

ABSTRACT
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN RESPONSE TO CONFEDERATE
RECONSTRUCTION: BLACK POLITICAL ORGANIZATION
IN DOUGHERTY COUNTY, 1865-1867

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Recent scholarship on the post-Civil War period indicates that African Americans did not wait for Radical Republicans to implement legislation in 1867 to claim the rights and privileges that went along with freedom. Rather from the moment of emancipation, freedmen played an active role in shaping their future. In the heart of the southwest Georgia black belt, Dougherty County freedmen exercised their new liberty in numerous ways. Some moved to Albany, the county seat; others negotiated the terms of labor contracts with their former owners. Blacks established independent churches and schools and they organized politically.

The earliest center of black political activity was on the Whitlock Place, a 500-acre plantation in east Dougherty County. Here a colony of Wilkes County freedmen rented the land and grew corn and cotton in 1866. Among the Wilkes colonists were several Georgia Equal Rights Association organizers who established a Dougherty chapter of the newly-formed black political organization. Gradually, freedmen from all over east Dougherty began attending the association's Sunday meetings which were open to sworn members who had paid their initiation fees. Discussions at the meetings focused on the African American struggle for political equality and for more control over their own labor. Realizing that they needed to be prepared to defend themselves against hostile whites, African Americans made drilling a regular part of their weekly E.R.A. meetings.

Planters and overseers were determined to preserve as much as possible the strict control over black workers that they had maintained in slavery, but they saw control of their society slipping from their hands. In July 1866, sixty-one Dougherty whites petitioned the Freedmen's Bureau to have the E.R.A. "broken up" or that its "legitimate objects" be explained to the freedmen in such a way as to eliminate the "erroneous ideas now existing among them." The Bureau, however, refused to move against the Dougherty E.R.A. arguing that freedmen had the same rights as whites to organize and hold meetings.

In fall 1866 the E.R.A. merged with the Union League and became the dominant black political organization in southwest Georgia. The E.R.A., and

later Union League, laid the groundwork for the Republican party organization in Dougherty County when Radical Reconstruction began in 1867. When Union League president Philip Joiner ran for the state legislature that year, he campaigned on many of the same issues that his predecessors in the E.R.A. had championed more than a year earlier on the Whitlock Place. His followers also used many of the same tactics, including drilling, pioneered by the E.R.A. organizers.