



# **Break Those Chains at Last: African Americans 1860-1880: 5 (The Young Oxford History of African Americans)**

*Noralee Frankel*

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We thought we'd break those chains at last, sang the slaves, hoping such spirituals would sustain them until the Confederacy surrendered and slavery was gone forever. During the Civil War, blacks served in the Union army and navy (although some fought for the South) and in Union-controlled camps, which harbored fleeing slaves. Not all slaves escaped, but even those who remained with their masters began to imagine a new life. After the war, amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery, granted citizenship to freed people, and gave African-American men the right to vote. Freedom, blacks hoped, would also mean political equality and economic well-being. Some moved from rural areas to cities in the South or North; others looked to the West, where many African-American men became farmers or found work as cattle-drive cooks and cowboys. But many whites viewed freedom for African Americans as a threat, and they responded by establishing white supremacy organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Organized violence against blacks, along with poor agricultural conditions, discrimination, and worsening economic times, guaranteed poverty for most Southern blacks. Although the tightly knit slave communities on the larger plantations began to disperse, a sense of having shared interests and goals actually widened freed peoples vision of the meaning of community. Despite fierce white opposition, African Americans established their own churches, schools, and other associations and began to participate actively in government. Break Those Chains at Last tells the story of these turbulent and complicated years, as African Americans created the communities and organizations that survive to this day.

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