

Race in the New South

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The Civil War marked the destruction of the “Old South,” which was defined by cotton cultivation and forced, unpaid labor. For a time, Reconstruction offered the potential for the creation of a new sociopolitical order, based on the principles of the Fourteenth Amendment. However, as Reconstruction in the South ended in 1877, White Southerners limited the reach of the Fourteenth Amendment. They did so with assistance from the federal courts and apathetic White Northerners. As promoters celebrated the rise of a “New South,” old problems and racial inequality persisted throughout the region.

This tutorial examines the New South in three parts:

1. The “New South”

During the 1880s, one could argue that the political and economic structures of the “Old South” had reemerged. After Reconstruction ended in 1877, Democratic **Redeemers**, who had tried to reestablish Southern state governments under the Democratic Party during Reconstruction, enacted measures that rolled back social welfare and racial equality initiatives undertaken by Republican-led state governments.

➞ **EXAMPLE** After 1877, Democrat-led state legislatures across the South cut property taxes to benefit wealthy, White landowners. They also cut funding for public schools, public works, and other racial equality and infrastructure development efforts that had been undertaken by Southern Republicans during Reconstruction.



TERM TO KNOW

Redeemers

Democrats opposed to Congressional Reconstruction; the label expressed their desire to “redeem” the Southern states from Republican control and to restore a pre-Civil War social order.

A number of planters, merchants, and businessmen benefited from the actions of Democratic officials at the state level, while many African Americans and poor Whites struggled. Poor Black and White farmers had few economic opportunities. They paid rent on the land they farmed, using the crops they grew, in an arrangement known as **sharecropping**.



TERM TO KNOW

Sharecropping

A system in which poor farmers paid rent on land they farmed (but did not own) with the crops they grew.

Most sharecroppers paid their rent and other debts with cotton. This was a dead-end occupation that trapped farmers in a cycle of debt. It also maintained cotton as the South's most valuable export after Reconstruction, as it had been before the Civil War.

Backed by the investments of Northern capitalists, cotton production continued, along with economic development and diversification in parts of the South. The expansion of railroads into the South contributed to development, as it became easier to move raw materials and finished goods throughout the region.

With the extension of railroad lines, new industries began to emerge in the South, most of which were based on the region's agricultural resources. Textile mills processed the cotton produced by thousands of sharecroppers. Tobacco cultivation contributed to the emergence of cigarette manufacturing in several Southern cities.

An eager, young newspaper editor from Atlanta, Georgia named Henry Grady observed this growth and, when speaking before Northern audiences, proclaimed the arrival of a **"New South."**



TERM TO KNOW

"New South"

A belief that the South could build and sustain a modern, diversified economy based on industry and agriculture that, in the process, would solve its racial problems.

When speaking to a group of businessmen and investors in New York City in 1886, Grady proclaimed that Southerners "have established thrift in city and country" and "have fallen in love with work." He expressed optimism that Southerners were eliminating racial tensions to the satisfaction of all. He ended his speech by describing the New South, as follows:

Henry Grady, Newspaper Editor

"The old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth. The new South presents a perfect democracy, the oligarchs leading in the popular movement—a social system compact and closely knitted, less splendid on the surface, but stronger at the core—a hundred farms for every plantation, fifty homes for every palace—and a diversified industry that meets the complex need of this complex age.

The new South is enamored of her new work. Her soul is stirred with the breath of a new life. The light of a grander day is falling fair on her face. She is thrilling with the consciousness of growing power and prosperity. As she stands upright, full-statured and equal among the people of the earth, breathing the keen air and looking out upon the expanded horizon, she understands that her emancipation came because through the inscrutable wisdom of God her honest purpose was crossed, and her brave armies were beaten."



THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to Grady, what were the differences between the "old South" and the "new South"?
2. What do you think Grady meant when he argued that the South's "emancipation came because

through the inscrutable wisdom of God her honest purpose was crossed, and her brave armies were beaten”?

