The date was February 25, 1870 and southern Democrats in the U.S. Senate were shocked by what was happening. The Civil War had ended less than five years earlier and now they were witnessing the results of Reconstruction. The state of Mississippi had once been represented in the senate by Jefferson Davis, the man who became President of the Confederacy. Now the Mississippi had elected a new senator, Hiram Rhodes Revels, the first African American to be seated in the United States Senate!

The election of Hiram Rhodes Revels and other African Americans to government positions was only possible because of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments which together are sometimes called the “Reconstruction Amendments.” These Reconstruction Amendments were all ratified during Reconstruction and each one expanded on or protected the rights of African Americans.

The 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865 and declared that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime shall exist within the United States.” This amendment meant the death of slavery in America. Slavery as an institution was far older than the United States itself. The southern plantation system had come to depend on slave labor to function and without slaves plantations quickly began to fail. Though some survived by using a system called sharecropping, the old southern society that was dominated by wealthy plantation owners was gone for good.

At first southerners tried to get around the 13th Amendment by taking advantage of the part that permits involuntary servitude as a punishment for a crime. Using laws called “Black Codes” southern states tried to make it illegal for African Americans to be unemployed or work anywhere except on a farm. African Americans who broke these laws were often arrested and made to work on a farm. In short the Black Codes were an attempt to continue slavery by getting around the 13th Amendment.

The U.S. Congress responded to the Black Codes with the 14th Amendment which declared that all those born in the United States (except for members of American Indian tribes) were automatically citizens by birth. In addition the 14th Amendment said that no state could make or enforce any law which denies rights to any person or group of people while extending the same rights to other people or groups. In short African Americans could not be singled out by discriminatory laws because under the 14th Amendment, all American citizens had to be treated equally under the law.

The next battleground of Reconstruction was over the question of African American suffrage. Even most northern states did not allow African Americans to vote but Congress changed that in 1870 with the ratification of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution. The 15th Amendment simply stated 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.” This amendment angered many Americans, especially in the south where many former Confederates had lost their right to vote. Racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan tried to scare and intimidate blacks to keep them from voting but during Reconstruction U.S. soldiers frequently protected voting locations to ensure the rights of African Americans to vote were not violated.
As a result of these Reconstruction Amendments, African Americans in the South experienced a dramatic increase in their rights in just half a decade. In five years they had gone from slaves to voting American citizens. Hiram Rhodes Revels was the first African American senator seated in the U.S. Senate but he wasn’t the last. During Reconstruction, former Confederate states elected 15 African Americans to the U.S. House of Representatives and over 600 African Americans to the state legislatures.

As African Americans saw a great expansion of their rights thanks to the Reconstruction Amendments, former Confederate leaders and plantation owners watched bitterly as those who were once their slaves were now free to vote while many former Confederates had lost their voting rights. Lincoln had promised that Reconstruction would be quick and that the south would be forgiven and welcomed back into the United States. Since Radical Republicans took over Reconstruction though, the south had been occupied by northern soldiers and forced to watch as Republican majorities took over their state legislatures. Southerners felt that they were being treated less like fellow Americans and more like a defeated foreign people. Many southerners agreed that Reconstruction had gone too far and so they began to look for ways to end it.

**Journal Assignment:** Answer the following questions in your journal. Keep in mind these questions are asking you to think about the Reconstruction Amendments and answer based on your own thinking. Any answers to these questions are acceptable so long as you can defend your claims with evidence.

1. Of the three Reconstruction Amendments, which do you think had the biggest impact on expanding the rights of African Americans and why?

2. Why do you think many southerners were bitter or angry about the Reconstruction Amendments and which of the three amendments do you think angered them the most? Explain your reasoning.

3. The last paragraph talk about a strong desire among Southerners to end Reconstruction, how do you think they might try and bring Reconstruction to an end?