

THE RIGHT TO VOTE

SPIRALING AROUND THE PROMISE

*“A government of the people,
by the people, and for the people.”*

TO ENFRANCHISE

To grant a person citizenship and the right to vote.

TO DISENFRANCHISE

To deprive a person of equal rights
to citizenship and/or voting in order
to benefit a minority ruling class.

1787

THE PHILADELPHIA CONVENTION (CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION)

“How to establish a government
with equal voting rights?”

Debate to resolve representation by population,
the South bargains to include the enslaved.

The North capitulates.

THE THREE-FIFTHS COMPROMISE

3 of every 5 enslaved people are counted as
citizens which gives “Slave States” in the House of
Representatives a disproportionate advantage.

1787

DEBATE: ELECTORAL COLLEGE OR NATIONAL POPULAR VOTE

Some delegates want Congress to select the president and others favor a direct national popular vote. Compromise: Electors allotted on state-by-state basis as intermediaries that cast actual ballots.

THE GREAT COMPROMISE

The vote skews to White male property owners. No one argues to expand voting rights to women or racial minorities. Delegates from small states fear large states will dominate national elections. A dual system of representation results: an upper house (Senate) with equal representation from each state, and a lower house (Congress) with proportional representation based on a state's population.

1789

STATES SET VOTING REQUIREMENTS

A few allow free Black men to vote. New Jersey enfranchises all adults who own property, including unmarried and widowed women. Georgia removes property requirement for voting. For the most part, property-owning or tax-paying White males (about 6% of the population) are enfranchised.

FIRST CENSUS 1790

Nearly 700,000 enslaved people (about 18% of the national population), live mostly in Southern states.

1792

New Hampshire is the first state to eliminate the property requirement for free White men over 21.
Sparks a movement to open the electorate.

1801

*“The will of the people is the only
legitimate foundation of any government.”*

—Thomas Jefferson

1807

New Jersey strips voting rights from women,
racial minorities, and recent immigrants.
Only tax-paying White male citizens can vote.

1818

Connecticut: first state to disenfranchise felons.

(In 2021 residents on parole can vote.)

March 1820

MISSOURI COMPROMISE

To preserve the balance of power in the Senate

President James Monroe admits Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. Slavery is prohibited in the remaining unorganized territories of the Louisiana Purchase which are situated north of the $36^{\circ} 30'$ north latitude line.

1821

NYS CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

Eliminates property requirement for *all* White men over 21 to vote (rich and poor). For Free Black men: no land, no vote.

July 4, 1827

NYS abolishes slavery but the path to freedom not yet absolute.

August 1831

Nat Turner's Rebellion of enslaved and free Black people in Virginia turns deadly. State militias ruthlessly suppress any inkling of uprising.

1846

NEW YORK STATE REFERENDUM

Voters fail to repeal the \$250 property requirement
for Black men to vote.

“TIMBUCTOO,” SCHEME OF JUSTICE AND BENEVOLENCE

“Since [New York] State has again determined that although White men may vote, nonetheless Black men, because they are Black, shall be obliged to buy the right to vote—since they must become landowners that they be entitled to vote, they *will* become land owners. Vote they *will*, cost what it *will*.” —Gerrit Smith

Leading Black reformers—Rev. J. W. Loguen, Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, and Dr. James McCune Smith—recruit 3,000 grantees to own 120,000 acres of Smith’s land in the Adirondacks, entitling grantees to vote.

1849

WHITE ABOLITIONISTS ENTER POLITICS

John & Mary Brown move their family to Lake Placid, New York to befriend and mentor “Timbuctoo” grantees. John actively travels to build a militia to end slavery.

JOHN BROWN IS SUMMONED TO “BLEEDING KANSAS”

He joins his sons in the deadly fight raging in the territory to determine if Kansas enters the Union as a free state or a slave state. Armed proslavery “Border Ruffians,” driven by rhetoric, commit crimes of electoral fraud, intimidation, and property damage. Both sides commit murder.



LIBERTY, THE FAIR MAID OF KANSAS - IN THE HANDS OF THE "BORDER RUFFIANS".

Leaf 50. 88. 112

Dec. 4, 1907

1856

All states allow *all* White men to vote.

3.9 million are still enslaved in the U.S.A.

March 6, 1857

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

DRED SCOTT v. SANFORD (7–2)

Establishes that enslaved men are not citizens and have no right to bring suit in Federal Court. Strikes down the Missouri Compromise ruling that Congress has no authority to prohibit slavery in federal territories.

October 16, 1859

JOHN BROWN'S RAID AGAINST SLAVERY IN A "SLAVE" STATE

HARPERS FERRY, VIRGINIA

Out of the 22 Black & White raiders,
10 are killed, including 2 of John Brown's sons;
5 escape, including Owen Brown; 7 are captured.

CHARLESTOWN, VIRGINIA

The 7 captives, including Brown, are imprisoned,
tried for murder and treason. John Brown is the
first to be hanged on December 2.

NOVEMBER 6, 1860

16TH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Four major political parties nominate candidates. Abraham Lincoln wins on the newly-formed anti-slavery Republican Party line. He opposes the expansion of slavery into western territories.

NY REFERENDUM ON BLACK SUFFRAGE

The second time New York voters (64%) reject cutting the \$250 property requirement to enfranchise Black men.

The Nation is in crisis over the issue of slavery.

