

READING

Names and Freedom

Historian Douglas Egerton explains one of the first tasks freedpeople had to complete once they were emancipated from slavery:

Former slaves had to undertake a task unknown to free-born Americans. They had to adopt a surname. Although slaves often adopted family names for use among themselves, few masters wished to bestow upon their chattel the sense of dignity a surname implied.¹

Historian Leon Litwack describes some of the factors freedpeople considered when adopting names:

In some instances, Federal officials expedited the naming process by furnishing the names themselves, and invariably the name would be the same as that of the freedman's most recent master. But these appear to have been exceptional cases; the ex-slaves themselves usually took the initiative—like the Virginia mother who changed the name of her son from Jeff Davis, which was how the master had known him, to Thomas Grant, which seemed to suggest the freedom she was now exercising. Whatever names the freed slaves adopted, whether that of a previous master, a national leader, an occupational skill, a place of residence, or a color, they were most often making that decision themselves. That was what mattered.²

¹ Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 40.

² Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 251.