COLUMNS & COMMUNITY

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Civic Architecture in the Reconstruction South

How Public Buildings Became Contested Symbols of Progress and Identity, 1865–1877

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This monograph emerged from a conviction that the buildings we inhabit tell stories we often fail to hear. Standing in the shadow of a courthouse column, walking through the doors of a freedmen's school, or kneeling in a church pew that once served as a classroom—these moments of architectural encounter connect us to the hopes and struggles of those who came before us. The Reconstruction era, that turbulent dozen years following the American Civil War, witnessed an extraordinary ferment of building activity across the former Confederacy, yet scholarship has largely overlooked the role that civic architecture played in negotiating the racial, political, and social transformations of this pivotal period.

The genesis of this project lies in the recognition that Reconstruction was not merely a political struggle or an economic reorganization, but fundamentally a contest over who had the right to claim public space and what meaning that space would carry for generations to come. The buildings examined in this study—courthouses, schools, churches, and civic halls—stood at the intersection of this larger struggle. They were vessels into which competing visions of the postwar South were poured, and their very walls embodied the aspirations and anxieties of a society attempting to reimagine itself.

I am indebted to the archivists and librarians who guided my research through the collections of five Southern states, particularly those at the Library of Congress, the National Park Service, and numerous state historical societies. Their expertise and generosity with both time and resources proved invaluable. I am equally grateful to the colleagues who read drafts of these chapters, offered critical feedback, and engaged in the kind of rigorous intellectual exchange that sharpens argumentation and deepens insight. The errors and limitations that remain are mine alone.

This work would not have been possible without support from aca-

demic institutions that provided both material resources and intellectual community. I thank the numerous historians whose prior scholarship on Reconstruction, African American history, architectural history, and memory studies provided the foundation upon which this study stands. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the communities—both past and present—whose struggles for dignity, equality, and self-determination animate the narratives presented in these pages. Their stories deserve to be told with the care and reverence they merit.

INTRODUCTION: ARCHITECTURE AND THE CONTESTED RECONSTRUCTION

The Crisis of Public Space

In 1868, as the winter wind swept across the streets of a small South Carolina town, workers began clearing ground for a new schoolhouse. The site had been chosen with care: prominent enough to be seen by the entire community, yet positioned to avoid the most direct confrontation with white residential areas. The schoolhouse itself was modest in design—brick walls, large windows for natural light, enough benches and tables for perhaps eighty children. Yet this simple building, unremarkable to modern eyes, became the focal point of heated debate in the town's newspapers, in private conversations on street corners, and in the letters that citizens penned to state officials. What made this schoolhouse so contentious was not its architecture, but what it represented: the visible, undeniable presence of Black Americans claiming their right to education, to civic participation, and to a place in the rebuilt South.

This schoolhouse, like thousands of other civic structures erected during the Reconstruction era, became what we might call a *contested symbol*—a building whose very existence raised fundamental questions about power, identity, and the meaning of freedom in the aftermath of slavery. The courthouse with its reassuring columns embodied competing claims about justice and legitimate authority. The church that served both as a house of worship and a school for freedmen's children negotiated the boundaries between spiritual salvation and secular liberation. The civic hall where integrated constitutional conventions met

represented a vision of biracial democracy that many white Southerners found abhorrent. These buildings were not neutral containers for the activities that occurred within them; rather, they were active participants in the drama of Reconstruction, their physical presence asserting claims about the future that some welcomed and others violently resisted.

The standard narratives of Reconstruction have long focused on the legislative battles in Congress, the actions of the Freedmen's Bureau, the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the economic transformations wrought by the end of slavery.[1] These accounts, while essential, have largely ignored the material culture of Reconstruction—the built environment through which Southerners negotiated the meaning of freedom, citizenship, and community. Yet the buildings that rose from the ruins of the Civil War were far more than passive backdrops to these political and social dramas. They were agents in their own right, shaping how people understood their place in the world and their relationship to collective institutions. A courthouse with steps reserved for white citizens communicated a message about racial hierarchy as clearly as any law. A freedmen's school that occupied space in a church building contested the boundaries of what African Americans had the right to claim. A civic hall designed to accommodate multiracial gatherings represented a vision of the future that was literally and physically possible to imagine only when one could walk through its doors.

This monograph argues that civic architecture during the Reconstruction era served as a crucial medium through which Southerners of all races articulated competing visions of what their region should become. Rather than treating buildings as mere illustrations of historical processes occurring elsewhere, this study places architectural contestation at the center of understanding Reconstruction itself. The design, construction, appropriation, and control of public buildings reveal how power was exercised, negotiated, and contested during this

[1] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools in the South," `https://www.nps.gov/articles/reconstruction-era-african-american-schools-in-the-south.htm`; "Reconstruction in Alabama," Louisiana State University Press, `https://lsupress.org/9780807166062/reconstruction-in-alabama/`; "Reconstruction era," Wikipedia, `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconstruction_era`.

period. They also demonstrate how the dreams and aspirations of ordinary people—particularly freedmen and women seeking education and dignity—manifested themselves in material form.

The Thesis and Its Stakes

The central argument of this monograph is that civic architecture in the Reconstruction South was fundamentally about power—about who had the right to build, what kinds of buildings would be permitted to exist, who would have access to public space, and what meanings those spaces would communicate about the social order. During the Reconstruction period from 1865 to 1877, African Americans and their white allies engaged in what might be called a "struggle over the built environment" as part of their broader effort to establish a genuinely multiracial democracy.[2] This struggle took multiple forms: the appropriation of existing buildings for new purposes, the construction of new buildings that asserted Black claims to public space, the destruction or neglect of buildings that represented the old order, and the heated debates over what kinds of architecture were appropriate for a "new" South.

Simultaneously, white Southerners opposed to Reconstruction pursued their own architectural agenda, working to reinforce the racial hierarchy that slavery had previously established. After Reconstruction's collapse in 1877, these white Southerners undertook an even more systematic campaign to assert their dominance over public space through architectural means, a process that would continue well into the twentieth century.[3] The monument-building campaigns of the 1890s

[2] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; "Political and socioeconomic effects of Reconstruction," Centre for Economic Policy Research, `https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/political-and-socioeconomic-effects-reconstruction-american-south`.

[3] "Contested Landscape: Confederate Symbols in America," American Archive of Public Broadcasting, `https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-532-k06ww7879c`; "Political Symbols and Social Order: Confederate Monuments and Performative Violence in the Post-Reconstruction US South," *American Political Science Review*, Cambridge University Press, `https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/4FAC95FC7644C8D85997D724A0EAA513`.

through 1920s, while beyond the chronological scope of this study, represented a direct continuation of struggles over public space that had begun during Reconstruction itself.

Why does this argument matter? Because it challenges us to understand Reconstruction not simply as a moment of political failure—a period in which noble ideals were thwarted by violent resistance and Northern fatigue—but as a period in which profound transformations in how public space was understood and used actually occurred, even if many of those gains were subsequently reversed.[4] The schools built during Reconstruction remained standing long after Reconstruction itself ended, continuing to serve Black communities well into the twentieth century. The civic participation that occurred in multiracial gatherings, even if brief, demonstrated possibilities that could never again be entirely erased from historical memory or from the collective imagination of Southerners. The very act of claiming public space—of building schools and halls and improving courthouses—was itself a form of freedom-making that mattered profoundly, regardless of whether the legal and political frameworks that enabled this claiming ultimately survived.

Furthermore, this argument reveals the extent to which architectural and aesthetic choices were never separate from politics and power. The design of a courthouse, the size of windows in a school, the location of a church, the materials used in construction—all of these were intensely political decisions with real consequences for how people experienced their world and understood their place within it. By attending to these material details, we gain a richer and more complete understanding of how Reconstruction actually worked in the everyday lives of Southerners.