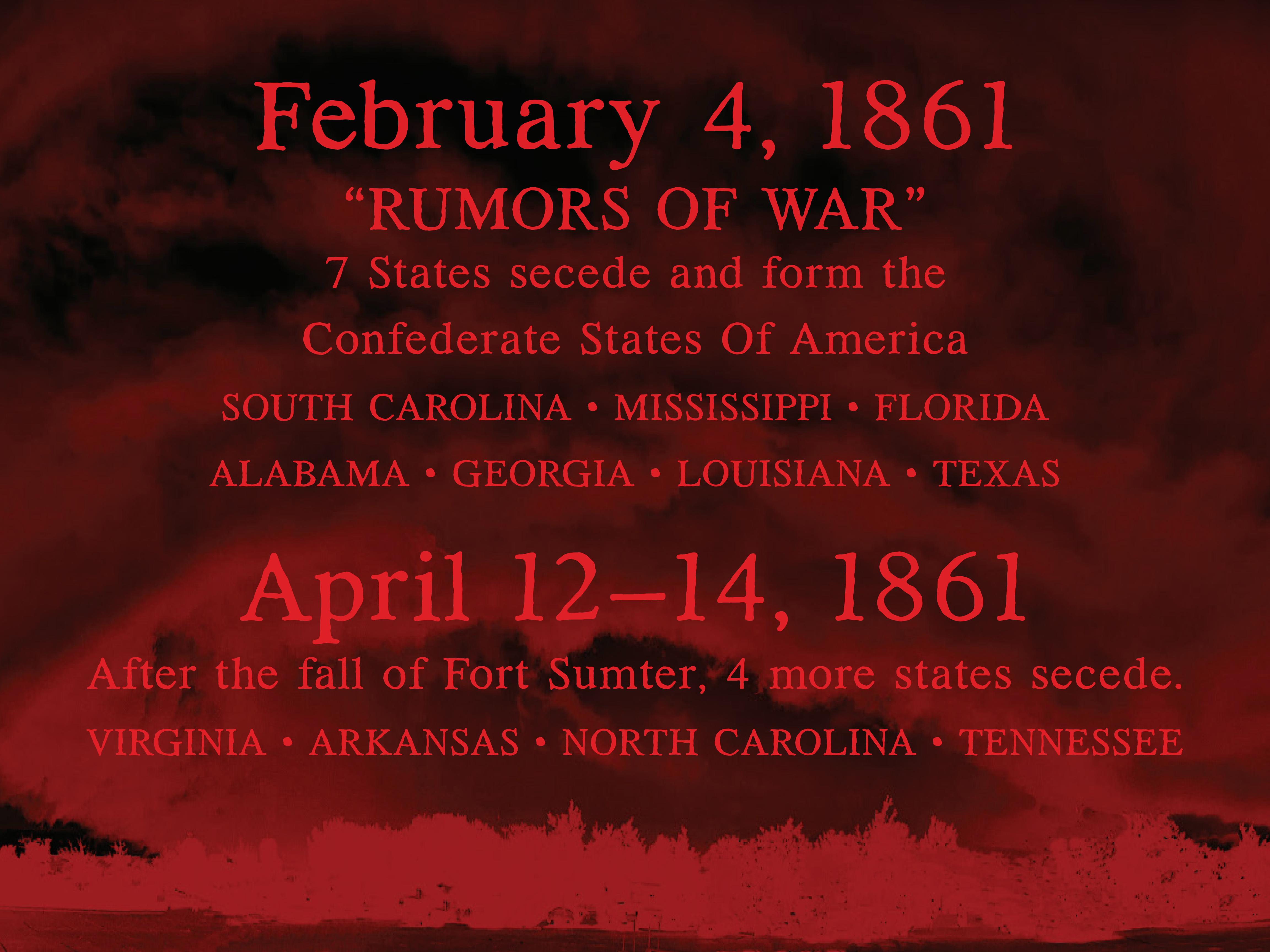
1860

DECLARATIONS OF SECEDING STATES

“The prohibition of slavery in the Territories... For forty years...considered and debated... The majority...of the North in 1860 decided it in their own favor. We refuse to submit to that judgment...” —GEORGIA

“...Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery... a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization... we do not overstate the dangers to our institution...” —MISSISSIPPI

“...[The President] has declared that ‘Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free,’...that slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction...aided in some of the States by elevating to citizenship, persons who, by the supreme law of the land, are incapable of becoming citizens; and their votes have been used to inaugurate a new policy, hostile to the South, and destructive of its beliefs and safety...all hope of remedy is rendered vain...” —SOUTH CAROLINA



February 4, 1861

“RUMORS OF WAR”

7 States secede and form the
Confederate States Of America

SOUTH CAROLINA • MISSISSIPPI • FLORIDA

ALABAMA • GEORGIA • LOUISIANA • TEXAS

April 12–14, 1861

After the fall of Fort Sumter, 4 more states secede.

VIRGINIA • ARKANSAS • NORTH CAROLINA • TENNESSEE

1861–1865

THE CIVIL WAR

The Federal Government/The North/The Union
opposes the expansion of slavery.

To end slavery and unite the 36 states,
620,000 people die.

Of the 186,000 Black soldiers, nurses,
and laborers allied with the Union Army,
at least 38,000 die.

January 1, 1863

EMANCIPATION IS PROCLAIMED

Enslaved Americans *“shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons.”*

—President Abraham Lincoln

Southerners remain angered and demoralized by a Nation that defies their authority.

December 9, 1864

EBENEZER CREEK MASSACRE

Confederate soldiers pursue hundreds of Black families, newly-liberated by the Union Army.

