

A House Divided

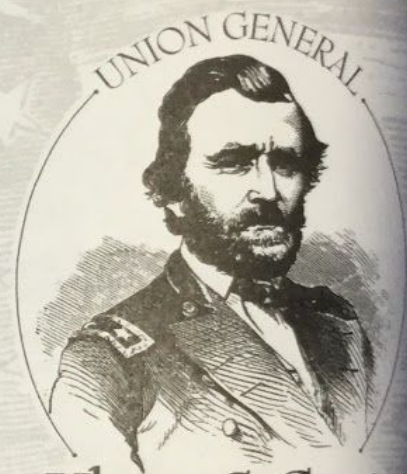
Slavery and the Civil War

By the time of Abraham Lincoln's inauguration as President in March of 1861, seven states—South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas—had seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America, with Jefferson Davis as President. A month later, Confederate troops opened fire on Northern troops attempting to resupply Fort Sumter, a federal installation in the Charleston, South Carolina, harbor. Three days later, Lincoln ordered additional troops to enforce the law. In response, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee joined the Confederacy. The Civil War had begun.

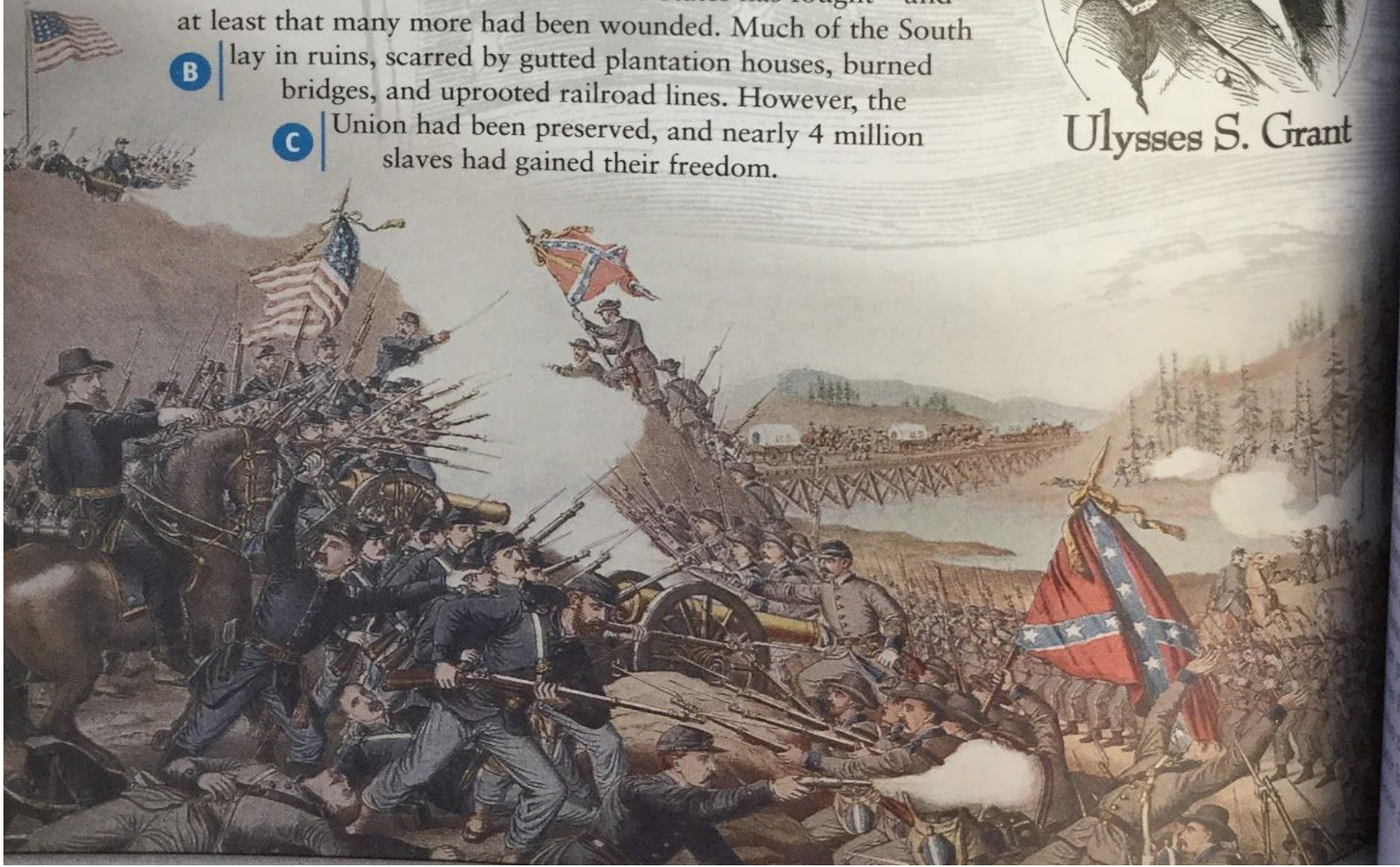
When the war ended on April 9, 1865, with General Robert E. Lee's surrender to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, more than 620,000 men had been killed—nearly as many as have died in all other wars that the United States has fought—and at least that many more had been wounded. Much of the South

