

SITE OF THE DAY



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Elaine Nichols  
State Museum curator of African-  
American history and culture

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Monday, April 14, 1997

The Gamecock

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Special to The Gamecock

Visitors examine a black dress, which symbolizes mourning, in the exhibit *America's Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War*.

## Reconstruction exhibit showing at State Museum

STAFF REPORTS

Scaffolding, reminiscent of what one might find on an unfinished building, ties together *America's Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War*, an exhibit that opened in February at the South Carolina State Museum.

Threshold Studio, which designed the exhibit, used this approach to represent Reconstruction as "the unfinished revolution." More than a century after the end of federal occupation of the Confederate states, the U.S. still faces some of the same issues Reconstruction tried to resolve. They include determining the role the federal government should play in protecting citizens' rights and the difficulty of achieving social and economic equality in a heterogeneous society.

The exhibit looks at why Reconstruction is regarded as a failure, said Elaine Nichols, the museum's curator of African-American culture and history. Black leadership was blamed. However, she said, "the majority of blacks in leadership positions was no more or no less corrupt than whites." Most were educated and owned businesses. Another factor was an economic depression that followed the Civil War.

"Ultimately, the federal government was not committed to ensuring that Reconstruction continued," Nichols said.

There were, however, some successes. Colleges for blacks, such as Benedict, Allen, Claflin and Voorhees, were established.

"It also was the first time that we had major emphasis on public education. Prior to that, most schools were private," Nichols said.

It was during Reconstruction that the states ratified the 13th Amendment, which established the rights of citizenship for all native or naturalized Americans; and the 15th Amendment, which gave blacks the right to vote.

"These Amendments really were the basis for what became the civil rights movement," Nichols said.

Some objects in the exhibit are particularly symbolic of the period. They include a black dress, which reflects the many people who died during the Civil War; a Ku Klux Klan robe, c. 1866; a carpet bag, from which the Northerners who came south after the war got their nickname; and a freedman's reader, which represents one of the main goals of Reconstruction: educating the newly freed blacks.

Dr. Eric Foner of Columbia University and Olivia Mahoney of the Chicago Historical Society prepared the exhibit for the Valentine Museum and the Virginia Historical Society. They spoke at the museum yesterday.

The exhibit is particularly relevant to South Carolina, Nichols said. It examines the Port Royal experiment near Beaufort, which began during the Civil War as an effort to ease the transition, for blacks and whites, from a social and economic system based on slavery. The project included establishing residential communities, such as Mitchelville on Hilton Head Island, and educational institutions, such as Penn School on St. Helena Island.

*America's Reconstruction* may be seen until May 26. For more information about the exhibit, contact Elaine Nichols at 737-4921.

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