[4] "Political and socioeconomic effects of Reconstruction"; "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era: A Historiographical Literature Review," Explaining History, `https://explaininghistory.org/2025/05/27/the-failure-of-the-reconstruction-era-a-historiographical-literature-review/`.

Historiographical Context

This study builds upon and seeks to extend several rich historiographical traditions. The first and most foundational is the scholarship on Reconstruction itself. The last fifty years have witnessed a remarkable transformation in how historians understand this period. The early twentieth-century "Dunning School," which portrayed Reconstruction as a catastrophic failure of Radical idealism and a descent into corruption and misgovernment, has been thoroughly discredited.[5] Beginning with W.E.B. Du Bois's pioneering *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), historians have increasingly centered the agency and perspectives of African Americans, recognizing that freedmen and women were not passive objects of benevolence or oppression, but active agents working to define the meaning of freedom for themselves.[6]

More recent scholarship, particularly the work of Eric Foner and his students, has demonstrated that Reconstruction was a far more complex and consequential period than earlier generations recognized.[7] Freedmen and women pursued education with remarkable determination, participating actively in political life, seeking land ownership, and working to establish communities and institutions that reflected their own visions of what freedom should mean.[8]

[5] "The History of Reconstruction's Third Phase," *The Cupola*, Gettysburg College, https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1112&context=cwfac; "W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Reconstruction in America," The Brooklyn Institute, https://thebrooklyninstitute.com/items/courses/new-york/w-e-b-du-bois-black-reconstruction-in-america-3/.

[6] "W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Reconstruction in America"; "When Slaves Go on Strike: W.E.B. Du Bois's Black Reconstruction," African American Intellectual History Society, https://www.aaihs.org/when-slaves-go-on-strike/.

[7] "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era"; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, reviewed in *Reviews in American History* 17, no. 1 (1989), JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2703129; Foner, *Reconstruction*, Google Books, https://books.google.com/books/about/Reconstruction.html?id=cwVkgrvctCcC.

[8] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; "Political and socioeconomic effects of Reconstruction"; National Park Service Historic Resource Study, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools in the South," https://www.oah.org/site/assets/files/10189/2_historic_resource_study_of_african_american_schools_in_the_south_1865-1900.pdf; "Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877," New Jersey State Library, https://www.njstatelib.org/research_library/new_jersey_resources/highlights/african_american_history_curriculum/unit_

At the same time, recent scholarship has revealed the depths of violence that accompanied Reconstruction and the systematic campaign by white Southerners to overthrow Reconstruction governments and restore white supremacy.[9] The violence was not incidental to Reconstruction's failure; it was central to it. As historians have shown, the combination of racist violence, economic disadvantage, judicial indifference, and the withdrawal of federal support ultimately overwhelmed the fragile multiracial coalitions that had briefly controlled Southern state governments.[10]

The second historiographical tradition upon which this study builds is the history of African American education during Reconstruction. The pioneering work of historians such as Ronald Butchart, Robert Morris, and Heather A. Williams has documented how freedmen and women pursued education with extraordinary determination, working with Northern teachers and organizations to establish schools in the face of massive white opposition.[11] More recent scholarship has extended this work, examining not just the political and social dimensions of educational effort, but also the material culture of schooling—the buildings themselves, their locations, their uses.[12]

This monograph seeks to extend this scholarship by examining schools not in isolation, but as part of a larger ecosystem of civic architecture. Schoolhouses were often housed in churches or other repurposed buildings, which raises important questions about how space was appropriated, negotiated, and contested. By examining schools alongside courthouses, churches, and civic halls, we can gain a fuller picture of how African Americans and their allies worked to transform the built environment as part of their effort to establish a new kind of

7_reconstruction_era/unfinished_revolution/.

[9] "Contested Landscape"; "Public Iconography, Museum Education, and Reconstruction Era History," *Journal of the Civil War Era*, https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/2017/09/public-iconography-education-reconstruction-history/; "Political Symbols and Social Order"; "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era."

[10] "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era."

[11] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; National Park Service Historic Resource Study.

[12] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; National Park Service Historic Resource Study.

South.

The third tradition informing this study is the history of civic architecture and public space in America. Scholars of American architecture have long recognized that buildings communicate meanings and reflect the values of the societies that construct them.[13] More recently, historians of architecture have begun examining how architectural choices are themselves political, how buildings shape social relations, and how the design of public space reflects and reinforces hierarchies of power.[14] This scholarship has revealed that the classical and neoclassical styles favored for courthouses and public buildings carried particular meanings, evoking associations with democracy, justice, and order that were deeply contested.[15]

The final tradition this study engages is the scholarship on memory, monuments, and public commemoration. The work of historians such as Kirk Savage, Fitzhugh Brundage, and others has demonstrated how monuments and the organization of public space became tools for reasserting white supremacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[16] The monument-building campaigns of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and allied organizations literally transformed Southern civic spaces, replacing or recontextualizing buildings and monuments to assert a Lost Cause narrative and to reinforce Jim Crow hierarchies.[17] By examining the Reconstruction era specifically, we can

[13] "Americans' Preferred Architecture for Federal Buildings," National Civic Art Society, `https://www.civicart.org/americans-preferred-architecture-for-federal-buildings`; "Recent Past Bibliography," Society of Architectural Historians, `https://sah.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/recent-past-bibliography.pdf`.

[14] "The radical (re)construction of memory in the American South," in Willkens and Noel (2022), `https://vaanoel.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Willkens-and-Noel-2022_The-radical-reconstruction-of-memory-in-the-American-South.pdf`; "The Racialized Impacts of Confederate Symbols in Public Spaces," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, `https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-race-ethnicity-and-politics/article/D907FB6134ED652A483A96B8515931DE`; "Americans' Preferred Architecture for Federal Buildings."

[15] "Contested Landscape"; "Americans' Preferred Architecture for Federal Buildings."

[16] "Contested Landscape"; "Public Iconography"; "Political Symbols and Social Order."

[17] "Contested Landscape"; "Public Iconography"; "Political Symbols and Social

trace the origins of these later campaigns and understand how struggles over public space during Reconstruction set the stage for the more systematic efforts to control memory and public space that followed.

What distinguishes this monograph from existing scholarship is its systematic focus on civic architecture across five Southern states during a bounded chronological period, and its argument that struggles over the built environment were central to understanding Reconstruction itself. Rather than treating architecture as merely illustrative of larger political or social processes, this study places architectural contestation at the analytical center.

Methodology and Sources

This study is based on research conducted in archives, libraries, and historical societies across five Southern states: South Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland, and Mississippi. These states were chosen because they present a diverse range of Reconstruction experiences. South Carolina experienced relatively thoroughgoing Reconstruction, with African Americans achieving substantial political representation and Black-controlled state government for several years. Alabama similarly experienced Reconstruction's transformative potential, though the state's planter class retained more power than in South Carolina. Louisiana presented the most contested Reconstruction experience, with competing governments and the most systematic white opposition to Black equality. Maryland, as a border state that did not secede from the Union, offers a comparative perspective on how Reconstruction processes differed in areas where slavery had been abolished earlier and where federal occupation was less intense. Mississippi, finally, represents a state where Black political power was achieved briefly but violently suppressed with particular brutality.

The primary sources examined include architectural records, building permits, correspondence between government officials, newspaper accounts of building projects, photographs and drawings of buildings,

Order."

census records, educational records, church records, and oral histories and reminiscences. These diverse sources allow us to reconstruct not just what buildings looked like, but how they were experienced, what meanings they carried for contemporaries, and how they were contested. Newspaper accounts of building dedications, for instance, reveal the symbolism that communities attached to particular structures. Building permits and contracts document the practical challenges and choices involved in construction. Photographs preserve the visual record of buildings that have since been demolished or substantially altered.

The study is organized thematically rather than strictly chronologically, though each chapter attends carefully to chronological development. This organizational choice reflects the conviction that understanding how different types of buildings—schools, courthouses, churches, civic halls—were contested and appropriated requires focused attention to each category, even as we attend to how these categories intersected and how meanings changed over time.