2. Black Life in the New South

Grady’s proclamation of the “New South” as a region “of growing power and prosperity” lacked substance. Economically, new industries associated with textiles, tobacco, or other Southern products contributed little to development. They required cheap, unskilled labor and Northern capital to survive. More importantly, Grady’s words rang hollow when it came to race.

Black political participation declined dramatically in the South after 1877. As White Democrats regained control of state and local governments during and immediately after Reconstruction, they worked steadily to destroy Black political coalitions and to disenfranchise African American voters. They had several strategies for accomplishing these goals. One was the use of terror and violence.

White supremacist groups including the Ku Klux Klan clandestinely—and openly—threatened, intimidated, and killed African Americans who challenged the economic or political order of the “New South.” Even more alarming was the rise of public, racially-motivated attacks on Black men by White mobs known as **lynchings**.



TERM TO KNOW

Lynchings

Public hangings, often by vigilante mobs, for perceived offenses or challenges to White supremacy. In 1892, the *Christian Recorder*, a Philadelphia Black newspaper, reported that lynchings and other forms of racial violence were occurring in Arkansas:

Excerpt from the *Christian Recorder*

“There is much uneasiness and unrest all over this State among our people, owing to the fact that the people (our race variety) all over the State are being lynched upon the slightest provocation; some being strung up to telegraph poles, others burnt at the stake and still others being shot like dogs. In the last 30 days, there have been not less than eight colored persons lynched in this State. At Texarkana a few days ago, a man was burnt at the stake. In Pine Bluff a few days later two men were strung up and shot, and this too by the brilliant glare of the electric lights. At Varner, George Harris was taken from jail and shot for killing a White man, for poisoning his domestic happiness. At Wilmar, a boy was induced to confess to the commission of an outrage, upon promise of his liberty, and when he had confessed, he was strung up and shot. Over in Toneoke County, a whole family consisting of husband, wife and child were shot down like dogs. Verily the situation is alarming in the extreme.”



THINK ABOUT IT

According to the *Christian Recorder*, what provoked these acts of racial violence? Were the provocations or accusations genuine?

In addition to threats of violence, Southern state legislatures enacted voter restriction strategies to circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment, adopted during Reconstruction, which prohibited states from denying men the right

to vote based on race. The strategies included the following:

- *Poll taxes:* A poll tax was a fee that every citizen had to pay for the right to vote. This tax virtually guaranteed that only those who had the money to pay the fee (like planters, businessmen, and merchants) would vote.
- *Literacy tests and “understanding” clauses:* These tests required prospective voters to read and, in some cases, interpret a passage from the state constitution before a voting registrar.
- *Grandfather clauses:* A “grandfather clause” exempted anyone descended from persons who had been eligible to vote before the Civil War from poll taxes, literacy tests, or any other voting requirement. African Americans did not qualify for this exemption, since only White men could vote in the South prior to the Civil War.



DID YOU KNOW

According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1965), Black voter registration in Mississippi in 1867, when Reconstruction was in effect, was 66.9%. However, as a result of the enactment of a poll tax, an “understanding” clause, and other voting restrictions, Black voter registration in the state declined to 9.1% by 1899.

Southern legislators argued that voting restrictions were color-blind: they could affect Black and White voters equally. In practice, this was not the case.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Under the “understanding” clause, it was up to the voting registrar (who was White) to decide whether one’s interpretation of a constitutional passage was satisfactory. Tests were often written to enable barely-literate White men to pass, while highly-educated Black men struggled to demonstrate their understanding of the state constitution.

3. The Supreme Court and Segregation

White Southern politicians were supported in their efforts to marginalize African Americans economically, terrorize and subjugate them socially, and disfranchise them politically, by Supreme Court decisions that narrowly interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution guarantees citizenship to all persons born in the United States, and bars states from making or enforcing laws “which shall abridge the privileges or immunities” of citizens, “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law,” or “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Passed in 1868 at the height of Congressional Reconstruction, this amendment was designed to protect the rights of formerly enslaved people and support Black equality.

