

# The Social Construction of Race during Reconstruction

Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2025-30, “*The Social Construction of Race during Reconstruction*,” by Anjali Adukia, University of Chicago; Richard Hornbeck, University of Chicago; Daniel Keniston, Louisiana State University; and Benjamin Lualdi, University of Chicago

During the United States’ Reconstruction Era (1865-77), people with the same physical skin tone were more likely racialized as White or Mulatto if they were wealthier or literate. This historical finding underscores the fluidity of socially constructed racial classifications and challenges the notion of fixed racial identities, which continues to influence both academic literature and social structures.

The end of the US Civil War in 1865 and the emancipation of enslaved people radically reframed race relations in ways that still resonate today. Indeed, it could be said that the years following the Civil War *reconstructed* race in the United States, as segregationists—forced to abandon the previous legal distinction of “free” vs. “enslaved”—developed a system of social hierarchy based on skin color. This social construction of race remains deeply entrenched in US institutions and culture, including in social science research.

This paper investigates the embryonic phase of this phenomenon, showing how people with the same physical skin tone were racialized differently based on their wealth and other proxies for socioeconomic status in the years following the Civil War. What came to be known as the **Reconstruction Era** (1865–1877) saw efforts by the federal government to integrate formerly-enslaved people into broader social, economic, and political institutions. However, with Reconstruction’s abandonment in 1877, power was thrown back to the states, giving rise to

**Figure 1** • Freedman Bank Depositor Accounts Linked to 1870 Census, by Branch



Note: This figure shows the locations of 27 Freedman Bank branches in the authors’ sample, where the size of the circle is proportional to the number of depositors linked to the Census. These branches cover the major Southern cities at the time. 54% of depositors are in their branch county and an additional 8% are in a neighboring county in the 1870 Census. When someone opened an account with the Bank, the branch clerk filled out a depositor record, which included the depositor’s name, birth state, age, and names of household members along with other information, including a field for “complexion.”

**Reconstruction Era:** The Reconstruction era (1865-1877) in the United States followed the Civil War and focused on reintegrating the former Confederate states into the Union while defining the legal status of formerly enslaved people. Reconstruction was abandoned following the disputed election of 1876, which was resolved when the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, agreed to end Reconstruction, thus ensuring Congressional approval of his presidency.

state-supported segregation (**Jim Crow**) that only “ended” with the **Civil Rights Act** of 1964.

To study the construction of post-Civil War race, the authors study the 1870 Census and skin tone data collected by the Freedmen’s Savings Bank (1865-1874), with a focus on the Census’s distinctions between “Black,” “Mulatto,” and “White.” Census takers who visited households were instructed to take care when counting Mulattos, making sure to include “quadroons, octoroons, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood,” on which “important scientific results depend.” Note the use of the term “scientific” in an official government source such as the Census, which provides insight into how people were racialized at this time. Racial perceptions, and the resulting racial categorization, substantially impacted how people were treated by society and the law.

In the case of the **Freedmen’s Savings Bank**, clerks recorded depositor “complexion” and other information to help identify customers when they returned to the bank, including skin tone (e.g., dark, dark brown, brown, light brown, light) and occasionally included other physical descriptors (e.g., distinctive scars or pox marks).

The authors’ analysis of the data finds the following evidence for the social construction of race in the post-Civil War United States:

- Among people with the same skin tone, those with higher wealth or literacy are more likely racialized as Mulatto or White. The authors estimate selected racialization along each of three margins, (White or Mulatto vs. Black; White vs. Mulatto or Black; and Mulatto vs. Black), and find the largest effects among people with light skin tones.
- The influence of socioeconomic status on racialization is similar across age, gender, and geographical area, suggesting a pervasive social construction of race. The evidence for this finding is revealed in the uniquely detailed data on skin tone from depositor records of the Freedman’s Savings Bank, which reflects the differential racialization by socioeconomic status in the 1870 Census.

The main contribution of this novel paper is not just that race is a social construct (an idea that is increasingly taking hold), but rather to empirically reveal the historical construction of race along socioeconomic lines in the years following the Civil War, which set the stage for racial segregation and continued racial stratification during the Jim Crow Era. Those “scientific” notions linger today. Standard statistical practice still often involves “controlling for race” alongside other variables, which becomes difficult to interpret when race itself is an outcome of socioeconomic status.

**Jim Crow:** In the wake of Reconstruction’s demise in 1877, state and local governments devised laws to institutionalize racial segregation and discrimination. These laws persisted until federal Civil Rights legislation nearly 100 years later.

**Civil Rights Act:** The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in public places, schools, and employment, and established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

**Freedmen’s Savings Bank (1865-74):** The Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company, known as the Freedman’s Savings Bank, was a private savings bank chartered by the US Congress in 1865 to collect deposits from the newly emancipated communities. The bank opened 37 branches across 17 states and Washington, D.C., within 7 years and collected funds from over 67,000 depositors. The bank failed due to White managers’ mismanagement, fraud, and risky investments that were exposed during financial stress.

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