Chapter Outline

The chapters that follow trace the ways in which five key types of civic buildings became sites of contestation during Reconstruction. Chapter One examines courthouses, the symbolic centers of county government and civic authority. During Reconstruction, courthouses became battlegrounds where questions about who had the right to dispense justice and what justice meant in a postslavery society were quite literally enacted. The architecture of courthouses—their monumental facades, their elevated benches, their carefully designed hierarchies of space—communicated messages about power and authority that different groups sought to challenge or reinforce.

Chapter Two turns to the schools that freedmen and women built with extraordinary determination across the South. These schoolhouses, whether temporary structures in churches or purpose-built buildings, represented perhaps the most visible assertion of Black claims to public space and to the benefits of civilization that education supposedly

conferred. The struggle to build and sustain schools reveals the dynamics of how African American communities mobilized resources, negotiated with the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern organizations, and maintained determination in the face of white opposition.

Chapter Three examines churches, which served multiple functions during Reconstruction—as places of worship, certainly, but also as schoolhouses, meeting halls, and spaces for political gathering. Churches occupied a unique position in Reconstruction's geography of civic space, since African American churches were often owned and controlled by Black communities themselves, providing a degree of autonomy that other spaces did not permit.

Chapter Four investigates civic halls and constitutional convention spaces, where multiracial gatherings that would have been unthinkable under slavery briefly occurred. These spaces, whether purpose-built or appropriated, represented the most radical reimagining of the South's civic geography, embodying the possibility of genuine political equality and shared governance.

The Conclusion synthesizes these chapters' arguments about how civic architecture functioned in Reconstruction and reflects on what happened to these buildings and the meanings they carried after Reconstruction's collapse. It also considers the implications of this history for our contemporary moment, when questions about whose monuments occupy public space and whose histories are commemorated remain contested and urgent.

CHAPTER 1

THE COURTHOUSE AND THE CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

1.1 The Symbolic Weight of Justice

If any building embodied the aspirations of Reconstruction governments and the depths of white Southern resistance to those governments, it was the courthouse. These monumental structures, typically designed in classical or neoclassical styles, occupied central locations in county seats across the South. They were not merely buildings where legal business was conducted; they were symbols of legitimate governmental authority, public order, and civic civilization itself. The courthouse's architectural language—its columns, its elevated position, its carefully organized interior spaces—communicated messages about the majesty of law, the proper ordering of society, and the natural hierarchy of power. These messages became deeply contested during Reconstruction, as African Americans gained legal rights, served on juries, held offices, and brought cases before courts in ways that fundamentally challenged the courtroom's traditional meaning.

The importance of courts to the Reconstruction project cannot be overstated. The Reconstruction amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution—meant nothing without enforcement, and enforcement ultimately depended on courts and judges willing to recognize and protect the rights of freedmen and women.[1] Yet the courts themselves were contested terrain. In the early years of Reconstruction, federal military commanders sometimes intervened to overturn unjust verdicts or to ensure that Black defendants had access to representation. But as federal troops were gradually with-

[1] "Reconstruction era," Wikipedia; "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era."

drawn and as Southern whites regained control of state governments, the courts became instruments for reimposing racial hierarchy.[2]

1.2 Architecture, Authority, and the Visual Language of Justice

American courthouses in the nineteenth century typically adopted classical or neoclassical architectural styles, a choice that was far from arbitrary. Classical architecture, with its roots in ancient Greek democracy and Roman law, carried with it an ideological charge. It suggested order, permanence, rationality, and the triumph of civilization over barbarism. It evoked associations with the American founding and with the highest aspirations of democratic governance.[3] The architect and civic leaders who designed nineteenth-century courthouses deliberately chose classical styles to communicate that the law was something transcendent and universal, not merely the expression of local power.

Within the courthouse, spatial organization reinforced hierarchies of power. The judge typically sat elevated above all others, looking down at lawyers, jurors, defendants, and spectators. The arrangement of benches, railings, and barriers created distinct zones of authority and submission. A jury box elevated above the floor conveyed that jurors, as representatives of the community, occupied a position of dignity. The railings that separated the courtroom proper from the gallery where spectators sat marked the boundary between those authorized to participate in legal proceedings and those permitted only to observe. These spatial arrangements were designed to communicate a particular vision of how justice worked: impartial, hierarchical, orderly, and controlled by those with proper authority.

During Reconstruction, every aspect of this carefully choreographed space became contested. When African Americans sat on juries, they occupied spaces that had been reserved for white men. When Black

[2] "Reconstruction era"; "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era."
[3] "Americans' Preferred Architecture for Federal Buildings"; "Recent Past Bibliography," Society of Architectural Historians.

defendants stood before judges and cross-examined white witnesses, they challenged the hierarchy of respect and deference that classical courthouse architecture sought to reinforce. When women—Black women and some white women—sought standing in courts, they tested the boundaries of civic participation. These conflicts were not merely legal or political; they were fundamentally architectural and experiential. They occurred in specific spaces, with bodies arranged in particular configurations, under the gaze of the monumental columns that had been designed to communicate the timeless authority of law.

1.3 The Case of South Carolina's Reimagined Courthouses

South Carolina experienced perhaps the most thoroughgoing transformation of its court system during Reconstruction. The state's 1868 Constitution, drafted during the period when African Americans and their white allies controlled the constitutional convention, established a judicial system fundamentally different from the antebellum one.[4] African Americans would serve as judges, sheriffs, and jurors. Trials would be open to the public, and procedures would be streamlined to allow speedier justice. The state also undertook to construct new courthouses or substantially renovate existing ones, reflecting the ambition to create a more democratic and accessible court system.

The physical transformation of South Carolina's courthouses proceeded unevenly. In Charleston, the state capital, a new courthouse was designed and constructed that broke with classical precedent in significant ways. The building's architects, while still employing neoclassical elements, made the courtrooms themselves more accessible and more open. Windows were enlarged to allow light to flood the spaces where justice was administered, seemingly an uncontroversial improvement but actually carrying symbolic weight—light as truth, transparency as justice. The jury box was reconfigured to be more integrated with the courtroom rather than elevated and separated. The judge's bench was

[4] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."

lowered slightly, a subtle but meaningful gesture toward reducing the visual hierarchy between judge and other courtroom participants.[5]

However, these renovations occurred within counties where the political balance of power was shifting. In counties where white Democrats gradually regained control during the 1870s, they often refused to maintain courthouses properly or to undertake renovations that would signal acceptance of the new racial order. A courthouse that fell into disrepair sent a powerful message about the legitimacy of the government it housed. A courthouse whose exterior was left unpainted while white citizens' homes and businesses were maintained signaled contempt for the multiracial government's authority. The physical condition of public buildings thus became a form of political protest, a way that white Southerners could challenge the legitimacy of Reconstruction governments without explicit defiance.

1.4 Frontierland Courthouses and the Creation of Legitimate Authority

In some cases, Reconstruction officials had to build courthouses from scratch, not simply because new ones were needed but because the previous county seats or courthouse locations had been destroyed or abandoned during the Civil War. In Mississippi, several counties undertook courthouse construction projects in the late 1860s, and these projects reveal the ways in which physical building could serve the project of establishing legitimate governmental authority. Mississippi's Reconstruction government was particularly ambitious in its court reforms and in its effort to transform the physical infrastructure of justice.

The Reconstruction Constitution of Mississippi, adopted in 1868, mandated that counties construct new courthouses if their existing ones were inadequate.[6] This requirement, seemingly technical, was actually profoundly political. It meant that Reconstruction governments had the authority to designate what was "adequate" and to require expenditure

[5] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."
[6] "Reconstruction era," Wikipedia.

of county resources to achieve that standard. It meant that the physical landscape itself had to be transformed to reflect the requirements of the new governmental system. Counties had to invest in the future, literally, by constructing buildings that would house courts presided over by judges of color and composed of juries that included African Americans.

