**8-5.2: Economic Impact of Reconstruction – Full Version**

**8-5.2 Focus Question:**

What was the economic impact of Reconstruction for different groups of South Carolinians?

**8-5.2 Essential Notes:**

**Reconstruction policy** had little economic impact on the South’s recovery from the devastation of the Civil War. The economy continued to rest on agriculture and cotton, but now depended on sharecropping rather than slave labor. The national government did not see its role as taking an active hand in managing the economy until the 20th century and so the national government did not rebuild the war-torn region economically. The South remained in a state of **economic depression** well into the 20th century.

As a result of the war and the **13th amendment**, plantation owners lost their labor force and a very large part of their wealth. Many were astonished that their former slaves, who they thought were loyal to them, left the plantations. Feeling betrayed and resentful of the former slaves’ attitudes, many became more hostile to the freedman. Now they were forced to perform all of the normal household and farm duties themselves or pay their workers, but their investments in Confederate dollars were worthless. All they had was the land. Facilitated by the Freedman’s Bureau, many entered into **sharecropping** relationships with freedmen and reestablished their former position as master through a new means. Sharecroppers tilled the land that belonged to their former masters in exchange for a share of the crop. Although the planter elite tried to hold onto slave-like conditions through the **Black Codes** and control over the government of the state through the **constitution of 1865**, Congressional Reconstruction brought a temporary end to their political control of South Carolina. However, plantation owners and the middle class engaged in violence and intimidation against African Americans throughout Reconstruction.

Small farmers who had not owned slaves were not directly affected financially by their liberation. However, now they had to compete with African American sharecroppers when they marketed their crops. Many who had felt a sense of social superiority to slaves now felt that superiority threatened. They reacted with anger and resentment and joined the ranks of the vigilante groups that terrorized African Americans. Some small farmers from non-slaveholding districts cooperated with the Republicans because they would benefit from the educational and economic opportunities they offered. They were called “**scalawags**” by other South Carolinians.

**Freedmen** were both liberated and displaced in the Reconstruction period. At the end of the war, many freedmen left the plantation looking for relatives sold “down the river” or seeking a taste of freedom. Most soon returned to the area that they knew best, their former plantations. It is a common misconception that former slaves left the South as soon as they had the opportunity to escape the society that had mistreated them. With the assistance of the Freedman’s Bureau and their own determination, they worked to consolidate their families and communities and establish a network of churches and other autonomous institutions. Unable to secure their own land to farm, many African Americans entered into agreements with southern landowners, who were land rich and cash poor. In sharecropping, the landowner supplied the seed, tools and land and the sharecropper supplied the labor. Both then shared the crop that was produced. Although the sharecropper was able to move away from the old slave quarters, the sharecropper remained economically dependent on the landowner. In bad years the crop shared might be very little and sharecroppers would take out a loan in the form of a lien on the next year’s crop to buy supplies to last until the next harvest. This **crop lien system** placed the sharecropper in a cycle of debt and dependence on the landowners and lien holders. Although African Americans suffered from white violence and intimidation throughout the Reconstruction period, they continued to claim equal citizenship and carve out as much independence as possible in their lives.

The impact on women of the Reconstruction period depended on their social class. Both the wives of elite plantation owners and small farmers shared their husbands’ loss of social status and fear of economic competition from the freedmen. Elite white women had to negotiate household services from former slave women or perform household tasks themselves. In addition, the large number of men killed, and others physically and mentally impaired during the Civil War meant that many white women took on non-traditional roles. Former slaves, “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags” pushed for some women’s rights. As a result of the C**onstitution of 1868**, women achieved some rights, including the right to own property in their own name after marriage.

Northern immigrants, both men and women, came to South Carolina as teachers, missionaries or entrepreneurs. Some came as Union soldiers and stayed. Reviled as “carpetbaggers”, they were not accepted by most of white South Carolina society. Some found political opportunity in the Reconstruction governments, others found economic opportunity.