A lay in ruins, scarred by gutted plantation houses, burned bridges, and uprooted railroad lines. However, the

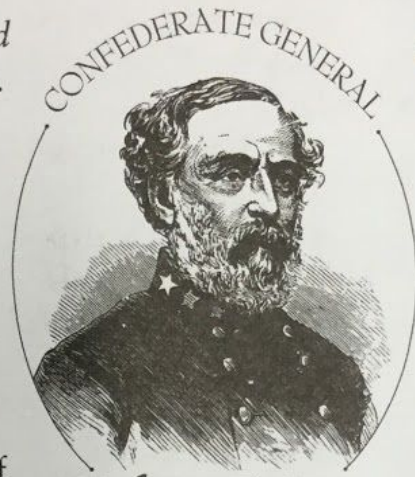
B Union had been preserved, and nearly 4 million slaves had gained their freedom.



Ulysses S. Grant



Before the Civil War, *United States* had been a plural noun. People were used to saying “The United States *are* . . .,” with the emphasis on the individual *states* more than the *united* interests of all. However, a strong belief in states’ rights ultimately threatened the union itself and allowed the institution of slavery a longer history in the Southern states than in the



Robert E. Lee

Northern states and in most of Latin America and Europe as well. “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” maintained Abraham Lincoln. “I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.” After the Civil War, the United States had become irrevocably one country. People began saying “The United States *is* . . .”

In the years before the war, slavery was a major subject engaging a large number of writers. Public lectures were a forum by which many writers supported themselves. Henry David Thoreau, as active in the political and social world as he was in the literary, lectured on the individual’s responsibility to take action against unjust laws. His lecture, published as the essay “Civil Disobedience” (page 369) in 1849, has since become famous, providing some of the basis for the American tradition of nonviolent protest that took hold about 100 years later during the civil rights movement.

This crucial time period also generated some of the first important literature by African Americans. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper became the first popular African-American poet, as she traveled throughout the North lecturing to substantial audiences in favor of abolition and punctuating her lectures with recitations of her poems. Most eloquent of all, however, was Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave who taught himself to read and write and later became a champion of the abolitionist cause and woman suffrage. Douglass’s



Mary Chesnut

D I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name—if ten *honest* men only—ay, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership [with government by refusing to pay taxes], and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever.

Henry David Thoreau
from “Civil Disobedience”

The South, in my opinion, has been aggrieved by the acts of the North, as you say. I feel the aggression, and am willing to take every proper step for redress. . . . As an American citizen, I take great pride in my country, her prosperity and institutions, and would defend any State, if her rights were invaded. But I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union. It would be an accumulation of all the evils we complain of, and I am willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation.

Robert E. Lee
from a letter to his son
three months before the war

This Southern Confederacy must be supported now by calm determination and cool brains. We have risked all and we must play our best, for the stake is life or death.

Mary Boykin Chesnut
from her diary

