

What It Means to Be a Progressive

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Progressivism was a complex movement driven by a variety of individuals, groups, and ideas. It was also full of contradictions.

The promise and limits of Progressivism were most clear when it addressed matters of race. This tutorial gives you an opportunity to consider the question “What did it mean to be a Progressive?” while learning about the work of African American reformers during the Progressive Era:

1. Black Life in the Progressive Era

Despite Progressivism’s quest for a more perfect democracy and social justice, these qualities were not evident in race relations during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The events of this period have led historians to refer to it as the “nadir,” or the lowest point, of race relations in America.

Political reforms like the **direct primary**—when combined with poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and other restrictive measures—deprived African Americans of the right to vote throughout the South.



TERM TO KNOW

Direct Primary

A political reform that permits the nomination of candidates by a direct vote by party members rather than selection by delegates at conventions.

By the early 20th century, the Southern electorate was predominantly White and the voter turnout was low.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1880, more than two thirds of the adult male population in the South (Black and White) voted in the elections. In 1910, less than one third of the adult male population voted.

In the South, African Americans endured the **Jim Crow** system. Although Supreme Court decisions, including *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), ordered that separate facilities (based on race) be equal, in practice, “separate but equal” was fiction.



TERMS TO KNOW

Jim Crow

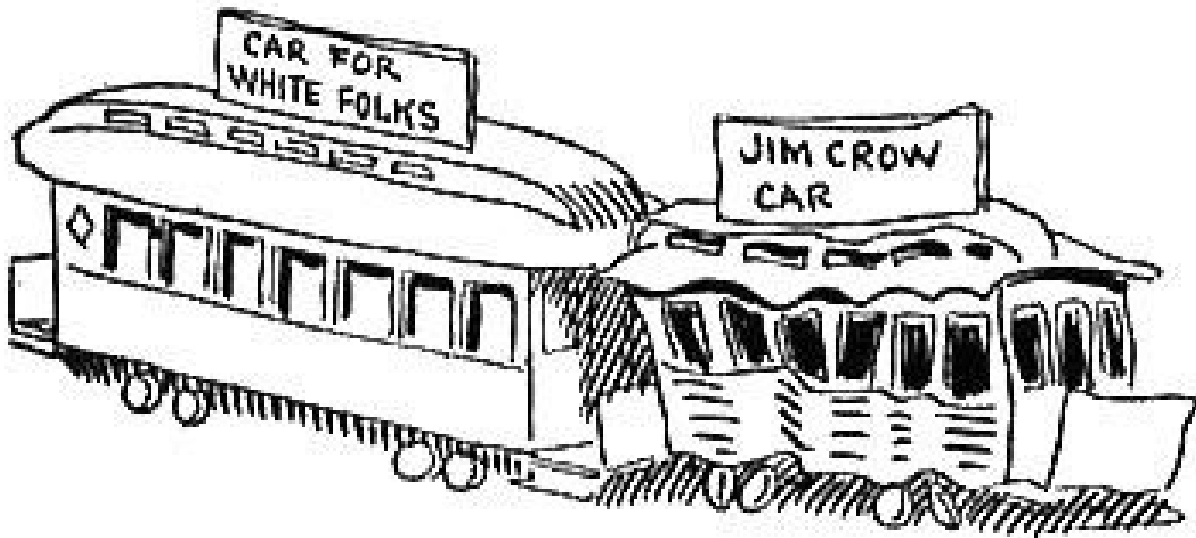
A system of laws and social codes designed to regulate and monitor the physical and social segregation of people by race in the post-Reconstruction South in an effort to codify White

supremacy.

***Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)**

Supreme Court case that affirmed the doctrine of “separate but equal” in public accommodations. Signs that divided “White” facilities from “Colored” ones proliferated throughout the South. Not only was the system supported by state law and the Supreme Court, but “Colored” facilities were usually inferior to those designated for “White” use.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Separate railroad cars for African American passengers were often dirty and uncomfortable. In one instance, Black passengers on a Tennessee rail line discovered that their “first-class” car was a partitioned section of the second-class car.



A caricature of “White” and “Colored” railroad cars by political cartoonist John T. McCutcheon (1904); it highlights the inferior conditions that African American travelers endured despite the legal requirement that such facilities be “separate but equal.”

The inequality extended to public education. Local governments and Southern state legislatures, dominated by Whites, appropriated funds for White schools but neglected facilities for Black students.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1900, there were no public high schools for African American students in the South. Mob violence against African Americans, which sometimes took the form of **lynchings**, continued during the Progressive Era.



