# DBQ Essay Example: Reconstruction and American Citizenship

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PROMPT

Evaluate the extent to which the Reconstruction amendments changed the meaning of American citizenship between 1865 and 1877.

## Document set

**Document A.** Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln, January 1, 1863
Declares that "all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."

**Document B.** Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified 1865, Section 1
"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

**Document C.** Mississippi "Black Code" laws, 1865 (summary)
Recognized limited rights for freedpeople, such as owning certain property and marrying, while requiring written proof of employment each January, restricting where they could rent land, and punishing "vagrancy."

**Document D.** Fourteenth Amendment, ratified 1868, Section 1
"All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." No state may deny any person "the equal protection of the laws."

**Document E.** Fifteenth Amendment, ratified 1870, Section 1
"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

> **Document F.** Slaughterhouse Cases, U.S. Supreme Court, 1873 (summary)
> The Court read the Fourteenth Amendment's "privileges or immunities" clause narrowly, separating the rights of national citizenship from the much broader rights of state citizenship.

> **Document G.** United States v. Cruikshank, U.S. Supreme Court, 1876 (summary)
> Arising from the 1873 Colfax Massacre in Louisiana, the decision limited the federal government's power to prosecute private individuals who violated the rights of Black citizens.

## Model response

Before the Civil War, American citizenship was defined largely by the states, and the Supreme Court's 1857 *Dred Scott* decision had declared that Black Americans could not be citizens at all. The war, emancipation and the defeat of the Confederacy forced Congress to decide what freedom would mean for nearly four million formerly enslaved people. **Between 1865 and 1877, the Reconstruction amendments transformed the legal meaning of citizenship by making it national, birthright-based and formally color-blind, but Southern resistance and narrow Supreme Court rulings meant that the practical meaning of citizenship changed far less than the constitutional text promised.**

The amendments first redefined who was free and who was a citizen. Lincoln's proclamation (Doc A) was framed as a war measure issued under his authority as commander in chief, which explains why it freed enslaved people only in areas "in rebellion" and left slavery untouched in loyal border states. Its limits made a constitutional amendment necessary, and the Thirteenth Amendment (Doc B) abolished slavery everywhere in the United States. The Fourteenth Amendment then went further (Doc D): by declaring that all persons born or naturalized in the United States are citizens, it overturned *Dred Scott* and, for the first time, placed national citizenship above state definitions. Congress had already moved in this direction with the Civil Rights Act of 1866, passed over President Andrew Johnson's veto, and the amendment wrote that principle into the Constitution so a future Congress could not easily reverse it.

Citizenship also gained a political meaning. The Fifteenth Amendment (Doc E) barred racial discrimination in voting, and in the years around its ratification Black men voted and held office across the South; Hiram Revels of Mississippi became the first Black U.S. senator in 1870. Federal institutions such as the Freedmen's Bureau, created in 1865, supported schools and labor contracts, and the Enforcement Acts of 1870–1871 gave the federal government tools against the Ku Klux Klan. For a brief period, citizenship meant not only legal status but active participation in government.

Yet the practical meaning of citizenship was contested from the start. Mississippi's Black Codes (Doc C) show how Southern lawmakers tried to preserve a coerced labor system: freedpeople could marry and own some property, but employment and vagrancy rules pushed them back into

plantation work. Because these laws were written by former Confederates seeking to control Black labor, they reveal that many white Southerners accepted emancipation only in the narrowest sense. The Supreme Court then narrowed the amendments themselves. In the *Slaughterhouse Cases* (Doc F), the Court limited the rights protected by national citizenship, and in *United States v. Cruikshank* (Doc G), decided after the Colfax Massacre, it restricted federal power to punish private violence. As a judicial ruling, *Cruikshank* carried the weight of law: it left Black citizens dependent on state governments that were increasingly controlled by opponents of Reconstruction.

By 1877, when the remaining federal troops were withdrawn from Southern statehouses, the gap between constitutional promise and lived reality was wide. The amendments had permanently changed the legal definition of citizenship, and later generations would use the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause in cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In the short term, however, violence, discriminatory state laws and narrow court rulings meant that Reconstruction changed what citizenship meant on paper far more than what it meant in daily life.

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