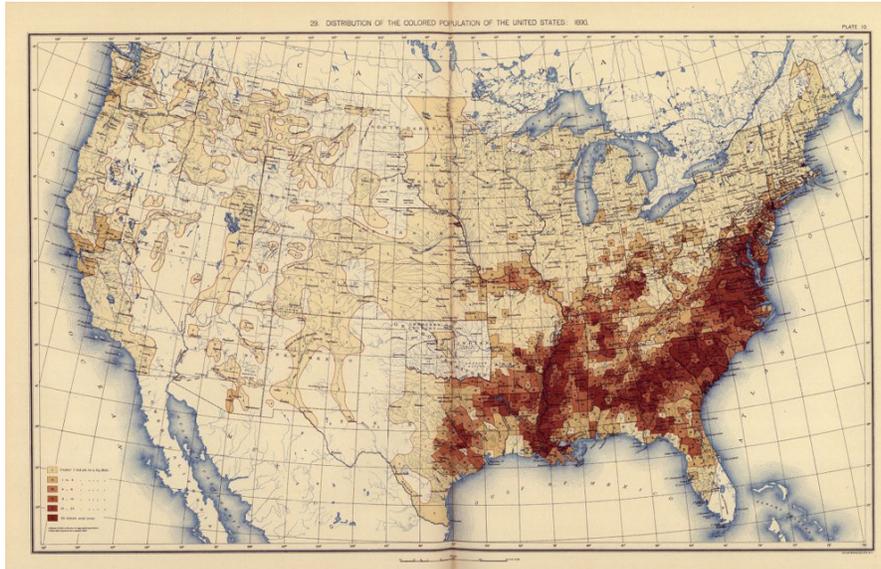
Text-Dependent Questions

- The 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution, ratified in 1870, states that “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Refer to the [portrait of Governor Stone](#) as well as [Alexander Clark’s speech at the “Colored Convention”](#) and note the year Iowa allowed all men over 21 years of age to vote. Why might Iowa have made this decision ahead of the passing of the 15th Amendment?
- How would having an African-American representative in the legislature impact African-American citizens?
- Read the other items listed at the bottom of the illustration. How is education liberating? Why might the artist have included that and the other items in this source?

Citation Information

Kelly, Thomas, “The Fifteenth Amendment,” 1870. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Distribution of the Colored Population of the United States in 1890, 1898



Courtesy of Library of Congress, United States Census Office, 11th Census (1890), and Henry Gannett, *Statistical Atlas of the United States*, based upon the results of the eleventh census, Washington, 1898

Description

A statistical atlas of the United States that is based on the results of the 11th census, completed in 1890, shows the distribution of the “colored population” of the country. As can be seen in the distribution map, members of the targeted population predominantly resided in the southeast.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Which states had the highest African-American population in 1890? Why would that be?
- What impact might the 15th Amendment have had on different regions of the United States? As a reminder, the 15th Amendment states that “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

Citation Information

United States Census Office, 11th Census (1890), and Henry Gannett, *Statistical Atlas of the United States*, based upon the results of the eleventh census, Washington, 1898. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

African-American Demonstrators Outside the White House, March 12, 1965



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Leffler, Warren K., "[African American demonstrators...]" 12 March 1965

Description

This photograph by Warren Leffler shows African-American demonstrators outside the White House, with signs reading "We demand the right to vote, everywhere" and protesting police brutality against civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama. On August 6, 1965, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law. This law gave the federal government the authority and funding to ensure that all legal-age citizens were allowed to vote in all states, without obstructions such as literacy tests, thus fully enacting the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

[Transcript of Signs from African-American Demonstrators](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- How many years separated the passage of the 15th Amendment, passed in 1870, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965? Refer to "[Voter Registration Literacy Test](#)" and draw conclusions about why African Americans were protesting. The Voting Rights Act gave the federal government the authority and funding to ensure that all legal-age citizens were allowed to vote in all states, without obstructions such as literacy tests, thus fully enacting the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution
- After looking at this photo, refer to the "[Distribution of the Colored Population of the United States](#)" map. What conclusions can be drawn about why places like Selma, Alabama, were hotbed locations for African-American suffrage.

Citation Information

Leffler, Warren K., "[African American demonstrators outside the White House, with signs "We demand the right to vote, everywhere" and signs protesting police brutality against civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama]," 12 March 1965. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Oral History Interview with African-American Politician Robert G. Clark, Jr., in Pickens, Mississippi, March 13, 2013



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Clark, Robert G., "Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi, 2013-03-13.," 13 March 2013

Description

Robert G. Clark, Jr., describes the early life experiences that led up to his successful campaign for political office in the Mississippi legislature, where he became the first African American elected since Reconstruction. Clark discusses his career as an educator, how the Civil Rights Movement influenced him, and the danger he experienced signing up African-American voters.

[Full Transcription of Robert G. Clark's Interview](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts from Robert G. Clark's Interview](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- What is the history of the house that Robert Clark lives in? How would the history of the house and land impact Clark's life?
- What did Robert experience with the Citizens Council? Why might Clark's drive to keep his personhood or manhood go against the Citizens Council?
- What dangers did Clark, as well as his friend and family, experience as they helped African Americans register to vote?

Citation Information

Clark, Robert G., "Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi, 2013-03-13.," 13 March 2013. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Oral History Interview with African-American Activist Charles Siler about Life in Louisiana, May 10, 2013



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Siler, Charles, E., "Charles Siler oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline in Dallas, Texas, 2013-05-10," 10 May 2013

Description

Charles Siler remembers his early life in Louisiana, including a penchant for drawing that began before the age of two, quitting the Boy Scouts when his troop made black Scouts walk behind the horses in a local parade, and picketing Louisiana's segregated state library as a senior in high school. He was eventually expelled from Southern University because of his activism. He joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He was drafted in 1967 and served in the military in the Vietnam War. He continued his civil rights advocacy as he took a variety of positions at cultural institutions and began a career as a cartoonist. The interview closes with Siler's reflections on identity and the process of learning from those whom are ideologically different.

[Full Transcript of Charles Siler's Oral History Interview](#)

[Transcribed Excerpt from Charles Siler's Oral History Interview](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- According to Charles Siler, how many attempts did it take Mrs. Williams before she was allowed to register to vote? Refer to the Voter Registration Literacy Test {link} and Charles' interview. Describe the reasons why it might have taken Mrs. Williams so many attempts.
- What significance did registering to vote have for Mrs. Williams? Why do you think it was important for her to vote before she died?
- Why does Charles get upset when people tell them they're not going to vote?

Citation Information

Siler, Charles, E., "Charles Siler oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline in Dallas, Texas, 2013-05-10," 10 May 2013. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)