On the 37th day, of a 287-mile march to Savannah Georgia, Sherman's Army crosses the icy, swollen creek on a pontoon bridge and hastily removes it in a desperate escape, stranding hundreds of Black refugees who drown in the raging water or are killed or recaptured.

January 12, 1865

PUBLIC OUTCRY

Union General William Tecumseh Sherman
and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton
ask prominent Black Southern Ministers:

Q: “What do you want for your people?”

*A: “Land! Tillable land... and maintain it
ourselves... and live away from prejudice...”*

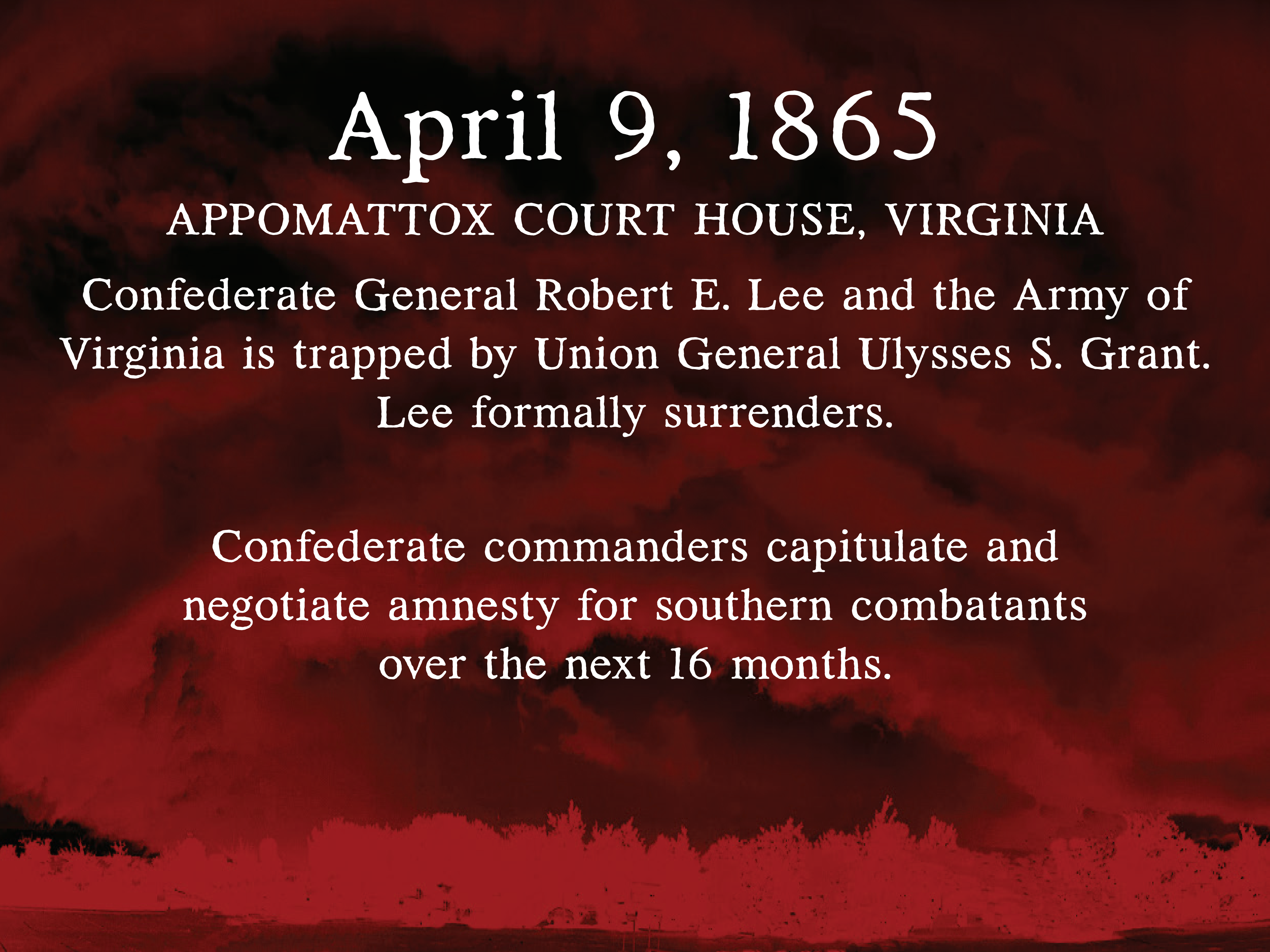
January 16, 1865

GENERAL SHERMAN ISSUES

SPECIAL FIELD ORDER 15

“40 acres and a mule...”

The Federal Government confiscates 400,000 acres of coastal land—originally stolen from Native Americans—abandoned during the war by Confederate plantation owners. It is redistributed to 40,000 Black families who, for generations, worked the same land without pay.



April 9, 1865

APPOMATTOX COURT HOUSE, VIRGINIA

Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Virginia is trapped by Union General Ulysses S. Grant.
Lee formally surrenders.

Confederate commanders capitulate and negotiate amnesty for southern combatants over the next 16 months.

April 11, 1865

President Lincoln declares,

*“...Very intelligent African American citizens
and veterans deserve the Right to Vote...”*

3 DAYS LATER, ASSASSINATED.

Vice President Andrew Johnson, former slaveowner, assumes the Presidency. He revokes “40 acres and a mule,” displacing tens of thousands of free Black landowners whose property is deeded back to former Confederate plantation owners.