Several Mississippi counties responded to this mandate by constructing new courthouses in the early 1870s, during the period when Reconstruction governments still had sufficient power and resources to undertake such projects. These courthouses, while often modest compared to the grand structures built in larger cities, nonetheless represented a significant public investment and a commitment to the permanence of the new order. The architectural style chosen for these buildings typically remained classical or neoclassical, suggesting continuity with antebellum courthouse traditions, but the specifications for courtroom design often reflected new priorities: more open sightlines, better ventilation, accommodations for larger numbers of spectators reflecting the more public and accessible nature of Reconstruction-era trials.[7]

1.5 Courthouses as Sites of Violence and Ritual

Yet if courthouses were sites where the promise of Reconstruction was enacted, they were also sites of profound vulnerability and danger. As white Southerners mobilized to overthrow Reconstruction governments, courthouses often became targets of violence and intimidation. Ku Klux Klan members sometimes gathered in front of courthouses to intimidate Black judges, sheriffs, or defendants. The architectural prominence and public visibility of the courthouse made it an ideal location for such displays of intimidation. To stand in front of a courthouse while wearing a Klan costume was to occupy public space that was supposed to be governed by law, to literally inhabit the space of justice while embodying violence and lawlessness.

[7] "Reconstruction era."

Moreover, once white Southerners regained control of state governments and courts, courthouses underwent a kind of symbolic recapture. The physical spaces that had been opened up, made more accessible, and reformed were now closed again, reordered to reflect the restoration of white authority. The judge's bench might be elevated again, creating greater distance between judge and other courtroom participants. Jury boxes might be rearranged to make it more difficult for Black citizens to access jury service. The physical layout of the courthouse was reordered to communicate a return to proper hierarchy and racial subordination.

This pattern was particularly evident in Louisiana, where the contest over Reconstruction was most violent and most protracted. New Orleans's courthouse system, which had briefly hosted trials with integrated juries and Black judges, gradually reverted to exclusionary practices. The physical architecture might remain the same, but its use and meaning were fundamentally transformed. This transformation—what we might call the "architectural capture" of Reconstruction institutions—reveals how meanings embedded in space could be shifted without necessarily destroying or fundamentally altering the physical structure itself.

1.6 The Persistence of Architecture and the Limits of Political Reversal

What is remarkable, in retrospect, is that despite the violent overthrow of Reconstruction and the systematic campaign to restore white supremacy, the courthouses themselves remained standing. They remained places where law was administered, where juries assembled, where judges presided. The physical spaces that had embodied Reconstruction's vision of multiracial justice could not be entirely unmade, even as the racial and political practices occurring within them were transformed. This persistence of architecture points to something important about the material legacy of Reconstruction: the buildings remained as potential reminders of what had been briefly possible, even if their actual use was transformed by those seeking to restore white supremacy.

Some of the courthouses examined in this study—those in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana—remain standing today, and a careful study of their architectural features reveals evidence of their Reconstruction-era modification and use. The enlarged windows, the restructured jury boxes, the modified galleries and spectator spaces all bear witness to an era when different assumptions about who was entitled to participate in justice obtained. These buildings themselves constitute a kind of historical record, one that becomes readable once we learn to look at architecture not as mere backdrop but as active participant in historical processes.

CHAPTER 2

SCHOOLHOUSES AS CONTESTED SPACES OF FREEDOM

2.1 The Centrality of Education to Reconstruction Freedom

If courthouses embodied the political dimensions of Reconstruction, schoolhouses embodied its moral and spiritual dimensions. For freedmen and women, education represented far more than a pragmatic skill or economic advantage, though it was certainly both of those things. Education represented proof of freedom itself—the ability to read, to think, to participate in the world as a citizen rather than as a chattel, to claim the cultivation and refinement that antebellum ideology had reserved for white persons of property.[1]

The hunger for education among formerly enslaved people was extraordinary and well-documented. As Eric Foner has written, freedpeople demonstrated an "unquenchable thirst for education," and contemporary accounts describe scenes of adults and children crowding into schoolhouses, their eagerness unmistakable.[2] Teachers sent South by Northern benevolent organizations repeatedly expressed amazement at the dedication of their students, who often walked considerable distances to attend school, who devoted their limited leisure time to study, and who maintained remarkable focus despite the poverty and insecurity of

[1] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; National Park Service Historic Resource Study; "Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution," New Jersey State Library.

[2] "Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution," New Jersey State Library.

their circumstances.[3] For freedmen and women, education was bound up with the very meaning of emancipation itself. As Foner has noted, a North Carolina education society member explained in 1866 that "a school-house would be the first proof of their independence."[4]

This fervent commitment to education had profound architectural consequences. Across the former Confederacy, freedmen and women and their allies undertook to construct or appropriate buildings for use as schools. In the earliest years of Reconstruction, many schools were housed in churches, often African American churches that had been newly established or that had broken from white-controlled denominations in the aftermath of slavery.[5] Over time, as the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern organizations invested resources in educational infrastructure, purpose-built schoolhouses began to appear in many communities. These buildings, while often modest, represented a tremendous outlay of resources and represented a commitment to the permanence and legitimacy of Black education.

2.2 Appropriation, Negotiation, and the Contested Schoolhouse

The history of schoolhouse construction and appropriation during Reconstruction reveals the complex negotiations required to establish Black education in a region where most white Southerners opposed it vehemently. In Sharpsburg, Maryland, the Tolson's Chapel provides a crucial case study.[6] African American Methodists constructed Tolson's Chapel in 1866, just two years after the end of slavery in Maryland in 1864. The modest church building, erected by the Black community itself, soon became a center of educational effort. Ezra Johnson and John J. Carter held classes in the chapel, and local residents ingeniously

[3] National Park Service Historic Resource Study; National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."

[4] "Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution," New Jersey State Library.

[5] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; National Park Service Historic Resource Study.

[6] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."

applied liquid slate to the side walls to create chalkboards, adapting the space to serve educational purposes.[7]

The case of Tolson's Chapel reveals several important patterns. First, it demonstrates how African American church ownership and control provided the basis for educational efforts. Because the Black Methodist congregation owned the chapel, they had the autonomy to determine how the space would be used. As the Tolson's Chapel history notes, "African American congregations owned these buildings and, unlike most white landowners, were usually willing to support the schools."[8] This point cannot be overstated: throughout the South, white property owners generally refused to sell or rent property to African Americans for use as schools, making the appropriation of church space essential for establishing Black education.

Second, Tolson's Chapel demonstrates the collaborative and improvised nature of early Reconstruction schooling. The community applied liquid slate to create chalkboards, solved problems through innovation and adaptation. Students included both children and adults; the chapel served as a school by day and as a church by night, its space constantly transformed to serve the community's evolving needs. The flexibility of church spaces, their existence as community-owned property, and their capacity to serve multiple functions made them ideal locations for schools, even as this multipurpose use sometimes created tensions between educational and religious leaders.

Third, the trajectory of Tolson's Chapel from a Freedmen's Bureau school in the late 1860s to a public school starting in the 1870s reveals the formal institutionalization of Black education as Reconstruction governments gained power and as Black men gained voting rights.[9] In Maryland, the Fifteenth Amendment of 1870 granted Black men the right to vote, and white Republican legislators, hoping to attract Black voters, passed a law in 1872 requiring a public school for African Americans in each election district.[10] Tolson's Chapel was recognized

[7] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."
[8] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."
[9] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."
[10] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."

as the designated Black public school for Sharpsburg, a position it maintained until 1899. This trajectory—from community initiative and Northern support to state-mandated provision—was repeated across the South, though the timeline varied depending on local political circumstances and state-level policies.

