

Segregation, Racial, 1816–1900

Americans at War, 2005
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In some instances war has increased American consciousness about the nation's ideals and identity, and the public's awareness of its failings to live up to the principles it professes. The War for Independence, for example, made plain the contradiction between the practice of slavery and struggle for liberty. Although independence resulted in the abolition of slavery in the North, the institution continued in half the nation after that war and racism existed in all sections of the country. One of the ironies of American history is that gains made by blacks in the Revolutionary War were lost by a later generation. One of the tragedies of that same history is that the Civil War, which fundamentally altered American society and culture by ending slavery, did not destroy the underlying racism that would produce more than a century of segregation following that war.

Racial segregation existed in America long before laws and biases enacted a physical separation. Dependent upon one another for colonial survival, fears of insurrection by a growing slave population created insurmountable boundaries between blacks and whites. Blacks who served in the Revolutionary War expected freedom or rising class status. Yet in the 1820s, as the country struggled to meet President Thomas Jefferson's ideal of equality, many states withdrew blacks' rights and curtailed civic participation. Although slavery nearly had been eradicated in the North by 1830, strong racial bias in non-slave holding states enforced segregation in public spaces, transportation, education, distinct residential housing, medical care, even in death.

Although traditional belief systems throughout the colonies taught white superiority, blacks served in military units side by side with whites during the colonial wars, the Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812. But by August 25, 1862, with a decision made to use the sizeable black populations for service in Civil War regiments, segregated units such as the 54th Massachusetts Infantry and 35th United States Colored Troops were the order of the day. Ultimately, the Bureau of Colored Troops in the War Department would oversee 178,892 Union soldiers in the Army and over 10,000 black sailors and pilots in the Federal Navy. In occupied territories, U.S. generals utilized the black population for skilled labor, as scouts and spies, cooks, nurses, and gravediggers. After the war, four black regiments remained in federal service. (Their number was reduced to two in 1869.)

With the Thirteenth Amendment signaling the end of slavery, in March 1865 Congress designated the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands (known as the Freedmen's Bureau) as an arm of the War Department to help displaced blacks make the transition from slave to wage earners and property owners. Under Reconstruction, Radical Republicans and the Union League grappled against Southern Democrats and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) for control; primarily black militias raised in efforts to support and protect freedmen's advocates heightened the animosity.

JIM CROW

As the Southern white vote splintered between political parties, harnessing the newly emerging black vote became critical for success. Adhering to the previously unnamed system of "Jim Crow" (separate facilities for blacks and whites) and further determined to disenfranchise the blacks, Southerners enacted "Black Codes" to prevent blacks from accumulating wealth or acquiring education. Thus, racial segregation began in earnest as freed Southern blacks moved towards cities across the country, only to find their access restricted. In the South, the KKK did its part to keep freed men and women from escalating in social rank and economic status, and local residence requirements directed towards tenant farmers ensured that blacks would not be moving into white zones any time soon.

Racial segregation existed at this time through custom and practice (de facto segregation), and both races mostly accepted their places. Modes of transportation proffered varying expectations of separation (including classes), with streetcars being not as firmly enforced, railroad cars more so, and steamships

strictly separated.

The Federal Civil Rights Act of 1875 expressly prohibited racial segregation, and it was against Federal law from 1875 to 1883. Then, in 1883, the Supreme Court heard seven civil rights cases and lay precedent towards establishing "separate but equal" as the law of the land. In 1896, Homer Plessy, an octoroon (a person of one-eighth black ancestry) in Louisiana, challenged a statute by refusing to leave a white railroad car, and he was arrested and convicted for his crime. In deciding *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Court failed to overturn the conviction, holding that separate but equal had become universally recognized (therefore not violating the Fourteenth Amendment), and stating that integrating transportation or education would upset the existing local customs that defined social relations between the races. The lone dissenting judge opined that segregation violated the Constitution, but soon discrimination and violence against blacks were again on the rise. Between 1887 and 1892, nine Southern states passed Jim Crow laws marking the passage into de jure segregation. By 1899, the Supreme Court routinely upheld rulings on statutes permitting segregation.

Ensuing Jim Crow laws treated blacks harshly and focused energies on lowering their status in society. No longer were differing classes within the races tolerated; rather all blacks were perceived to hold the same human worth, which was very little. The result of such legislation and direction had a lasting impact on American cities, as marginalized blacks, vying for jobs against whites and immigrants, set their own social, political, and economic structures, with fraternal orders, housing, education, and financial ventures following color lines.

Increasingly populated Western states had similar tensions among people of different races. Working in mines or on the transcontinental railroad, Mexicans, Chinese, blacks, and white immigrants competed for jobs. Mexicans (absorbed by the annexation of Texas and lands won in the Mexican-American War), displaced Native Americans, and emigrating Chinese and Japanese pooled with waves of European immigrants and white pioneers to claim land and work on the frontier.

Additionally, the Federal government warred against, displaced, and cordoned off Native American populations throughout the West. Poorly paid and deprived of amenities provided to whites, the Chinese faced prejudice in many forms. In California, whites alarmed at the large number of Chinese passing through Angel Island passed the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, following with segregation legislation. In addition, as the cattle and mining industries thrived and expanded, Mexicans were moved off traditional homesteads. The Hispanic American Alliance formed in 1894 to aid the displaced.

Adding to the crisis, in 1898, the "Buffalo Soldiers," who fought Native Americans on the Plains, helped win the Spanish-American War, which delivered eight million people of varying races unto the authority of the United States. Throughout America tides of nativism began to surge. Anti-immigration and segregation legislation separated races, religions, and cultures into enclaves; it would be nearly sixty years before segregation began to be outlawed and dismantled.

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See also: [African Americans \(Freed People\)](#) ; [Freedmen's Bureau](#) ; [Ku Klux Klan](#) , [Sharecropping and Tenant Farming](#) .

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Source Citation:

List, Sarah Hilgendorff. "Segregation, Racial, 1816–1900." *Americans at War*. Ed. John P. Resch. Vol. 2: 1816-1900. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 155-156. *Gale U.S. History In Context*. Web. 12 Oct. 2010.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|CX3427300190