

Then: Fighting Jim Crow

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will study the period from the end of the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. During this time, African-Americans were legally free but legally separated from the rest of society. Laws known as Jim Crow laws kept Blacks and whites “separate but equal” -- even though “equal” rarely meant “equal.”. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Reconstruction
2. The Jim Crow Era
 - a. Booker T. Washington
 - b. W.E.B. Du Bois



BEFORE YOU START

What arguments did people make against segregation in the Jim Crow era?

1. Reconstruction

The Union’s victory in the Civil War and the passage of the 13th Amendment ended the practice of slavery, but they did not bring social or economic equality to African Americans. The 14th Amendment, proposed by Congress in 1866, stated that anyone born in the United States was a citizen and entitled to equal protection under the law (although it excluded Native Americans who had not renounced tribal membership). Nearly every Southern state refused to ratify the new amendment, however, and violence against Black residents was widespread across the former Confederacy.

During this time and throughout **Reconstruction**, the federal government took action to confirm and protect the civil rights of African Americans. Southern states were divided into five districts controlled by the military and were required to ratify the 14th Amendment before they could rejoin the United States. The 15th Amendment was approved, guaranteeing male citizens the right to vote. Federal troops enforced voting rights, and Black congressional representatives were elected. A government agency called the Freedmen’s Bureau was established to give freedmen, or formerly enslaved people, a way to lodge complaints about violence or unfair labor contracts. In 1877, however, Reconstruction came to an end when President Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew federal troops from the South.

With Reconstruction over, Southern leaders worked to make sure whites kept their economic and social advantages. Freedmen who were successful or took leadership roles in their communities faced increased violence from terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Even though they had the legal right to vote, Black men were effectively disenfranchised with political tactics like **poll taxes** and violent intimidation. Although slavery

had been outlawed, African Americans were still denied full freedoms and rights.



TERMS TO KNOW

Reconstruction

The period lasting from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to 1877 during which the federal government worked to establish and protect the rights of African Americans in the Southern United States.

Poll Taxes

Taxes levied on all adult individuals that, if not paid, renders one ineligible to vote; in the Jim Crow South, poll taxes were used to effectively disenfranchise Black citizens.

2. The Jim Crow Era

Starting in the late 1800s, many states passed new laws (which came to be known as Jim Crow laws) that enforced segregation. Jim Crow laws permeated virtually every aspect of Black peoples' lives. Jim Crow laws limited where they could live, go to school, shop for goods and services, receive healthcare, and go to the bathroom -- among many other aspects of life. While the law technically required separate facilities to be separate but equal, in reality, they were rarely equal. Jim Crow laws resulted in Blacks living as second-class citizens.

One such law from Louisiana was challenged in the 1896 Supreme Court case of Plessy v. Ferguson. The Court ruled that white and Black Americans could be segregated based on race, as long as equal facilities, services, and opportunities existed for both. Out of nine Supreme Court justices, only Justice John Marshall Harlan dissented, or disagreed, writing the following (Our Documents, n.d.):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Supreme Court Decision: Plessy v. Ferguson

Author: Justice John Marshall Harlan, writing for the dissent

Date: 1896

Slavery as an institution tolerated by law would, it is true, have disappeared from our country, but there would remain a power in the States, by sinister legislation, to interfere with the blessings of freedom; to regulate civil rights common to all citizens, upon the basis of race....

The idea of “separate but equal,” supported by the Supreme Court, would be used for decades to justify segregation in public facilities such as schools.



A man gets a drink from a “Colored” water cooler in a streetcar terminal, Oklahoma City, July 1939.

Just as abolitionists had challenged slavery before the Civil War, activists spoke out against the threats, lynchings, and segregation of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Let’s take a look at two of those activists and how they used communication to work toward their goals.

2a. Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) was born into slavery and emerged as a major African American leader in the South in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He believed economic power was the best way to gradually weaken the grip of segregation and discrimination. For this reason, he encouraged African Americans to develop skills that would help them be financially self-sufficient.



Portrait of Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

Washington also believed that white and Black Americans should work together to achieve progress, as we can see in this excerpt from a speech he gave in Atlanta in 1895 (Washington, 1895):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Speech

Author: Booker T. Washington

Date: 1895

In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress. There is no defense or security for any of us except in the highest intelligence and development of all.

This speech is called the “Atlanta Compromise” speech because of Washington’s view that white and Black Americans should join forces for progress. Many civil rights activists disagreed with Washington’s ideas about cooperation, though. Let’s now examine a primary source that was written in direct response to Washington’s ideas.

2b. W.E.B Du Bois

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was a civil rights activist, historian, and sociologist, and one of the eventual founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He viewed Booker T. Washington’s approach as too much of a compromise, believing that white Americans had no intention of ever seeing Black Americans as equals.



Portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963)

Du Bois himself would call for a strategy that included much more willingness to confront and agitate in the face of injustice.

Below is an excerpt from an essay he wrote in direct response to Washington's speech (Du Bois, 1903):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Essay

Author: W.E.B. Du Bois

Date: 1903

Again, in our own land, the reaction from the sentiment of war time has given impetus to race-prejudice against Negroes, and Mr. Washington withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens. In other periods of intensified prejudice all the Negro's tendency to self-assertion has been called forth; at this period a policy of submission is advocated. In the history of nearly all other races and peoples the doctrine preached at such crises has been that manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses....

The writings of both Washington and Du Bois are primary sources that are relevant to our topic. Both address the state of civil rights during the era of Jim Crow segregation. Washington's full speech gives an overview of African American economic realities, as well as information about how Black and white Americans were interacting following the Civil War. Du Bois's essay provides different insight into the minds of the African American community at the time. Both are accurate representations of each man's thoughts and experiences. Du Bois's essay was even written as a critical response to Washington's speech, so these sources clearly provide two different—but related—perspectives on the same time period and events.



HINT

This is an example of how using multiple sources can give us a deeper understanding of a period of history. When we read two different sources, we not only try to corroborate historical facts, we also see the past through the eyes of two different people.

The fight against slavery and segregation, as well as the ongoing reality of oppression and racism in the United States, is a fundamental part of our nation's narrative—and it's critical that we remember, understand, and learn from the past so we can address inequality and oppression in our society today.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the struggle for African American civil rights from the end of the Civil War into the 20th century. The period known as **Reconstruction** witnessed advances in civil rights, especially with the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments and federal oversight of the southern states. Once Reconstruction ended in 1876, the **Jim Crow Era** established segregation and discrimination as the law of the land. Black leaders like **Booker T. Washington** and **W.E.B. Du Bois** emerged to lead the fight for equality, although with different approaches.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

REFERENCES

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1903). Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others. History Matters.

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). (n.d.) Our Documents. www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=52

Washington, Booker T. (1895, September 18). Speech at the Atlanta Exposition. Internet History Sourcebooks Project, Fordham University. sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1895washington-atlanta.asp



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [A man gets a drink from a “Colored” water cooler in a streetcar terminal, Oklahoma City, July 1939](#) | Author: Russell Lee / Library of Congress | License: Public Domain
- [Portrait of Booker T. Washington, 1905](#) | Author: Frances Benjamin Johnston / Library of Congress | License: Public Domain
- [Portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois, 1918](#) | Author: C. M. Battey / Library of Congress | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Poll Taxes

Taxes levied on all adult individuals that, if not paid, renders one ineligible to vote; in the Jim Crow South, poll taxes were used to effectively disenfranchise Black citizens.

Reconstruction

The period lasting from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to 1877 during which the federal government worked to establish and protect the rights of African Americans in the Southern United States.