Remembering Reconstruction at Carolina
Reconstruction in North Carolina

Laura F. Edwards, History Department, Duke University
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It is a pleasure to be back at UNC talking about Reconstruction in North Carolina, particularly at this occasion. I was a graduate student here. I did the work for my dissertation, on Reconstruction in North Carolina, here. I came back here to do more research, as I was working to turn that dissertation into my first book. Now I find myself back here, still talking about Reconstruction in North Carolina. But when I first came here, as a graduate student in 1985, I did not intend to work on Reconstruction. In fact, nothing could have been further from my mind. Yet I ended up there, because that piece of this state’s past drew me in. It did more than change the way that I saw that period. It also changed the way that I thought about the relationship between history and the present.

And so I want to begin with my own relationship to Reconstruction in North Carolina. I came to graduate school with a deep faith in the past: I believed that the past held meaning for us today. At first, though, I did not stray far from familiar territory, near the present, with the Civil Rights Movement. But once ensconced in the archives, I found myself slowly moving back in time, until I landed, with a definitive thump, in 1865, at the end of the Civil War.

I was fascinated. What fascinated me most was that I could not figure out what was going on. I found some of the things I expected: Klan violence, the blatant denial of African Americans’ civil and political rights, invocations of race to divide the electorate, and economic policies impoverished African Americans and many whites as well. But I found all sorts of things that were not supposed to be there, either: African American families acquiring property; African Americans speaking out about political issues; white North Carolinians launching critiques of conservative white Democrats; and those same whites ignoring Democratic race-baiting to vote Republican with African Americans. The material did not fit my preconceptions, which owed in part to my interest in the Civil Rights Movement. I expected Reconstruction to be sort of an early Civil Rights Movement, in which southern African Americans struggled to achieve full civil and political equality, only to experience a defeat of such major proportions that it would take a hundred years to recover what had been lost. But while some of the material fit that narrative, not all of it did. To confuse matters, those elements did fit my other preconceptions about the Reconstruction—and that was confusing because those preconceptions were a jumble of history lessons gleaned from a childhood that straddled the Mason Dixon line. From my time in Connecticut, I learned the Yankee narrative: northerners who opposed slavery and racism fought the Civil War to end slavery and realize the Revolution’s promise of equality. From my time in East Tennessee, I learned an updated, sanitized version of the neo-Confederate narrative: that the Civil War was about states’ rights, with the North running roughshod over individual liberty, completely bungling in its efforts to abolish slavery, and leaving the entire region in disarray. Yet,
because this was East Tennessee, not West Tennessee, I also learned the white southern critique of the neo-Confederate narrative: that slave holders had dragged hardworking farmers and laborers into the war, destroyed their families and livelihoods, and then blocked all subsequent efforts to improve their lot in life.

All these histories clashed. Yet I had never given much thought to the dissonance, until I saw them mingling together—literally in black and white—in the documents from North Carolina’s past. After that, I could think of nothing else. How could I explain the presence of all these dissonant elements, these conflicting pieces from the state’s past? What did they say to us today? Now, nearly twenty years later, I realize that those dissonances—those conflicts within the history—are why North Carolina’s Reconstruction history is so valuable. Acknowledging and understanding those dissonances can provide the most important insights into the connections between our past and our present. The rest of this talk is divided into several three sections, which focus on three dissonances that characterize the history of Reconstruction in North Carolina. I should emphasize that I am using that term—dissonance—in two registers, to mean conflicts in the way we see the past as well as conflicts among people in the past as well. First, I begin with the dissonance between “the North” and “the South,” with North Carolina as representative of “the South.” Second, I will take up a different dissonance, namely the conflicted relationship between whites and blacks within the state of North Carolina. Finally, I move to yet another dissonance, this time within households in the state, focusing on the Reconstruction’s implications for the status of women.

North Carolina and the Nation

The history of Reconstruction is often told as if “the South” and “the North” were opposing forces, with nothing in common. One region usually represents right or wrong, depending on your perspective. Of course, there were differences—after all, there was a Civil War. But focusing only on those differences distorts the picture, obscuring key areas of overlap and making the issues more simplistic than they were. North Carolina underscores those complications. Although a Confederate state, it left the Union reluctantly. It did not leave in the first wave of secession, when the deep south states did, immediately following Lincoln’s election. It left months later, with other upper South states, only after Lincoln called up troops following the Crisis at Fort Sumter. Many white North Carolinians held reservations about the Confederacy throughout the war. Those doubts, however, did not necessarily translate into opposition to slavery, although we tend to link those two issues together today. In fact, support for slavery and Unionism were compatible at the time: up until secession, many white North Carolinians thought that the best way to preserve what they had, including slavery and a society stratified by race, was to remain within the Union.