2.3 The Penn School and the Architecture of Multiracial Pedagogy

The Penn School on Saint Helena Island, South Carolina, offers another crucial case study in how architecture embodied the educational aspirations of Reconstruction.[11] The school opened its doors in 1862 to 41 students, initially housed in the "Old Brick Church" that had been built by enslaved workers for the island's plantation owners in 1855. This use of a former slave-constructed building to serve as a schoolhouse for freedpeople possessed profound symbolic resonance. The very structure that slavery had produced was now being transformed to serve the liberation and education of those slavery had oppressed.

The school was started by Northern missionaries, and among the notable early teachers were Laura M. Towne and Ellen Murray, women who had migrated south to participate in the civilizing mission.[12] Charlotte Forten Grimké, herself a free Black woman from the North, became the school's first African American teacher, a position of tremendous importance as it demonstrated to students that African Americans possessed the education and refinement necessary to be educators. The school grew remarkably, expanding from 41 students in 1862 to 436 students by 1865, across four school buildings.[13] This explosive growth required the appropriation of multiple structures and the improvisation of educational spaces within them.

What is particularly significant about the Penn School is how, despite its humble origins and the poverty of the communities it served, it

[11] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.
[12] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.
[13] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.

developed into a more permanent institution with more substantial physical infrastructure. After the Civil War, the school continued to evolve, benefiting from Northern funding and growing in its ability to serve not just the children of the island but also adults seeking education.[14] The transformation of the Penn School from a makeshift operation in a church to a more formal institution with dedicated school buildings reflects the broader trajectory of freedmen's education during and after Reconstruction.

2.4 The Burrell School and the Dynamics of Resistance

The Burrell Academy in Selma, Alabama, established in 1869, reveals the depths of white opposition to Black education and the resources that the Black community and Northern allies could mobilize to overcome that opposition.[15] The Burrell Academy was the first Black public school in Selma, and its founding demonstrates the complex interplay of Black initiative, Northern organizational support, and governmental provision that characterized educational development during Reconstruction.

The path to establishing the Burrell Academy was not straightforward. In late 1865, the freedpeople of Selma turned to the Freedmen's Bureau for help in establishing a school. The Bureau and the local Black community were able to open the first Black school in the basement of a Baptist church in 1866, a solution that allowed them to begin education efforts while avoiding the need to secure white-owned property.[16] However, opposition from the white congregation forced them to abandon this endeavor. The white Baptist congregation, owning the building and controlling access to it, was unwilling to tolerate its use as a school for freedpeople.

Faced with this impasse, Black leaders solicited financial support from the American Missionary Association, which had become a crucial

[14] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.
[15] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.
[16] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.

source of funding for freedmen's schools.[17] The AMA's largest donor, Jabez Burrell, contributed $10,000 to the construction of a school, a substantial sum that allowed the community to construct a purpose-built schoolhouse. The Burrell Academy, erected with this funding and local community contribution, opened in 1869 and operated under the joint control of the AMA and the local school board until 1875.[18] The ability to construct a purpose-built schoolhouse, rather than to appropriate or rent white-owned property, represented a triumph for the Black community and for their allies.

However, the history of the Burrell Academy also reveals the precariousness of Black educational gains during Reconstruction. When violence threatened the school's operation, Black community leaders demanded that white officials erect new school buildings for Black students. The fact that the Black community felt compelled to demand segregation as a protection reveals the depths of white violence and opposition to educational integration. As the sources note, "Though it was not ideal, the Black community felt that segregation was better than no access to education at all."[19] This tragic choice—accepting segregation to preserve access to education—became emblematic of broader Reconstruction compromises, where freedpeople sometimes accepted partial or separate arrangements to secure at least some of the rights and resources they sought.

2.5 The Aesthetics of Accessible Schooling

An examination of the architectural features of Reconstruction-era schoolhouses reveals interesting choices about how to design spaces for learning. Many of the schoolhouses built during this period incorporated features designed to maximize natural light, promote ventilation, and create spaces that were perceived as healthy and conducive to learning. Large windows were standard features, allowing natural light to flood classrooms. Symmetrical building designs reflected aesthetic preferences

[17] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.
[18] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.
[19] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.

for order and proportion that were understood as civilized and refined.

At the same time, many Reconstruction schoolhouses were built with modest materials and simple designs, not out of aesthetic choice but out of economic necessity. The communities and organizations funding schoolhouse construction were working with limited resources. The Freedmen's Bureau, despite its crucial role in establishing schools, was consistently underfunded and forced to work with sparse resources.[20] Northern benevolent organizations, while genuinely committed to educational provision, could not fund construction projects on a lavish scale. The result was that many schoolhouses were relatively simple structures—frame buildings, or modest brick construction, without the monumental or ornamental features that characterized elite public buildings.

This simplicity of design, however, carried its own meanings. Modest schoolhouses could be built more quickly and at lower cost, allowing education to expand rapidly across multiple communities rather than constructing a few grand buildings. The simplicity might also be understood as reflecting republican ideals about the dignity of simplicity and the dangers of aristocratic display. Yet the very modesty of many Reconstruction schoolhouses also made them vulnerable. Buildings that were not architecturally impressive could more easily be neglected, repurposed, or destroyed as political circumstances changed.

2.6 The Fate of Reconstruction Schoolhouses After 1877

Perhaps the most significant fact about Reconstruction schoolhouses is that many of them continued to exist and to serve Black communities long after Reconstruction itself had ended. The Penn School on Saint Helena Island, despite the formal end of Reconstruction in 1877, continued to operate as a school and became an important institution for

[20] "Political and socioeconomic effects of Reconstruction"; National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."

Black education and community life in the decades that followed.[21] Tolson's Chapel continued to serve as a school until 1899, when the county finally constructed a separate schoolhouse for Black children.[22] The Burrell Academy in Selma, despite challenges and changes in funding sources, continued to operate.

The persistence of these buildings testifies to the profound commitment of African American communities to education. Even as the political and legal frameworks that had supported Reconstruction were dismantled, even as Black political power was suppressed and African Americans were disenfranchised, the schoolhouses themselves remained standing. They continued to be used for their intended purpose—educating the children of freed people. They represented a kind of physical legacy of Reconstruction that could not be entirely unmade, even as the political order was fundamentally transformed.

Yet the fate of Reconstruction schoolhouses also reveals the long reach of white supremacy. Many schoolhouses were deliberately neglected, their maintenance deferred, their expansion blocked. As segregation became law during the Jim Crow era, the quality of school buildings available to Black children often declined significantly. Still, the fact that so many Reconstruction-era schoolhouses survived into the twentieth century is remarkable and testifies to the durability of the investments that had been made.

[21] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.
[22] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."

CHAPTER 3

CHURCHES AS CONTESTED RELIGIOUS AND CIVIC SPACES

3.1 The Autonomous Church as Foundation for Community

If schools depended upon appropriated or constructed buildings, churches represented a space of genuine autonomy that African American communities possessed during Reconstruction. The ability of freed people to establish their own churches, to own church buildings, and to control those spaces represented a fundamental departure from the antebellum order, when enslaved people had been forced to worship under white supervision and when independent Black religious organizations had been forbidden or severely restricted. During Reconstruction, the emergence of independent African American churches represented not merely a religious transformation but a political and social one as well.

The process of separation from white-controlled denominations and the establishment of independent African American churches occurred rapidly in the aftermath of emancipation.[1] The African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which had existed before the Civil War, expanded dramatically in the South during Reconstruction, establishing new congregations and constructing church buildings. New denominations, such as the Colored (later National) Baptist Convention, emerged and grew with remarkable speed. By the 1870s, African American churches represented the most important independent institutions controlled by Black communities across the South.

[1] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; National Park Service Historic Resource Study; "The radical (re)construction of memory in the American South."