June 19, 1865

“JUNETEENTH”

GALVESTON, TEXAS

Two years after Emancipation is proclaimed
Union General Gordon Granger and his troops inform
the last enslaved people that they are free.

GENERAL ORDER NUMBER 3:

*“The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with
a proclamation from the Executive of the United States,
all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of
personal rights and rights of property between former masters
and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between
them becomes that between employer and hired labor.”*

December 6, 1865

1ST ACT OF RECONSTRUCTION

ABOLISH SLAVERY

13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution
ends the Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787

and recognizes millions of ex-slaves as free people.

*“Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate
legislation, the provisions of this article.”*

The federal government strengthened, the struggle
to establish homes, jobs, resources, and educational
opportunities is amplified by the desolation of war.

1866

2ND ACT OF RECONSTRUCTION

14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

“No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

Overrides the Dred Scott ruling of 1857.

Bitterness festers among White southerners.

1866

CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION

WHITE ALLIES (REPUBLICAN)

WIN THE HOUSE

Establish the Freedmen's Bureau.

Federal troops occupy former Confederate States to protect the civil rights of the newly free.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1866

Declares all persons born in the U.S. are citizens and guarantees equal protection under the law.

1866

Backlash to Reconstruction

FORMATION OF THE KU KLUX KLAN PULASKI, TENNESSEE

A campaign of terror, intimidation, and violence seeks to re-establish social control over 4 million Freedmen. Members plot to restore cheap labor by rewriting laws in state legislatures. For example: if no job, arrest the man for vagrancy, fine him, or bind him to labor for Whites.

September 28, 1868

OPELOUSAS MASSACRE, LOUISIANA

Emerson Bentley, a White journalist and advocate for voter registration and education for all, is attacked while teaching at a Black school by 3 White supremacists resentful of voting rights for Freedmen. This leads to a night of mayhem and murder. As many as 200 Black citizens are killed, 6 Whites, Black voters are terrorized into silence.

.

November 3, 1868

LANDMARK PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The first time newly-freed enslaved people vote.

*Some states with unreconstructed status
are not allowed to vote.*

UNION WAR HERO ULYSSES S. GRANT

is elected the 18th President.

He protects the goals of Reconstruction.



1869-1873

Entered according to act of Congress in the year 1872 by Currier & Ives, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress at Washington.

ROBERT C. DE LARGE, M.C. of S. Carolina.

JEFFERSON H. LONG, M.C. of Georgia.

U.S. Senator H. R. REVELS, of Mississippi.

BENJ. S. TURNER, M.C. of Alabama.

JOSIAH T. WALLS, M.C. of Florida.

JOSEPH H. RAINY, M.C. of S. Carolina.

R. BROWN ELLIOT, M.C. of S. Carolina.

THE FIRST COLORED SENATOR AND REPRESENTATIVES.

In the 41st and 42nd Congress of the United States.

NEW YORK, PUBLISHED BY CURRIER & IVES, 125 NASSAU STREET.

7038CL

February 3, 1870

3RD ACT OF RECONSTRUCTION

15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

ONE MAN, ONE VOTE

*“The right of MEN to vote shall not be denied
or abridged by the U.S. or by any state
on account of race, color, or
previous condition of servitude.”*

1870 and 1871

THE ENFORCEMENT ACTS

Prohibit groups of people from banding together to impede Reconstruction. When they did not diminish harassment of black voters in some areas, the Senate passed two Force acts, also known as the Ku Klux Klan acts, to enforce the 14th Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. National election administration is placed under the federal government. U.S. marshals supervise local polling places, and use armed forces to combat conspiracy to deny equal protection of the laws.

—U.S. Senate History

1874

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

SLAUGHTERHOUSE CASES (5-4)

New Orleans butchers contest state-granted meat-packing monopolies. The court's first interpretation of the 14th Amendment, it returns citizens' rights to the control of individual states.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1875

Seeks to bar discrimination in public places and provide equal access to public accommodations, theaters, and transportation.

1876

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN DISPUTE

*Months of partisan gridlock
sabotages Reconstruction*

The Electoral Commission resolves which votes count
in SOUTH CAROLINA, FLORIDA, and LOUISIANA.

The presidency is awarded to Rutherford B. Hayes
in exchange for withdrawal of Federal troops
put in place to protect the rights of Black citizens.
Violent anti-Black racism disenfranchises voters.

1877–1879

“BLACK CODES”

DOMINATE THE SOUTH

JIM CROW LAWS

SEGREGATE SOCIETY

Rewritten state constitutions and laws in Southern cities and states diminish Black political power and civil rights, and restrict social contact along racial lines.

1883

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

CIVIL RIGHTS CASES

The Federal Government rolls back
Reconstruction-era protections and policies that
guarantee equal rights by overturning

The Civil Rights Act of 1875.

Constitutional Amendments meant to protect
formerly enslaved people are undermined.

1890s

REVISED MISSISSIPPI CONSTITUTION BECOMES BLUEPRINT FOR DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Voter Suppression based on economic opportunities.

Southern states institute a poll tax as prerequisite to voting.

MISSISSIPPI (1890) • SOUTH CAROLINA (1895) • LOUISIANA (1898)

ALABAMA (1901) • VIRGINIA (1902) • TEXAS (1902)

White landowners bar sharecroppers from voting.

Arrest without cause leads to convict leasing.

White supremacists erect monuments to revise history.

1890s

LITERACY TESTS

FOR BLACK VOTERS ONLY

*Voter Suppression based on reading, writing,
and arbitrary questions:*

“How many grains of sand in a seashell?”

