



The Reconstruction Desegregation Debate: The Policies of Equality and the Rhetoric of Place, 1870-1875 (Rhetoric & Public Affairs)

Kirt H. Wilson

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In the decade that followed the Civil War, two questions dominated political debate: To what degree were African Americans now “equal” to white Americans, and how should this equality be implemented in law? Although Republicans entertained multiple, even contradictory, answers to these questions, the party committed itself to several civil rights initiatives. When Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment, the 1866 Civil Rights Act, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Fifteenth Amendment, it justified these decisions with a broad egalitarian rhetoric. This rhetoric altered congressional culture, instituting new norms that made equality not merely an ideal, but rather a pragmatic aim for political judgments.

Kirt Wilson examines Reconstruction’s desegregation debate to explain how it represented an important movement in the evolution of U.S. race relations. He outlines how Congress fought to control the scope of black civil rights by contesting the definition of black equality, and the expediency and constitutionality of desegregation. Wilson explores how the debate over desegregation altered public memory about slavery and the Civil War, while simultaneously shaping a political culture that established the trajectory of race relations into the next century.

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