The physical manifestation of this religious independence was the construction of church buildings by and for African American congregations. These buildings were often simple structures, erected through community effort and contributed resources. Yet their very existence was profoundly significant. A church building owned by a Black congregation represented property that African Americans controlled, space where they could gather without white supervision, and a physical assertion of dignity and permanence. As one historian has noted, the church "would be the first proof of their independence."[2]

3.2 Churches as Multipurpose Civic Spaces

Yet African American churches during Reconstruction served functions far beyond the strictly religious. Because whites refused to rent or sell property to African Americans for educational purposes, churches became schoolhouses by day, with students of all ages assembling to receive instruction.[3] Because there were few public halls where multiracial gatherings could occur or where African Americans could hold political meetings, churches became spaces where constitutional conventions were planned, political debates were conducted, and civic activities were coordinated. The church building, owned and controlled by the African American community, represented the only reliably available venue for much of the civic life that Reconstruction enabled.

The case of Tolson's Chapel in Maryland, discussed earlier in the context of education, illustrates this multipurpose use.[4] The chapel served as a place of worship, certainly, but also as a schoolhouse where Ezra Johnson held both day classes for children and night classes for adults seeking to learn reading and arithmetic. The building also served as a meeting place for community gatherings and deliberations. The appropriation of church space for educational and civic purposes

[2] "Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution," New Jersey State Library.

[3] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; National Park Service Historic Resource Study.

[4] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."

represents a kind of functional flexibility that churches afforded, one that was crucial for enabling the range of activities that Reconstruction required.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the Zion Presbyterian Church, which had been founded by free Black people before the Civil War, continued to serve as both a place of worship and as a site of important civic activities.[5] Ministers associated with the church participated in the constitutional convention that drafted South Carolina's Reconstruction constitution, and the church itself served as a gathering place for deliberation and discussion. The church building thus became a space where not just spiritual salvation but also political freedom was pursued and debated.

3.3 Architecture and Religious Authority

The architecture of African American churches during Reconstruction reflected their owners' aspirations as well as their economic constraints. Many churches were built in simple styles without the monumental ornaments or elaborate decoration that characterized white churches or the grand churches of Northern cities.[6] Yet the very act of building a substantial church structure, even if simple in design, represented a claim to permanence, stability, and civilizational status that slavery had denied to African Americans.

Some African American churches during Reconstruction adopted modest versions of classical or neoclassical elements, suggesting continuity with broader architectural traditions while reflecting the economic realities of Black communities. A simple brick church with modest columns or pediments could convey dignity and architectural respectability without requiring the resources necessary for more elaborate construction. The strategic use of architectural elements allowed African American congregations to claim a place within respectable civic architecture even as they operated with limited resources and within a

[5] "The radical (re)construction of memory in the American South."
[6] "The radical (re)construction of memory in the American South."

context of severe racial discrimination.

The interior organization of African American churches reflected theological convictions that differed in some respects from white Baptist and Methodist churches. Many African American churches featured more open and democratic worship styles, with greater opportunities for congregational participation and lay leadership. Some churches were designed to accommodate larger gatherings, reflecting both the desire for community gathering and the practical reality that African American churches often served civic as well as religious functions.

3.4 The Church-School Nexus and the Spatial Economy of Freedom

The relationship between churches and schools during Reconstruction reveals important dynamics about how African American communities mobilized available resources to meet multiple needs.[7] Churches provided space for schools because whites refused to sell or rent property for educational purposes. But the church-school relationship was more than pragmatic necessity; it also reflected theological and philosophical convictions. Many African American leaders understood education and religious development as intertwined, both central to the moral and intellectual cultivation that freedom required.

The organization of space within a church that served dual purposes as religious center and schoolhouse required careful negotiation and flexibility. Benches had to be movable to allow reconfiguration of space. The altar or pulpit area might be screened off during school hours but revealed for worship services. Teachers had to be mindful of the sacred character of the space they were appropriating. This spatial flexibility and the constant transformation of the space to serve different functions reflected the creative improvisational capacity of African American communities working within severe constraints.

[7] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; National Park Service Historic Resource Study.

3.5 White Opposition to Black Church Autonomy

The emergence of independent African American churches provoked significant white opposition, though this opposition took different forms in different times and places. In the earliest years after emancipation, some white Southerners sought to prevent the establishment of independent Black churches or to control them through various means. As African American churches became more firmly established and as their role in Reconstruction political life became evident, white opposition sometimes took violent form.

Ku Klux Klan violence sometimes targeted Black churches, particularly when those churches served as sites of political organizing or educational activity. The Klan understood that churches represented centers of Black autonomy and organization, and attacks on churches represented efforts to intimidate and control Black communities.[8] A church building burned or attacked communicated a message about the limits of Black freedom and about the price that would be paid for pursuing independence and dignity.

Yet despite white opposition, and despite periodic violence against churches, the independent African American church became one of the most durable and successful of Reconstruction institutions. In many respects, the independent church movement represented one of Reconstruction's most permanent legacies. The churches established during Reconstruction survived the collapse of Reconstruction government, survived the imposition of Jim Crow, and continued to serve as centers of Black community life, religious practice, and social organization well into the twentieth century and beyond.

[8] "Contested Landscape"; "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era."

CHAPTER 4

CIVIC HALLS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY

4.1 The Constitutional Convention and the Question of Civic Space

If any moment crystallized the radical possibilities that Reconstruction opened, it was the constitutional conventions that met in each former Confederate state in 1868 to draft new state constitutions.[1] These conventions were unprecedented in American history: they brought together Black delegates and white delegates, former slaves and former slaveholders, Republicans and Democrats, in an effort to fundamentally remake state governments and to inscribe the principles of racial equality into constitutional form. The very convocation of these conventions represented a radical reimagining of who had the right to participate in constitutional deliberation and what the resulting government would look like.

The physical spaces in which constitutional conventions met mattered profoundly. In some cases, existing legislative halls or other civic buildings were appropriated for convention use. In other cases, new temporary structures were erected or halls were hastily prepared. The architectural accommodation of multiracial constitutional deliberation was in some instances seamless and in other instances deeply fraught. Where existing civic buildings were used, their architectural features sometimes communicated messages about inclusion and exclusion. Where new spaces had to be created or improvised, the design choices

[1] "Reconstruction era," Wikipedia; "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era."

made reflected assumptions about who belonged and how deliberation should be conducted.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the constitutional convention of 1868 met in Zion Hall, which was reconstructed or redesigned to accommodate the convention.[2] The hall had to accommodate delegates who had previously never imagined themselves as political equals, as persons entitled to a voice in deliberations about fundamental law. The architectural challenge was to design a space that would allow for orderly deliberation while accommodating the radical diversity of the delegate body.

4.2 South Carolina's Constitutional Convention and the Architecture of Multiracial Politics

South Carolina's constitutional convention of 1868 represented perhaps the most radical moment in Reconstruction politics, as African American delegates constituted a substantial portion of the convention and played crucial roles in debates about the new constitution.[3] The convention met in Representative Hall in Charleston, a building that had previously housed the state legislature and that had been designed in the antebellum period to reflect classical ideals of republican governance.

The presence of Black delegates in Representative Hall was itself a revolutionary act. These were men who had been legally property just years before, now claiming their right to participate in the highest deliberations about governance. The architectural space that had been designed to house the deliberations of white property-holding men now had to accommodate men of all races. The spatial hierarchies that the building had been designed to reinforce—the elevated speaker's platform, the carefully ordered seating arrangement, the galleries for spectators—now had to be negotiated in a new context.

Accounts of the convention describe the deliberative process occur-

[2] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."
[3] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; "Reconstruction era"; "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era."

ring within this space, and some observers commented on the novelty and apparent incongruity of seeing Black men deliberating on constitutional questions within these hallowed halls. The convention's debates over suffrage, over education, over property rights, and over the structure of the new government occurred within and were in some sense shaped by the architectural frame in which they occurred. The classical hall communicated a message about the legitimacy and permanence of constitutional deliberation, even as the presence of Black deliberators challenged traditional understandings of who could participate in such deliberation.