“How many bubbles in a bar of soap?”

“How many jelly beans in a jar?”

Answers assessed by White election registrars.

1896

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

PLESSY v. FERGUSON (7-1)

“Separate but Equal” Doctrine

Voter Suppression based on educational opportunity.

By refusing to leave his train seat, Homer Plessy, 1/8th Black by Louisiana law, triggers a case about the legality of segregation. The ruling upheld the constitutionality of separating children in public schools on the basis of race.

“Separate never intended to be equal.” —Nell Irvin Painter

POPULIST MOVEMENT

*To unite Blacks and poor Whites
against disenfranchisement.*

February 12, 1909

NAACP

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

An integrated advocacy group for civil rights

founded by Ida B. Wells, W.E.B DuBois,

Mary White Ovington, Moorfield Storey,

Lillian Wald, and Henry Moskowitz.

March 3, 1913

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE PARADE

The first major protest at the U.S. Capitol.

1917

To increase literacy, the Julius Rosenwald Fund builds thousands of Black schools in the South over the next decade.

August 18, 1920

ONE WOMAN, ONE VOTE

The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution enfranchises all women, fifty years after all men.

Voter Suppression attacks on communities of color.

November 2, 1920

ELECTION DAY MASSACRE

OCOEE, FLORIDA

White mob sets fire to two Black communities to “purge” local agricultural towns of diversity.

May 31–June 1, 1921

TULSA MASSACRE

GREENWOOD, OKLAHOMA

For a Night and a day, gangs of White Tulsans loot and burn 30 square city blocks of a thriving, affluent African American community to the ground. Hundreds are killed.

1923

EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT (ERA)

To end legal distinctions between men and women.

(Still in legal limbo in 2026 due to missed deadlines for ratification.)

1924

INDIAN CITIZENSHIP ACT

All Native Americans are finally granted the citizenship rights of the 15th Amendment (1870).

Western states bar their large Native American populations from voting until 1948 by declaring this Act makes them wards of the government due to the fact that they live on reservations and do not pay state taxes.

1937

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

BREEDLOVE v. SUTTLES (9-0)

Poll tax upheld in Georgia (until 1945).

WORLD WAR II

Black servicemen fight and die to free Europe from Hitler's oppression. Back home, racism intensifies.

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

MONTFORT POINT MARINES

ALL-BLACK 92ND INFANTRY DIVISION

Many emerge as leaders for civil and voting rights.

August 14, 1946

Elmore v. Rice

To end segregated primaries in the U.S.

African American businessman George Elmore, a registered voter, is denied the right to pick a representative in South Carolina's White-only primary.

Elmore's class-action suit opens the primary to all South Carolinians. Voter rolls increase dramatically. African American communities wait hours to exercise their right to vote in the 1948 Democratic primary.

1948

TRUJILLO v. GARLEY

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Miguel Trujillo, Tribal citizen, schoolteacher, and WWII Marine, sues the state for denying him the right to register to vote.

A 3-judge panel rules in Trujillo's favor, removing legal and constitutional barriers to voting for Native Americans who live on Tribal lands in New Mexico.

May 17, 1954

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION (9–0)

The “separate but equal” doctrine
is unanimously deemed *unconstitutional*,
overruling Plessy v. Ferguson (1896),
the case that gave rise to gross inequities
in public school access and funding
on the basis of race.

1954–1968

MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

To challenge legalized segregation
and promote civil rights,

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.,
THE BLACK FAITH COMMUNITY,
BLACK WOMEN ACTIVISTS,
AND BLACK ATTORNEYS

unite against a White-collar backlash
to the *Brown* doctrine by coordinating a unique
nonviolent campaign of civil disobedience.

December 5, 1955

THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

Local activists Claudette Colvin (age 15) and Rosa Parks refuse to give up their seats on city buses to White people. Their arrests trigger a 381-day boycott of the buses by over 30,000 African Americans, financially straining the system until the U.S. Supreme Court upholds a lower court decision on

December 21, 1956

Segregation is deemed *unconstitutional* on public transit. Black residents return to riding city buses, and sit in any open seat.

1957

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

Prohibits voting interference.

Feb 1–July 25, 1960

F.W. WOOLWORTH STORE
GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

Sit-in at a “White only” lunch counter by Black students who refuse to leave when denied service. The youth-led movement spreads to college towns in 78 cities throughout the south. 50,000 Black students and White sympathizers participate, until Black students are served.

1962

FANNIE LOU HAMER MISSISSIPPI DELTA

A 44-year-old sharecropper learns that she is allowed to vote. She joins the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and leads 17 volunteers to register voters at the courthouse.

Brutally beaten, Ms. Hamer is fired from her job, and evicted from her home in Ruleville, Mississippi, about a 10-minute drive from the barn where Emmett Till was tortured to death in 1955.

Ms. Hamer goes on to be an iconic civil rights leader until her death in 1977 at age 59.

1962

24TH AMENDMENT

Poll taxes are prohibited in Federal elections.

1966

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

HARPER v. VIRGINIA STATE
BOARD OF ELECTIONS (6-3)

The Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment
is upheld, prohibiting taxation to obtain access
to the polls in State elections.

JUNE 11, 1963

A few hours after President Kennedy announces
a tough civil rights bill on National TV,

MEDGAR EVERS

NAACP's impassioned visionary veteran activist
is in his driveway carrying a box of t-shirts
that say, "Jim Crow Must Go."

ASSASSINATED.

April 9, 1963

HARTMAN TURNBOW

Mississippi farmer, orator, and activist attempts to register to vote.