They had good reason to think so. Unionism and slavery also characterized most white northerners and Union policies until midway through the war. During his campaign and after his election, Lincoln promised not to disturb slavery where it already existed. Over the course of the war, Union policies evolved slowly toward emancipation. Even so, emancipation did not necessarily imply full equality for former slaves at first. That happened later: only after the war’s end and only after President Andrew Johnson’s first
Reconstruction plan collapsed, when the U.S. Congress made the recognition of African Americans’ civil and political rights a requirement for Confederate states’ readmission to the Union in 1867. Even within the North, then, both the principle of racial equality and the commitment to it were new and somewhat tenuous, outside a relatively small circle of activists. This is not what they told me in grade school in Connecticut, although I saw the effects all around me as the Civil Rights Movement moved North. The point, though, is not that racism was universal and uncontested. The point is that racism and racial inequality were not confined to the South or supported only by white southerners: these were national issues that played out in the South during Reconstruction in particularly brutal ways.

North Carolina was no exception. Early in 1866, soon after the war’s end, a group of the state’s political leaders met in Raleigh to fulfill President Johnson’s terms for rejoicing the Union. These were the same elite white men who had led the state during the Civil War. That was because the terms of Presidential Reconstruction were not particularly demanding: states had to withdraw their secession ordinances and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. All other matters, including the rights of people within the states, were left to the states, as they had been before the war. Otherwise North Carolina’s leaders left the state’s basic structures of governance in place, including existing inequalities between ordinary whites and their wealthier white neighbors. Then they tried to preserve the racial inequalities in place under slavery with a series of measures later termed the “Black Code.” The laws in the Black Code left African Americans few civil rights beyond access to the courts and the ability to contract. They were excluded from juries, barred from testifying against whites, and restricted in their mobility, among other things. Although free, African Americans were not to be confused with other, white citizens. With that, the state’s conservative white leaders thought it was over: North Carolina was as it had been before, although without slavery.

The recent past gave them reason to think that outcome would be accepted. But four long years of bloodshed had changed the context. Northerners saw the outcome of Presidential Reconstruction as a blatant denial of the war’s outcome. As opposition mounted, an explosive political battle ensued between Congressional Republicans and President Andrew Johnson. Congressional Republicans ultimately wrested control over Reconstruction, nearly impeaching Johnson in the process. In 1867, they passed a new Reconstruction plan, which laid out new terms for bringing Confederate states back into the Union. At its center was the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment, which pushed beyond the abolition of slavery to something different, namely the principle of racial equality, with the extension of full civil and political rights to African Americans.

Congressional Reconstruction introduced the principle of racial equality into the nation’s basic governing documents through policies designed to address the legacy of slavery within southern states. As such it leaves the impression that race was a peculiarly “southern” issue. Yet racial inequality was a national issue, not just a southern one. Elements of the infamous southern Black Codes differed from laws in other states only in degree. Such discrimination was sanctioned by the U.S. Constitution, which gave states jurisdiction over the legal status of state residents. Many political leaders from the North were not particularly happy about Reconstruction era changes that shifted power over those issues to the federal government.
Now place Congressional Reconstruction and the Fourteenth Amendment against that backdrop. The issues change. Against that backdrop, the central principles of Congressional Reconstruction became an exception within the history of the nation, not just the history of South. What made Congressional Reconstruction so exceptional was its enactment of a national commitment to racial equality. More than that, it was a national commitment to upholding the civil and political rights, of all citizens. That was radical change, for all the states in the Union, North and South. The extent of change for the nation, as a whole, helps explain why his radical vision of Reconstruction failed in North Carolina and the South. It was not just the South’s failure; it was a national failure. But failure in the pursuit of high goals is not the only lesson in this history. Also at play were the efforts of those who set those goals and who tried to reach them. And many of those people lived in the South.

Dissonance within the State of North Carolina

Which brings us to North Carolinians and to the next section of the talk. The policies of Congressional Reconstruction laid the groundwork. But it was left to North Carolinians to make those promises real. I don’t just mean North Carolina’s political leaders. I mean ordinary North Carolinians, white and black—these were the people who did a great deal of the work of Reconstruction. More than that I am also trying to draw your attention the importance of North Carolinians and North Carolina, because we do not usually look there for examples of positive, progressive efforts to achieve civil equality, political democracy, and economic justice. Yet those are legacies of the South, as Reconstruction in North Carolina reveals. It is just hard to see them, because they exist alongside and within a very conflicted, very difficult history of racial tensions and violence between whites and blacks.

