

The Unveiling **Our Little known History**



Black Code Laws

Written to ensure a cheap labor force after slavery was abolished.

“Why has it been so hard for Black people to get out of poverty?” we hear people ask. “After all, the slaves were freed over 150 years ago.” But were they really, though?

Earlier Unveilings have shown how Andrew Johnson snuffed out federal efforts to create financial stability for newly freed Black people. There were other factors, too:

Defeated southerners were determined to keep the social status quo and to recover financially by maintaining a

low-paid Black labor force. Emboldened by Johnson’s hands-off approach, they began passing laws to regulate Black labor: now there may not be bloodhounds chasing them, it was instead the tax man and the sheriff, enforcing laws written specifically to control former slaves. These laws were called Black Codes.

As early as 1865, Black Codes began to spring up in the south. Here are two from History.com

--”Mississippi’s law required Black people to have written evidence of employment for the coming year each January; if they left before the end of the contract, they would be forced to forfeit all earlier wages and were subject to arrest.

*(If arrested, of course, they could be forced into **convict leasing**, once again working on plantations for no pay.)

--In South Carolina, a law prohibited **Black people from holding any occupation other than farmer or servant** unless they paid an annual tax of \$10 to \$100. In both states, Black people were given heavy penalties for vagrancy, including forced plantation labor in some cases.”

Thus, as we’ve noted before, freed Black people were anything but free. **Laws then as now were overwhelmingly enforced against Blacks.** They were regularly incarcerated for small infractions, and if

unable to pay the fines, the prisoners could be “made available to the local agricultural interests.”

And so we have a system that made it costly for Blacks to work any job other than servant or farmer. Not being employed was also a crime--despite the limits on the kind of job they could get. And the punishment was forced labor. The system was completely rigged to keep Black people working on white plantations for low (or no) pay even after freedom.

And of course, to continue terrorizing them in every area of their lives.

This short 4-minute film explains further:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29qeqtgwPzQ&t=1s>