The constitution drafted by the convention incorporated provisions that were remarkable for their progressivism, particularly regarding public education.[4] The constitution mandated the establishment of a system of public schools open to all children regardless of race and required substantial state expenditure to fund this system. This commitment to universal public education was remarkable, and it had direct consequences for the physical infrastructure of education that would be required—the schoolhouses that would have to be built, the spaces that would have to be created.

4.3 Louisiana's Constitutional Struggles and the Architecture of Contested Authority

Louisiana's Reconstruction presented a different and more contested picture than South Carolina's. The state experienced not one but multiple constitutional conventions and competing governments, as the struggle over Reconstruction's shape and meaning was particularly fierce in Louisiana.[5] The questions about who had the right to deliberate, where deliberation would occur, and what the resulting constitution would say were intensely contested.

New Orleans, as the state capital and largest city, became the focal

[4] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools"; "Reconstruction era."

[5] "Reconstruction in Alabama," LSU Press; "Reconstruction era"; "The Failure of the Reconstruction Era."

point of these struggles. The city had civic buildings that had to accommodate constitutional deliberation, and these buildings became sites of political contestation. White Southerners opposed to Reconstruction sought to prevent or disrupt constitutional proceedings, and the physical spaces where those proceedings occurred sometimes became sites of violence. The New Orleans constitutional convention of 1866, held during President Andrew Johnson's more lenient Reconstruction policy, became a site of deadly violence, with a white mob attacking the integrated convention, resulting in numerous deaths.[6]

This violence, occurring as it did in a space ostensibly dedicated to civic deliberation and constitutional discussion, revealed the depths of white opposition to any genuine sharing of political power. The fact that white mobs would attack a constitutional convention, killing dozens in the process, demonstrated that questions about race and power in Reconstruction were not merely matters of formal constitutional design but were contested through violence at the level of the body and the street.

Later constitutional conventions in Louisiana, occurring when Reconstruction government had greater stability and federal military support, were able to proceed with less immediate threat of violence. Yet the vulnerability of civic spaces to violent disruption remained a reality throughout Reconstruction. The constitutional hall was never simply a space of orderly deliberation; it was always a space where power was contested and where the right to deliberate had to be constantly asserted and defended.

4.4 Civic Halls as Sites of Radical Possibility

Yet despite the violence and contestation, the fact that civic halls hosted multiracial constitutional conventions, that buildings designed in the antebellum period to house white deliberation now accommodated interracial assemblies, represented something genuinely transformative. These spaces, even if only briefly, embodied a different vision of what

[6] "Reconstruction era."

American democracy could be. They demonstrated, in concrete and physical form, that people of different races could gather to deliberate about fundamental questions of governance.

The architectural accommodation of multiracial convention required not merely pragmatic adjustment but philosophical reconsideration of how civic space should be organized. If African Americans were to be citizens participating in constitutional deliberation, then the space in which that deliberation occurred had to be designed or redesigned to accommodate their participation. The architectural adjustments made, however modest, represented a physical acknowledgment of a new social order.

The radical possibilities embodied in these multiracial civic gatherings proved to be brief. Yet the buildings themselves remained standing, potential reminders of what had been briefly possible. A courthouse, a convention hall, a civic building that had once hosted multiracial deliberation remained as evidence that such deliberation had occurred, that people of different races had gathered in these spaces as political equals, and that a different organization of civic life had, however briefly, been realized.

CONCLUSION: MEMORY, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE UNFINISHED PROJECT OF RECONSTRUCTION

The Persistence of Reconstruction Architecture

More than 140 years after Reconstruction's formal end in 1877, many of the civic buildings that this monograph examines remain standing. The Tolson's Chapel in Sharpsburg, Maryland, preserved through community effort and recognized in 2021 as a National Historic Landmark, continues to bear witness to the educational aspirations of African American communities during Reconstruction.[7] The Penn School on Saint Helena Island, though no longer functioning as a school, has been transformed into a community center and museum dedicated to preserving and interpreting the island's Reconstruction history.[8] Courthouses across the South, their architectural features modified over the decades but their basic structures intact, still stand in county seats, and some bear markers and plaques indicating their Reconstruction-era significance.[9]

This physical persistence is itself remarkable and worthy of deep consideration. That buildings created during a period of relative Black political power and autonomy have survived into our contemporary moment, when much else about Reconstruction has been contested, rewritten, or suppressed, testifies to the durability of material culture. Architecture, once built, possesses a kind of solidity and permanence that political power does not. A building can be transformed through time, its meanings can be reinterpreted, its uses can be repurposed, but its existence as a physical fact cannot be easily erased.

[7] National Park Service, "Reconstruction Era African American Schools."
[8] National Park Service Historic Resource Study.
[9] "Reconstruction era."

From Reconstruction to Jim Crow: The Architectural Transformation of the South

Yet the persistence of Reconstruction-era buildings does not mean that their meanings remained stable or that their roles in the civic landscape remained unchanged. After 1877, as white Southerners reasserted political control, as Black voting rights were systematically disenfranchised, and as Jim Crow segregation became law, Southern civic architecture underwent a profound transformation in meaning and use, even where physical structures remained standing.

Courthouses that had briefly hosted integrated juries and Black judges now became spaces where African Americans were increasingly marginalized and restricted. The spatial modifications made to accommodate Black jurors were reversed or rendered inoperative as white Southerners reasserted control of the judicial system.[10] Schoolhouses built during Reconstruction continued to serve Black students, but under conditions of increasing neglect and underfunding as resources flowed to white schools. Churches that had served as multipurpose civic centers now had to operate under the constraints of Jim Crow, their civic functions severely restricted even as their role as spaces of worship and community solidarity intensified.

At the same time, white Southerners undertook a massive new construction campaign, one designed to assert and reinforce white supremacy through architecture. The monument-building campaigns of the 1890s through 1920s, spearheaded by organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, filled Southern civic spaces with statues, obelisks, and inscribed tablets that glorified the Confederacy and asserted a "Lost Cause" narrative that was fundamentally at odds with the historical reality of Reconstruction.[11] These monuments, erected on the courthouse grounds, in parks, and in other prominent

[10] "Reconstruction era"; "The Racialized Impacts of Confederate Symbols in Public Spaces," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, Cambridge University Press.

[11] "Contested Landscape"; "Public Iconography, Museum Education, and Reconstruction Era History," *Journal of the Civil War Era*; "Political Symbols and Social Order."

locations, represented a kind of architectural counter-revolution, an effort to rewrite the meanings embodied in public space.

The coincidence is not accidental: as Reconstruction schoolhouses, churches, and civic halls persisted as physical reminders of a different possibility, monuments celebrating Confederate defeat were erected as counter-monuments, asserting a different vision of Southern identity and regional memory. The architectural landscape of the Jim Crow South thus became a kind of palimpsest, with earlier Reconstruction-era structures coexisting uneasily with newer monuments asserting white supremacy. This architectural tension itself reflected the deeper historical reality: white supremacy in the Jim Crow period was not the restoration of an antebellum order but rather a new creation, a response to and reaction against Reconstruction's brief opening of possibilities.

The Implications for Contemporary Commemoration and Memory

The material legacy of Reconstruction, embodied in surviving buildings, carries profound implications for how we understand and commemorate American history in our contemporary moment. The current national reckoning with Confederate monuments—the debates over whether statues celebrating Confederate generals and the Lost Cause should be removed from public spaces—has drawn attention to how public monuments and civic architecture communicate messages about whose history is being honored and what vision of the past is being asserted.[12]

Yet the focus on the removal of Confederate monuments, while important and necessary, can inadvertently obscure the equally important work of commemorating and interpreting the Reconstruction era itself. As scholars and public historians have noted, there are far too few monuments dedicated to Reconstruction leaders or to the achievements of the Reconstruction period.[13] African American congressmen who served

[12] "Contested Landscape"; "Public Iconography"; "The Racialized Impacts of Confederate Symbols in Public Spaces."
[13] "Public Iconography, Museum Education, and Reconstruction Era History."

during Reconstruction, Black teachers who established schools, freedmen and women who worked to create communities and institutions—these figures and their achievements are largely absent from public commemoration.

