

AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES

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PBS

Program Descriptions

press information





Episode Two: *The Promise of Freedom*



Co-Produced By
Thirteen/WNET New York
and Kunhardt Productions

Episode two travels back from the early 20th century to the end of the Civil War to look at how African Americans defined their freedom after slavery; how, in a lifetime, one goes from being property to owning property. Historians explain how the notion of “40 acres and a mule” – compensation to freed slaves to help them start new lives – went largely unrealized, and how the institution of slavery, though formally abolished, amounted to a generations-long assault on African American families. Once living memory fades, the quest for one’s ancestry must turn to written records. Dr. Gates learns that courthouse records of land acquisitions, documents from the Freedmen’s Bureau and the 1870 census – the first in which African Americans were counted as citizens, not property – all prove important resources for tracing the participants’ lineage through the Reconstruction Era. The episode also explores the importance of education, specifically literacy, for African Americans in the period, and the opportunities that participants’ ancestors had to be educated – and to educate others. Dr. Gates’ personal story continues as he seeks genealogical research to confirm a family legend – whether a white slaveholder is one of his 19th-century ancestors.

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