

READING

Reconstructing Mississippi

Freedman John Roy Lynch was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives in the elections of 1868, the first elections in which African Americans voted. In his autobiography, he described the accomplishments of the first interracial legislature in Mississippi.

The [1868] campaign was aggressive from beginning to end ... [T]he election resulted in a sweeping Republican victory. That party not only elected the state ticket by a majority of about thirty thousand, but also had a large majority in both branches of the state legislature.

The new administration had an important and difficult task before it. A state government had to be organized from top to bottom. A new judiciary had to be inaugurated, consisting of three justices of the state supreme court, fifteen judges of the circuit court, and twenty chancery court judges, all of whom had to be appointed by the governor, by and with the advice and consent of the [state] senate. In addition to this, a new public school system had to be organized and established. There was not a public school building anywhere in the state except in a few of the larger towns, and they, with possibly a few exceptions, were greatly in need of repair. To erect the necessary schoolhouses and to reconstruct and repair those already in existence so as to afford educational facilities for both races was by no means an easy task. It necessitated a very large outlay of cash in the beginning which resulted in a material increase in the rate of taxation for the time being, but the constitution called for the establishment of the system and, of course, the work had to be done. It was not only done, but it was done creditably and as economically as circumstances and conditions at that time made possible. That system, though slightly changed, still stands as a creditable monument to the work of the first Republican state administration that was organized in the state of Mississippi under the Reconstruction Acts of Congress.

It was also necessary to reorganize, reconstruct, and in many instances, rebuild some of the penal, charitable, and other public institutions of the state. A new code of laws also had to be adopted to take the place of the old

one, and thus wipe out the black laws that had been passed by what was known as the Johnson legislature. Also it was necessary to change the statutes of the state to harmonize with the new order of things. This was no easy task, especially in view of the fact that a heavy increase in the rate of taxation was thus made necessary. That this great and important work was splendidly, creditably, and economically done, no fair-minded person who is familiar with the facts will question or dispute.¹

¹ From John Hope Franklin, ed., *Reminiscences of an Active Life: The Autobiography of John Roy Lynch* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 69–71.