Shot at, he defends himself. His home firebombed,
he is framed for arson.

Summer 1963

“FREEDOM VOTE”

ORGANIZED BY SNCC IN MISSISSIPPI

About 80,000 African Americans defy White intimidation
and cast *unofficial* “freedom ballots” demonstrating
that Blacks will vote if afforded the right.

Freedom workers and 1,500 potential voters deal with food
blockades, economic reprisals, and police with dogs and clubs.

MAY 18, 1963

PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

REMARKS AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY CONVOCATION

“...The educated citizen knows how much more there is to know... that “knowledge is power,” ...that only an educated and informed people will be a free people, that the ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all, and that if we can, as Jefferson put it, ‘enlighten the people generally... tyranny and the oppressions of mind and body will vanish, like evil spirits at the dawn of day.’ And, therefore, the educated citizen has a special obligation to encourage the pursuit of learning, to promote exploration of the unknown, to preserve the freedom of inquiry, to support the advancement of research, and to assist at every level of government the improvement of education for all Americans, from grade school to graduate school.”

1963

AUGUST 28

250,000 MARCH ON WASHINGTON, D.C.

"I Have a Dream..." —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

SEPTEMBER 15

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

16TH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

White terrorist bomb obliterates four choir girls.

NOVEMBER 22

DALLAS, TEXAS

PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

ASSASSINATED.

1964

“FREEDOM SUMMER”

Interracial group of northern civil rights workers travel by bus to register southern voters.

Buses and workers are ambushed and at least 20 southern Black churches are bombed or burned.

JUNE 21

PHILADELPHIA, MISSISSIPPI

Three young civil rights workers, James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner are brutalized and buried under a dam.

The first interracial lynching.

1965

FEBRUARY 18

MARION, ALABAMA

PEACEFUL VOTING RIGHTS MARCH

JIMMIE LEE JACKSON

Unarmed, shot in the stomach while protecting his mother from Alabama State Troopers. His death sparks a 50-mile "Walk for Freedom" from Selma to Montgomery.

MARCH 7

SELMA, ALABAMA

"BLOODY SUNDAY"

At the second Freedom March, State troopers with helmets, gas masks, billy clubs, bullwhips, and tear gas attack 600 peaceful marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

March 15, 1965

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON INTRODUCES THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT TO CONGRESS

“At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom....So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. There is no Negro problem. There is no southern problem. There is no northern problem. There is only an American problem. Many of the issues of civil rights are very complex and most difficult. But about this there can and should be no argument. Every American citizen must have the right to vote...The command of the Constitution is plain. There is no moral issue. It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country. There is no issue of States’ rights or National rights. There is only the struggle for human rights.”

March 21–25, 1965

Dr. King summons northerners for a second March. 25,000 join the original “foot soldiers.”

JAMES REEB

White Unitarian Universalist minister, father of four, catches a last-minute flight from Boston.

Fatal beating on a Selma Street corner.

VIOLA GREGG LIUZZO

White mother of five drives from Detroit to Selma. After the march, driving a black protester to his car, Viola is forced off the road by Klansmen who shoot her in the head.

AUGUST 6, 1965

VOTING RIGHTS ACT (VRA)

Passage of the VRA is “the long-overdue realization of the 15th Amendment’s guarantee, a century earlier, that no one’s right to vote could be denied or abridged on account of race.” Section 5 authorizes federal supervision to prevent racial discrimination in voting. Federal registrars oversee dramatic increase in voter rolls despite White segregationist’s intimidating incidents of violence.

—Brennan Center for Justice

“The most important piece of legislation in the 20th century.”

—Ari Berman, president of Yeshiva University, “Give us the Ballot”

1966

JANUARY 10

HATTIESBURG, MISSISSIPPI

VERNON DAHMER

Successful farmer, businessman, and NAACP leader registers voters at his store and offers on the radio to pay the poll tax for anyone who cannot afford it.

His home is firebombed. He perishes.

ENSHRINED ON HIS TOMBSTONE:

“If you don’t vote, you don’t count.”

Ellie, Mr. Dahmer’s wife, survives the incident and becomes election commissioner in Hattiesburg in 1992.

1966

MARCH 7

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

SOUTH CAROLINA v. KATZENBACH (8-1)

The challenge to the VRA of 1965 is rejected.

“Preclearance” is ruled *Constitutional*.

In order for states to change election law,
federal approval is required. Voter registration
officials are sent to the South for a massive

Voter Registration Drive.

1968

APRIL 4

LORRAINE MOTEL, MEMPHIS

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

ASSASSINATED.

JUNE 5

AMBASSADOR HOTEL, LOS ANGELES

ROBERT F. KENNEDY

ASSASSINATED.

JULY 29, 1969

Get Out The Vote Rallies. Green County, Alabama is the first county in nation to elect all Black officials

VOTING RIGHTS ACT (VRA)

VRA 1970

Extended for 7 years. Federal preclearance to change election law remains in effect. Voting age lowered from 21 to 18, draft age.

VRA 1975

Amended to ensure rights of non-English-speaking voters.

VRA 1982

Extended for 25 years. Time limits for preclearance amended.

1980

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

CITY OF MOBILE V. BOLDEN (6–3)

“Wiley L. Bolden and other residents of Mobile, Alabama brought a class action on behalf of all black citizens in Mobile. They argued that the practice of electing the City Commissioners at-large unfairly diluted the voting strength of black citizens. A district court and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled in favor of Bolden,” upholding the 15th Amendment.