At this point, we must add ordinary white North Carolinians to the dynamics of Reconstruction. Before Civil War, North Carolina had a large population of propertyless workers and small farmers who did not own slaves. For them, North Carolina before the Civil War had not been a particularly democratic place. The state was one of the last states to adopt universal white manhood suffrage. And that was just the most graphic example of the general situation, in which ordinary whites often found themselves blocked from meaningful participation in law and government. Reconstruction offered a chance to change that situation. Under Congressional Reconstruction, all the states of the former Confederacy had to create new state constitutions that reflected the principles of civil and political equality in the Fourteenth Amendment. Those principles affected white as well as black North Carolinians. In 1868, a new set of delegates met in Raleigh to frame a new state constitution. These delegates were not the same men who met in 1866. They were whites and blacks aligned with Republican party, who were willing to use the spirit of Reconstruction, build on it, and take the state in more democratic directions. Besides extending full civil and political rights to African Americans, delegates democratized the legal system and government institutions at both the state and local levels.
Those changes literally upended the dynamics of governance in North Carolina. African Americans and poor whites—men and women—prosecuted legal cases themselves, not only defending their interests, but also defining their rights in ways that were impossible before. African American and poor white men sat on juries, where they moved the process of protecting and extending rights. They elected local officials, such as sheriffs and magistrates, as well as other political representatives. What is important to realize, in this period, is that African Americans and ordinary whites both worked to realize a more democratic society. They were not just passive recipients of reform. Rather, they seized the initiative and took the entire process in new directions.

Whites and blacks, however, did not always work together, even when their larger goals were compatible. Here the relationship becomes more conflicted, because of the legacy of slavery. That past can obscure the importance of African Americans’ actions during Reconstruction: slavery meant that African Americans had to demand “rights” so basic and so assumed by most of us now that they do not seem to rise to the level of “rights” at all; and so we miss the significance. Under slavery, for instance, North Carolina law did not even recognize slaves’ marriages, their claims to their own children, or their ownership of property. After slavery, all these rights had to be asserted and claimed. Both whites and African Americans understood such claims for what they were: overt challenges to the existing social order. Acknowledging that, now, places African Americans at the forefront of political change during Reconstruction and reveals how radical these native North Carolinians’ claims were.

That same legacy also cut in another direction, bringing African Americans into conflict with whites. Many whites in North Carolina saw the future through the past, through the legacy of slavery and the belief that hierarchies based on race were natural and necessary. As a result, many white North Carolinians saw African Americans’ efforts to establish their rights as contrary to their own goals.

The result was violence and the destruction of what many North Carolinians had worked so hard to achieve. The outcome was the brutal repression of African Americans in the state, for generations. The ultimate irony is that white North Carolinians lost as well, sacrificing their own positive goals for negative ones that diminished them and the entire state as well. That outcome, though, does not diminish what was lost, but what seemed possible, for a brief moment. If anything, it makes that goal more important. In that moment, people seized the initiative and tried to insert themselves into the political process in ways that had not been possible before. People who had once been excluded from public arenas insisted on their right to be there and say their piece. Regardless of whether they were white or black, their presence had effects. Their presence broadened the base of the legal system, which was necessary if changes in the law were going to be realized at all. Their presence broadened the base of the political system, which countered efforts to limit access on the basis of both race and class. These people also saw and acted on a different political order, one which could accommodate voices that had not been heard much before: they tried to make the institutions of state and local government their own, demanding recognition of their concerns and advancing their own interpretations of
their rights. That, too, is North Carolina’s legacy, hard fought through the efforts of people whom we do not always think of as representative North Carolinians.

African Americans and White Women

Which brings us to third and final section of the talk and to dissonances within North Carolina households and the status of women. The other thing that we tend to forget about women, at least within the context of Reconstruction, is that they are not men—that is, we forget that Reconstruction era legislation did not have the same effects on women as it did on men. And that makes a difference for how we understand this period. The collapse of slavery raised questions about the status of all women, white and black. We now tend to think of rights as being linked to race and sex: white women did not have them because of their sex; slaves did not have them because of race. Yet in the slave South, rights were defined through people’s legal position within households. Heads of household assumed moral, economic, and legal responsibility for all their domestic dependents, including African-American slaves, white wives, and children. They also represented their dependents' interests in the public arena of politics. The position of household heads thus translated directly into civil and political rights. This system was also about race, sex, and wealth: the exemplary household head was a white, propertied man. As the legal logic went, these were the only people capable of the rights and responsibilities of governance, whether in private households or public arenas. But race, sex, and wealth were not the primary means for distributing rights. Free white men were household heads because of their race and sex. But they had rights because they were household heads. African Americans were slaves because of race. White women were wives because of sex. But it was their position of dependency that kept them from claiming rights.