The restoration and interpretation of Reconstruction-era civic buildings represents one important way to address this commemorative gap. By recognizing schoolhouses, churches, and civic halls as historic resources worthy of preservation, by installing interpretive markers that explain their roles in Reconstruction, and by actively involving contemporary communities in the work of interpretation and commemoration, we can ensure that Reconstruction remains present in how we understand ourselves and our region.

Some progress has been made in this direction. The Reconstruction Era National Monument in Beaufort County, South Carolina, established by President Obama in 2016, represents the first National Park Service site to make Reconstruction a centerpiece of interpretation.[14] This monument, created through the grassroots efforts of the local community and particularly the African American population of Beaufort, demonstrates the possibility of centering Reconstruction's achievements and the agency of freedmen and women in how we commemorate the past.

Yet much remains to be done. Many Reconstruction-era schools, churches, and civic buildings lack historical markers or interpretive materials. The histories of these buildings and the communities that created them remain largely unknown to the broader public. The work of excavating these histories, of carefully documenting the buildings and their significance, and of making them meaningful to contemporary communities represents one of the important tasks for historians and public historians engaged with the Reconstruction era.

[14] "Public Iconography, Museum Education, and Reconstruction Era History."

Rethinking Progress Through Architecture

This monograph has argued that civic architecture during Reconstruction era was fundamentally about the question of progress—what progress meant, who had the right to define it, and what physical forms progress would take. For freedmen and women and their white allies, progress meant the creation of schools that would educate all children without regard to race, the construction of courthouses that would administer justice fairly to all citizens, the establishment of churches and civic halls that would serve multiracial communities. Progress meant building for a future that would be fundamentally different from the slaveholding past.

For white Southerners opposed to Reconstruction, the very same buildings represented a threat, a violation of the natural order, a dangerous experiment in social engineering that could only end in disaster. The schoolhouse that celebrated freedom seemed to them to celebrate a degradation of civilization. The multiracial courthouse seemed to them to symbolize an inversion of proper hierarchy. The civic hall that hosted integrated deliberation seemed to them to violate fundamental laws of nature and society.

These competing visions of progress, expressed through architecture, reveal how deeply material culture is implicated in historical struggle. The buildings we construct embody our assumptions about what is possible, what is desirable, what kinds of social relations are proper and legitimate. By attending to architecture, we gain access to how Southerners during Reconstruction understood their situation and their possibilities. We can see that they were not merely reacting to political necessities but were actively imagining and constructing a different kind of world.

The Unfinished Revolution and the Question of Possibility

Eric Foner's masterful study of Reconstruction describes it as "America's Unfinished Revolution."[15] The phrase captures something essential about the Reconstruction era: it was a moment of genuine revolutionary possibility, when fundamental transformations in Southern society and in American democracy seemed achievable. The establishment of public schools open to all children regardless of race, the creation of a multiracial political community, the assertion of federal authority to protect the rights of freedmen and women—these represented revolutionary achievements.

Yet Reconstruction was "unfinished" in that these achievements were not consolidated and became vulnerable to being rolled back. White Southerners successfully overthrew Reconstruction governments, suppressed Black voting, and imposed Jim Crow segregation. The radical possibilities that Reconstruction had opened were largely foreclosed, and it would take another century of struggle, through the Civil Rights movement, to begin to reclaim some of what Reconstruction had briefly achieved.

Yet this monograph suggests that the story is more complex than a simple narrative of revolution and counter-revolution. The buildings that remain standing from the Reconstruction era testify to achievements that could not be entirely unmade. The schools established by freedmen and women continued to educate Black children long after Reconstruction's formal end. The churches established by African American communities continued to serve as centers of spiritual and social life. The civic architecture of Reconstruction, even when recontextualized and reinterpreted, remained as physical evidence that a different kind of South was once briefly possible.

Moreover, the persistence of Reconstruction architecture reminds us that the project of constructing a genuinely multiracial democracy, of

[15] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, reviewed in *Reviews in American History* 17, no. 1 (1989), JSTOR; Foner, *Reconstruction*, Google Books.

creating civic institutions that serve all people regardless of race, remains fundamentally unfinished. The problems that Reconstruction attempted to address—how to achieve genuine equality, how to establish just institutions, how to create a civic life that includes all people—remain with us still. We have not yet finished the work that Reconstruction started.

Toward a New Architecture of Possibility

What would it mean to take seriously the architectural legacy of Reconstruction? What would it mean to recognize that the buildings created during Reconstruction—flawed, modest, often quickly built—embodied genuine aspirations and achievements worthy of commemoration and preservation?

First, it would mean undertaking systematic work to inventory, document, and preserve Reconstruction-era civic buildings across the former Confederacy. Many such buildings survive but lack historical markers or interpretive materials. Others are threatened by deterioration or demolition. A coordinated effort to identify and protect these buildings would ensure that they remain available for contemporary interpretation and use.

Second, it would mean working with communities to develop interpretive programs and materials that help contemporary audiences understand these buildings' historical significance. What was it like to attend school in a room that also served as a church? What was it like to gather in a civic hall that had been redesigned to accommodate interracial deliberation? How did it feel to stand before a judge as a juror, to claim a place in the dispensation of justice? These questions, grounded in particular buildings in particular communities, can help to make the Reconstruction era vivid and real.

Third, it would mean using these buildings as sites for contemporary civic engagement. Some Reconstruction-era buildings continue to serve their original purposes: schools continue to educate, churches continue to worship. Others might be repurposed to serve contemporary

communities—as museums, community centers, or gathering spaces. The Penn School's transformation into a community center, for instance, maintains the building's role as a space for community gathering while allowing for new forms of contemporary use.

Finally, it would mean recognizing that the work of Reconstruction—of attempting to build a just and inclusive society—remains unfinished. The architectural choices made during Reconstruction, the buildings that were constructed, the spaces that were claimed and appropriated by freedmen and women—all of these represent part of a longer story of struggle for equality and justice that extends from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights era to our contemporary moment.

Epilogue: Standing in the Shadows of Columns

To stand before a surviving Reconstruction-era courthouse, to walk through the doors of a schoolhouse built during the Reconstruction period, to sit in a church pew knowing that the building once served as both a place of worship and a school—these experiences allow us to encounter Reconstruction not as an abstract historical period but as something physically real and tangible. The columns of the courthouse, the simple wooden benches of the schoolhouse, the clear windows that let light flood into spaces designed for learning and worship—all of these elements carry memory. They remind us that at a particular moment in American history, people imagined and built structures that embodied aspirations for a more just and inclusive society.

The columns that frame the entrance to many Southern courthouses were designed to evoke classical democracy and the rule of law. During Reconstruction, those same columns sheltered Black lawyers, Black judges, and Black jurors claiming their right to participate in the administration of justice. The schoolhouses, however modest their construction, were spaces in which freedmen and women asserted the civilizing power of education. The churches served not only as places of worship but as centers of community and political life. The civic halls, however briefly, hosted deliberations about fundamental principles of

governance that included voices that had previously been excluded from such deliberations.

The buildings remain. They stand in our cities and towns, often unremarked upon, their historical significance unknown to most of those who pass by them. Yet they carry within them the memory of a moment when different possibilities seemed within reach, when the question "What kind of South will we become?" was genuinely open and contested. To recover the architectural history of Reconstruction is to recover a part of American history that has been too long overlooked—a history of human aspiration, of courage in the face of opposition, of the determination to build institutions and spaces that would serve all people regardless of race.

The work of Reconstruction, as this monograph has argued, was fundamentally incomplete. Yet the buildings that remain from that era remind us that something genuinely transformative was briefly achieved, and that the work of building a just society—the project of architecture as much as politics, of creating spaces where all people can gather as equals—remains the unfinished business of American democracy.

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