

# 15th gives black men the right to vote

The 15th Amendment gave black men the right to vote in 1870, but many decades would pass before that apparent promise became reality.

For example, some states required blacks to pass literacy tests before voting -- a hurdle not placed before already-registered white voters. A Supreme Court decision overturned that tactic in 1915.

And poll taxes, aimed largely at discouraging minority voters, remained legal until adoption of the 24th Amendment in 1964.

The efforts to suppress black voters reflected a mix of racism and politics, said Linda Monk, a constitutional scholar from Virginia.

"It was not only a Southern issue," she said, noting New Jersey revised its constitution in 1807 to prevent blacks and women from voting.

But in the South, "freed slaves were a larger percentage of the population, so the political consequences (of a potential black vote) were much greater," she said.

"It's not just inherent racism," Monk said. "It's the political consequences of that racism."

Also adding to the Southern states' resentment: Their traditional political leaders were excluded from the ratification process during the Reconstruction Era.

"Essentially, the white male power structure (of the former Confederacy) was out of business for the first few years after the war," said Monk, a Harvard Law School graduate and author of a guide to the Constitution called *The Words We Live By*.

The 15th Amendment, which benefited only men, also divided two longtime allies -- activists who opposed slavery and those fighting for women's suffrage.

Many women's rights leaders refused to support the 15th Amendment, saying women, too, should have the right to vote. Instead, women had to wait until 1920, when the 19th Amendment gave them access to the ballot box.

"Some leaders in the women's suffrage movement felt deeply betrayed," said Monk. "This wasn't healed until the end of the 19th century."

New Jersey legislators initially rejected the amendment in February 1870, but ratified the measure one year later. By then, the amendment had been in effect for almost a year.