Emancipation formally released all slaves from one position of dependency. As free men, African American men could, theoretically, take on the role of household head with all its legal rights and public privileges. But the situation for African American women was different. They now experienced limitations that held for all women, limitations that were also linked to the positions they were supposed to fill as dependent wives and daughters, within households. Of course, this represented improvement for African American women, who had been in slavery. Nor did freedwomen necessarily think in terms of civil and political equality to men. Still, the point is that their legal position in freedom was not the same as that of their menfolk.

At the same time, the abolition of slavery also called women’s subordination into question, as well. If African Americans could be made equal, then why not women? Women’s rights activists in the North raised that question. Many had been active in the abolition movement, and brought a similar critique to the position of women. After the Civil War, they hoped that the nation would address gender as well as racial inequality. They were disappointed. Congressional Republicans refused.

Granting rights to women would have undermined the logic of extending them to African Americans. That logic rested on the reasoning that all men, as heads of household,
needed rights to fulfill their duties. It was a powerful argument. Republican leaders in North Carolina drew on that same logic, emphasizing men’s differences from women and their responsibilities for their families in justifying the extension of rights to them. Like white men, African American men served as soldiers in the military, demonstrating their fitness for freedom. Now that African American were free and expected to take of their families and represent their interests, they needed the civil and political rights to do so. Ordinary African Americans also used that same logic to gain a purchase on specific rights in their daily lives. Using fathers’ parental rights, African American parents reclaimed children who had been apprenticed local planters and put to agricultural labor in the fields. African American families also found husbands’ and fathers’ legal prerogatives useful in shielding women in their families from the abuse of employers and other whites. In other words, the rights granted to African American men, as men, worked to the benefit of African American women as well, because of the legacy of slavery and the inequalities they faced. In fact, African American women in North Carolina wholeheartedly supported the concept for that reason. That did not necessarily mean that they supported the subordination of women to men. In fact, freedwomen’s actions suggest that they had a very different conception of women’s place within marriage than that enshrined in state law.

Those nuances were lost. In law, men’s claim to rights became a “natural” extension of their manhood, and the denial of rights to women became a “natural” outcome of their womanhood. That logic, then, blocked all women from claiming the rights protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1873, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the denial of civil rights to women on the basis that they were women, not men: women were different by nature than men; men were citizens with claims to full civil and political rights; therefore, the rights guaranteed to all citizens by the Fourteenth Amendment did not extend to women, because they were women and not men.

Inequalities are difficult to contain, and they spilled over into other arenas, affecting men as well. During and after Reconstruction, prominent white feminists expressed their dissatisfaction in overtly racial terms, using negative characterizations of African Americans to question the logic that enshrined manhood as the standard for claiming civil and political rights. Specifically, why could men who were black or poor or poorly educated exercise those rights more responsibly than wealthy, educated white women? Racism continued to mar the feminist movement in the South, in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The results severed questions of gender inequality from questions of racial equality, casting the two as if they were separate and unrelated. They weren’t, as conservative white leaders in North Carolina demonstrated after Reconstruction. They did far more damage in this regard, using fusing race, class, and manhood to argue that only certain men, only the “best men” should rule. In fact, other men weren’t men at all, when it came to the recognition of their civil and political rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to return to the three dissonances and use them to emphasize some connections. For that is what conflict is about, actually: connection. First, there is
“the North” and North Carolina, as representative of “the South”: What I would like to suggest here is that dissonance is more apparent than real. North Carolina’s history, during Reconstruction, is not as different from the nation’s history as we might think, particularly in matters of race. That, then allows to see and acknowledge the important political contributions of North Carolinians, including black North Carolinians, during this period. Then there is the dissonance among North Carolinians, white and black. The racial conflicts within the state during Reconstruction destroyed the lives and futures of many African Americans. It also destroyed the lives of many white Republicans. Beyond that, it destroyed what these North Carolinians had hoped to create: a more inclusive government that could represent the interests of all the people in the state. The bitterness of defeat, though, should direct our attention to the magnitude and importance of that goal: for inclusion usually entails conflict, and a government with a base broad enough and strong enough to work through conflict is a difficult thing to build and to sustain. Their hopes, rather than their failures can be our legacy. Finally there is the dissonance between women and men, which points back to racial divisions among North Carolinians. Again, the legacy of tension between movements for racial justice and women’s rights is very real. Yet in that past are also lessons about how those divisions came to be: lessons about how to simultaneously acknowledge the past and rethink the present, using our history to go forward, rather than standing, immobilized, in its shadow.