The Supreme Court “held that the Fifteenth Amendment did not entail “the right to have Negro candidates elected,” and that only purposefully discriminatory denials of the freedom to vote on the basis of race demanded constitutional remedies.”

“City of Mobile v. Bolden.” Oyez, www.oyez.org/cases/1978/77-1844.

1992

THE VOTING RIGHTS LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE ACT

Expands coverage to voters with limited English.

1993

THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT

Congress passes “Motor Voter” bill to make
voter registration more accessible. Allows mail-in ballots.

Allows registration at DMVs, welfare offices,
and unemployment agencies.

1994

VOTING RIGHTS OF FORMER OFFENDERS ACT

Secures voting rights for former felons.

1996

CONGRESS PASSES SECTION 230.

The law provides legal immunity to online platforms and users for content posted by 3rd parties, protecting them from civil lawsuits. Still, the subject of intense legislative scrutiny concerning generative AI, child safety, and fake news, is a huge threat to democracy.

2000

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

BUSH v. GORE (5-4)

Weeks-long battle over contested Florida punch-card ballots with “hanging chads” decides presidency.

2002

Major Federal Election Reform Law

HELP AMERICA VOTE ACT (HAVA)

Sweeping reforms create Election Assistance Commission, better accessibility to polling places, and funding to replace outdated voting systems.

November 4, 2008

Massive Grassroots Campaign

15 MILLION NEW VOTERS

Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States,
the First African American to hold the office.

2009

SUPREME COURT LANDMARK DECISION

Northwest Austin Municipal
Utility District v. Mukasey (8-1)

Restores voting rights for the formerly incarcerated. Largely
preserves Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

2010

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

CITIZENS UNITED v. FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION (5-4)

Unleashes unlimited spending (dark money) in elections without disclosing the funding source.

Devastates the impartiality of elections.

Without transparency, voters cannot know who is influencing them. The laws intent is to sabotage informed decision-making.

—Brennan Center for Justice

2013

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

SHELBY COUNTY v. HOLDER (5–4)

Authored by Chief Justice John Roberts in his decades-old crusade against the Voting Rights Act of 1965, this ruling declares a key part of the VRA *unconstitutional*, putting states' rights ahead of peoples' rights.

Preclearance for changes to voting laws ends.

Within weeks, 23 states enact discriminatory measures and pass laws that restrict voter registration.

Polling places are closed, reducing access to voting.

“A dagger to the heart.”—Senator John R. Lewis

November 14, 2014

PRESIDENTIAL MEDALS OF FREEDOM

President Obama awards our Nation's highest civilian honor posthumously to Freedom Summer co-workers

JAMES CHANEY

ANDREW GOODMAN

MICHAEL SCHWERNER

for their efforts to register
disenfranchised voters
in southern states.

2016

ELECTORAL COLLEGE DETERMINES PRESIDENCY

By turning a single national race into fifty state-by-state races.

The winner in each state takes all the votes.

ELECTORAL COLLEGE VOTES

Donald J. Trump 304. Hillary Clinton 227.

POPULAR VOTE:

Clinton: 65,853,625 (48.0%)

Trump: 62,985,106 (45.9%)

*4 other presidents in U.S. History are elected
by winner takes all strategy:*

John Quincy Adams (1824), Rutherford B. Hayes (1876),
Benjamin Harrison (1888), George W. Bush (2000)

2020

Covid-19 Enables Census Irregularities

Racial gerrymandering (redistricting) threatens fair representation.

Refusal to Accept Defeat in Presidential Election

Inauguration of a fairly-elected Democrat (Joe Biden) to the presidency incites hostilities toward the federal government.

January 6, 2021

Unconstitutional attempt to overturn an election
by preventing the Peaceful Transfer of Power.

“To advocate for secession is reckless. It legitimizes the false notion that the election of a moderate Democrat to the presidency is such a threat to the nation’s historic values that insurrection is a valid response.”

—Rex Smith, “Speculation on Secession is Immoral” Dec. 12, 2020, *Times Union*

December 22, 2023

To prevent a repeat of January 6, 2021

THE ELECTORAL COUNT REFORM AND PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION IMPROVEMENT ACT (ECRA)

A bipartisan bill signed into law by
President Biden reforms the
1887 Electoral Count Act (ECA).

ECRA removes the ambiguity
that lawyers exploited in 2020
to create the fake electors scheme.

2023

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING

MOORE v. HARPER (6–3)

Overrules Independent State Legislature (ISL) Theory,
a repeatedly-rejected interpretation of the
Constitution's elections clause—
as recently as 2015 and 2019.

ISL aims to end Democracy by nullifying hundreds of election
rules, by challenging key elements of democratic elections,
by giving states the right to overturn the popular vote
if they don't like the outcome of an election, and by
eliminating checks and balances against voter suppression.

2024

Campaigns to Suppress Votes Rise Sharply

U.S. SUPREME COURT RULINGS

unconstitutionally remove established Federal and State rights.

RESTRICTIVE VOTING BILLS

VOTING ACCESS ROLLBACKS

Replace election officials with partisan actors.

Undermine the safety and security of election administrators.

Intimidate and threaten poll workers, election officials,
and eligible voters. Purge Voter rolls. Close polling places and
cut hours at the polls. Harp on nonexistent voter fraud.

Frenetic and meritless election-related lawsuits
challenge voters and ballots.

