Florida during the Civil War

Directions: Write down two things you learned below the article after reading it.

Florida in Focus

In 1860, the population of Florida was just over 140,000 inhabitants, of whom approximately 40% were slaves. The Seminole Indians had, over the previous half century, been confined to reservations through a series of bloody conflicts. The state’s economy centered on the production of cotton and timber goods, both of which depended heavily on the use of slave labor. It was therefore not surprising that on January 10, 1861, a constitutional convention called for by Florida’s General Assembly adopted an ordinance of secession by a vote of 62 to 7. The “nation of Florida” thus seceded from the United States. The following month, Florida joined the Confederate States of America.

For much of the war, the North sought to control Florida’s coastline and to enforce a blockade preventing the supply of Confederate forces with food, arms, and materials from Florida. For these purposes, Union troops occupied Fort Pickens near Pensacola off the Gulf of Mexico, and made the fort their headquarters in Florida for the duration of the war. Key West remained in Union hands as well.

Federal forces also invaded and seized control of Apalachicola, Cedar Keys, Fernandina, Jacksonville, St. Augustine, and Tampa. Floridians often successfully ran the Union blockades, landing cargoes from Cuba and the Bahamas in the numerous inlets, bays, and waterways of Florida.

The Confederate commander, Robert E. Lee, hoped to preserve the interior of Florida as a source of agricultural produce and cattle for the South. A number of battles were therefore fought in this region. In 1864, 5,200 Confederate troops, led by General Joseph Finnegan, defeated 5,500 Union soldiers at the Battle of Olustee. Further Confederate victories followed at Gainesville, Cedar Keys, and Natural Bridge. This was despite the fact that these Confederate forces were often comprised of young boys and old men. Many of the slaves in Florida, in fact, remained loyal to their masters and stayed to help their owners’ wives and daughters manage the land and nurse the wounded. The war in Florida ended on May 10, 1865, when Tallahassee was occupied by federal troops.
Florida during Reconstruction

Directions: Write down two things you learned below the article after reading it.

Focus on Florida

Florida was fortunate in suffering less damage than most Southern states during the Civil War. After 1865, growing cotton in Florida became secondary to a wide variety of other occupations, including growing citrus fruits and winter vegetables, raising cattle, cutting timber, and tourism. The state’s population nearly doubled in the two decades after 1860, reaching 270,000 inhabitants by 1880. Almost half of these were African Americans.

African Americans took a very active role in the government of Florida during Reconstruction. They made up 19 of the 53 members elected to the state legislature in 1868. Jonathan C. Gibbs, a preacher and graduate of Dartmouth College, became Florida’s Secretary of State. Josiah T. Walls, a former slave and Union veteran, was the first black Floridian elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he served three terms.

Southern Democrats regained control of Florida’s state government in 1877. They followed the example of other Southern states in enacting their own “Jim Crow” laws. A state constitutional convention was held in 1885, which imposed poll taxes, literacy tests, and residency qualifications as requirements for voting. The convention also endorsed racial segregation in schools. In 1889, Florida’s state legislature introduced multiple ballot boxes at elections in order to confuse and discourage African-American voters. These laws were accompanied by acts of violence against those African Americans who still dared to exercise their political rights. Despite these threats, some African Americans bravely continued to assert their rights. For example, Joseph H. Lee, an African American who moved to Florida in 1873, actually served in the state legislature from 1880 until 1913.

A unique form of debt peonage developed in the pine forests of Florida at the end of Reconstruction, which lasted until the 1940s. African Americans who sought work in a turpentine camp were offered a bus ride to the camp. For their ride, they became indebted to the owner and were unable to leave the camp until the debt was paid. They became further indebted to the owner for their housing and food. Thus they became virtual prisoners. One victim later remembered:

“You is born into the teippentime, with no hope of getting out.”

The system exploited thousands of African Americans, who worked in the camps that produced one-fifth of the world’s turpentine.