Congress sought to further support Black equality by enacting the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which forbade segregation in restaurants, hotels, and other places of public accommodation. However, this Act was the last gasp of Reconstruction legislation, as the Supreme Court was already rolling back the Fourteenth Amendment, and would continue to do so throughout the late 19th century in a series of prominent cases.

Case	Description
The	Butchers from Louisiana claimed that their exclusion from a state-sponsored monopoly violated the “equal protection” clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The court disagreed,

<i>Slaughterhouse Cases</i> (1873)	arguing that the Fourteenth Amendment should be understood narrowly as protecting citizens from state actions that violated their “federal rights,” but that states could otherwise discriminate as they saw fit.
<i>United States v. Cruikshank</i> (1876)	Following an event known as the Colfax Massacre, in which Whites affiliated with the Democratic Party killed approximately 150 former enslaved people in Colfax, Louisiana after a close gubernatorial election, a federal court convicted several of the individuals responsible for the attack. In 1876, however, the Supreme Court threw out most of the convictions, based on a narrow interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment. It argued that the obligation to enforce “equal protection” of Constitutional rights (such as the right to assembly) rested with the states, not the federal government.
The <i>Civil Rights Cases</i> (1883)	<p>The Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional on the grounds that it infringed upon the rights of private businesses. According to the court’s ruling, state entities were bound to the Fourteenth Amendment’s “equal protection” clause, but private businesses were not.</p> <p>The Supreme Court’s weakening of the Fourteenth Amendment and its striking down of the Civil Rights Act, along with efforts to intimidate or disenfranchise Black voters at the state level, enabled the passage of laws throughout the South that allowed separate facilities on the grounds of race: a system known as Jim Crow.</p>



TERM TO KNOW

Jim Crow

A system of laws and social codes that regulated and monitored the physical and social segregation of people by race in the post-Reconstruction South in an effort to codify White supremacy.

In addition to public accommodations such as hotels, restaurants, and schools, Jim Crow laws covered public transportation, including railroads. Henry Grady referred to railroads and other forms of modern infrastructure as symbols of a “New South,” but it was clear that racism persisted throughout the region as African Americans were denied equal access to first-class passenger cars.

Demands for equal access provided the context for the most significant Supreme Court case related to segregation: *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).



TERM TO KNOW

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

Supreme Court case that affirmed the doctrine of “separate but equal” in public accommodations. The case involved a Black man, Homer Adolph Plessy, who boarded a Louisiana train and refused to leave the first-class car for a designated “colored” section, as required by Louisiana state law. Plessy’s case reached the Supreme Court, where his lawyer, Albion W. Tourg  e, argued that segregated rail cars violated the Fourteenth Amendment’s guarantee of equal protection under the law.

In an 8-1 decision, the Supreme Court upheld the Louisiana law. The decision cited the *Slaughterhouse Cases* and other rulings in which the Fourteenth Amendment had been narrowly interpreted. It referred to the Louisiana statute as a “reasonable regulation” because it conformed to “established usages, customs and traditions of the people” and preserved “the public peace and good order.” The ruling also indicated the court’s support of other measures at the state and federal level that had established separate facilities for Black and White patrons.



DID YOU KNOW

By 1896, all but three Southern states had enacted legislation that required segregation on rail cars. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* case was a landmark decision that legitimized racial segregation and Black disfranchisement efforts that were taking place in the “New South.” African Americans challenged these efforts, but most Americans were unwilling or uninterested in protecting Black civil rights in the late 19th century.



SUMMARY

Although the “New South” appeared new on the surface, it continued to be plagued by old problems. Foremost among these was racism. White Southern Democrats, who regained political control of the region following Reconstruction, restricted the economic and political opportunities of African Americans. Black Southerners endured intimidation, violence, and political disfranchisement. The federal court system, tasked with enforcing the Fourteenth Amendment, failed to provide adequate relief. Rather, in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the Supreme Court legitimized Jim Crow segregation throughout the South.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Lynchings

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Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

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Sharecropping

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grew.

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