

## CIVIL RIGHTS IN LEXINGTON – 4<sup>TH</sup> OF JULY, 1867 BACKGROUND ESSAY

On January 31, 1865, the U.S. Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. It abolished slavery. On April 9, 1865, the Civil War ended with the surrender of General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, Virginia. The Thirteenth Amendment went into effect on December 18, 1865, but not all states had ratified it. For example, Kentucky did not *ratify* the Thirteenth Amendment until March 18, 1976.

The Thirteenth Amendment *abolished* slavery, but it did not protect the *civil rights* of blacks. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 on April 5, 1866 in an attempt to provide what the Thirteenth Amendment did not: civil rights to African American men. The Civil Rights Act said that men born in the United States were entitled to be citizens, without regard to race, color, or previous condition of slavery. It also said that any citizen had the same right that a white citizen had to buy or rent property and to give evidence in federal court.



Some states passed state laws that said African Americans could not buy property or *testify* in state courts. Kentucky, for example, passed laws that prohibited blacks from voting and from testifying in state court cases “where a white person is a party concerned.”

The civil rights leaders in Kentucky at the time, both black and white, knew it would take many years for blacks in the Commonwealth to have full civil rights. These leaders decided to take it a step at a time, and focus first on two issues: winning the right for black men to vote and winning the right for them to testify in state courts. If black men could vote, white politicians would more likely support black's rights (in order to win their votes in elections), so securing the rights of black men to vote was critical. The second issue also was critical. If black men were not allowed to testify in state court when a white person was concerned, they had no legal protection at the state level.

Kentucky's civil rights leaders knew that it was important to bring together a large crowd of people to show how much support they had for winning these rights. They decided to hold a demonstration on July 4, 1867. July 4<sup>th</sup> was a day when it was acceptable for large crowds to gather. They spread the word through churches and associations, inviting people to come and emphasizing that the demonstration must be peaceful.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, a crowd of between six and ten thousand people, mostly African Americans, gathered for a parade through the streets of downtown Lexington. It was one of Kentucky's earliest civil rights demonstrations and one of the largest events for civil rights in Kentucky history. They marched to a wooded area off Harrodsburg Pike (now Road) about a mile southwest of Lexington. The crowd stayed for a peaceful day of picnics, music, and speeches about civil rights.

The focus for the day's events was on getting civil rights for black men. Only one speaker on the platform, General James Brisbin, spoke about the need to extend civil rights to women. Women were not granted civil rights until 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.