August 2025

PENDING SCOTUS RULING

Mississippi's Republican Secretary of State asks SCOTUS to reinstate the 5-day post-election grace period on a National basis to safeguard military, rural, and overseas voters who rely on the mail to vote. The routine law allows election administrators to count mail-in ballots that arrive within 5 business days of an election, as long as the postmark predates Election Day.

The routine law was reversed in October 2024 by The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals (Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi) in a GOP initiative, *RNC v. WETZEL*.

2024

SLIM VICTORY IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Despite sophisticated social media disinformation campaigns by partisan actors and foreign trolls, and at least 227 bomb threats at polling stations where voters trend Democratic.

ELECTORAL COLLEGE:

Trump 312. Harris 226.

POPULAR VOTE:

77,302,580 or 49.8% of voters

75,017,613 or 48.3% of voters

Tens of millions of registered voters don't vote!

PROJECT 2025

A federal policy agenda of The Heritage Foundation becomes a blueprint of the Trump administration to reorganize the government agency by agency in fealty to a conservative agenda that opposes abortion and reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, immigrants' rights, and racial equity.

2026

Broad GOP battle to skew voting to White wealthy men.

CAMPAIGN TO RIG, SUBVERT, “TAKE OVER,”
OR “CANCEL” ELECTIONS

Laws bar federal agents from the polls, but illegally deploying ICE to Minneapolis serves as a reminder that peaceful protest and public mobilization give the administration reason to change course. Laws prohibit interference by federal agents in elections, but the seizure of ballots and election records to collect personal voter data will lead to false claims of multitudes of noncitizens on the voter rolls. The SAVE Act intends to require “papers” to vote. Dismantling the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, and pardoning those responsible for the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol sends a clear message to would-be election subverters.

—Sean Moreales-Doyle for Brennan Center for Justice, May 2026

2026

STALLED IN THE SENATE SINCE 2021

FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

Expands Americans' access to the ballot box,
reduces the influence of big money in politics,
and curbs partisan and racial gerrymandering.

THE JOHN R. LEWIS VOTING RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT ACT

Modernizes and revitalizes the Voting Rights Act of 1965,
the most successful civil rights legislation in our country's
history until the Supreme Court gutted the law in
Shelby County v. Holder (2013).

—Brennan Center for Justice

*“...We live in a country still staggering imperfectly
down the path to full equality...”*

—Frank Bruni, New York Times opinion writer, August 1, 2024

*“...If you believe the Constitution and the rule of law
mean something, mean a better way of life for us and
our children... then you can’t just give up and walk away.”*

—Joyce Vance, American lawyer who served as the U.S. attorney for the
Northern District of Alabama from 2009 to 2017. Civil Discourse, Nov 26, 2024

“Democracy is not a state. It is an act.”

—John Lewis, pivotal American civil rights leader and longtime U.S. Congressman, 2020

Voters, election officials, advocates, and
state law enforcement fight back on Election Day.

VOTE!

THE RIGHT TO VOTE: SPIRALING AROUND THE PROMISE

Dedicated to the lineage of citizens since 1787 who struggle against bigoted violence, and courageously fight for the voting rights that the Framers of our Constitution imperfectly envisioned.

Updated June 2026. 1st edition 2023. Compiled and arranged by Ren Davidson Seward with thanks to editors Anna Fors, Martha Swan, Dr. Alice P. Green, Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. Made possible with support and funds from Creatives Rebuild New York; John Brown Lives!; the Statewide Community Re grants Program, a regrant program of the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature and administered by the Adirondack Lakes Center for the Arts; and New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

SOURCES

Ari Berman, "Minority Rule: The Right-Wing Attack on the Will of the People and the Fight to Resist It" (2024, Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

Ari Berman, Tom Zingarelli, et al. "Give us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America" (2015, Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

Gloria J. Browne-Marshall, "The African-American Woman: 400 Years of Perseverance" (2019, Law and Policy Group Press)

Heather Cox Richardson, "How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continuing Fight for the Soul of America" (2020, Oxford University Press)

Favreau, Lovett, Vietor, Holloway, the hosts of Pod Save America, "Democracy or Else: How to Save America in 10 Easy Steps" (2024, Zando-Crooked Media)

Amy Godine, "The Black Woods: Pursuing Racial Justice on the Adirondack Frontier" (2023, Three Hills Press)

Nell Painter, "Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction" (1992, Norton)

Rex Smith, "Speculation on Secession is Immoral" Dec. 12, 2020, *Albany Times Union*

Wright Thompson, "The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi"

Horace Randall Williams, "A Fast Walk Through a Long History" (2018)

Brennan Center for Justice, www.brennancenter.org/election-2024

Civil Discourse (Substack), joycevance.substack.com

Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc., avoice.cbcfinc.org/exhibits/voting-rights-act/

Democracy Docket, www.democracymarket.com

Intermountain Histories www.intermountainhistories.org/items/show/251

National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, Selma, Alabama

The Sentencing Project www.sentencingproject.org/reports/expanding-the-vote-two-decades-of-felony-disenfranchisement-reforms/

U.S. Senate HistoryL <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/EnforcementActs.htm>

Zinn Education Project, www.zinnedproject.org/materials/?theme=voting-rights

VOTERS

Voter registration must be received by: Oct 24, 2026

NEW YORKERS

Pre-register to vote at 16, then vote upon turning 18.

VOTING DAY: Tuesday, November 3

EARLY VOTING: Contact your county elections office

Visit [VOTE.GOV](https://vote.gov) to register to vote, to request an absentee ballot, to double check your registration, and to ensure your current address is on record.

Turn your ballot over to vote for amendments.