TERM TO KNOW

Lynchings

Public hangings, often by vigilante mobs, for perceived offenses or challenges to White supremacy. According to researchers at the Tuskegee Institute, approximately 3,500 lynchings and other murders were committed by Black Southerners between 1865 and 1900. More than 50 people, the majority of them African American males, were lynched in the South every year between 1883 and 1905.

Although many White Americans and Progressive reformers were appalled by lynchings, they still believed

that Anglo-Saxons were superior to people of other races. Many of them blamed African Americans for the lynchings, accusing the victims of raping White women even when the accusations were unfounded.

As Thomas Nelson Page, a White lawyer and writer from Virginia, wrote in a 1904 article titled “The Lynching of Negroes—Its Cause and Its Prevention,” many White Southerners justified the lynchings of Black men by portraying themselves as the protectors of White women.

Thomas Nelson Page, “The Lynching of Negroes—Its Cause and Its Prevention”

“... The stern underlying principle of the people who commit these barbarities (lynchings) is one that has its root deep in the basic passions of humanity; the determination to put an end to the ravishing of their women by an inferior race, no matter what the consequence.

For a time, a speedy execution by hanging was the only mode of retribution resorted to by the lynchers; then, when this failed in its purpose, a more savage method was essayed, born of a savage fury at the failure of the first, and a stern resolve to strike a deeper terror into those whom the other method had failed to awe” (p. 39).



THINK ABOUT IT

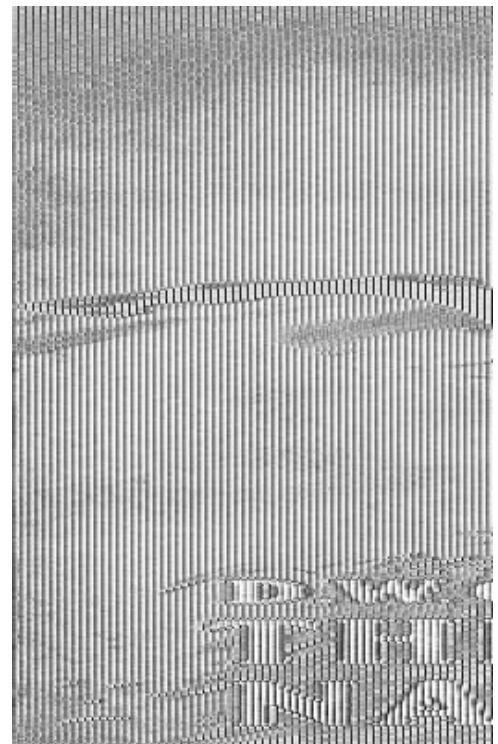
1. Whom does Page blame for the lynchings that were occurring throughout the South?
2. Why did White mobs resort to lynching, while Page saw it as a barbaric act?
3. Why was “the ravishing of their women” so often used by Whites to justify lynching?

The assumption that Black men lusted for White women was reinforced in popular culture, most notably in the novels of Thomas Dixon and the adaptation of his book *The Clansmen* into the film *The Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffith in 1915.

The Birth of a Nation depicted the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction. It portrayed White Southerners as victims of violence and violation at the hands of formerly enslaved persons. Given the racist assumptions about African Americans held by many during the Progressive Era, audiences across the country accepted the film as an accurate portrayal of Reconstruction.

➔ **EXAMPLE** After viewing the film, President Woodrow Wilson (a former history professor) reportedly remarked, “It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”

Thomas Nelson Page and White Southerners, along with other White Americans associated with Progressivism, considered Jim Crow and the separation of people by color as a Progressive solution to racial violence and inequality.



A theatrical release poster for *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915.

2. The Atlanta Compromise

A number of African Americans across the United States refused to accept racial inequality and “solutions” like segregation, which identified them as inferior. Segregation did nothing to protect Black Southerners from extralegal violence, including lynching. African American activists developed their own solutions during the Progressive Era and worked along different paths to accomplish them.

Booker T. Washington was an influential African American leader during the Progressive Era. Born into slavery in Virginia in 1856, Washington became the first principal of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama in 1881.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Booker T. Washington

Born into slavery, he became an influential Black leader during the Progressive Era, who called on African Americans to work diligently for their own uplift and prosperity through vocational education and community development.

Tuskegee was an all-Black “normal school” (an obsolete name for a teachers’ college) that taught African American students practical, vocational skills like cooking, farming, and housekeeping. Washington encouraged graduates to focus on self-improvement within Black communities.

At the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895, Washington presented his message to a mixed-race audience in a speech that came to be known as the **Atlanta Compromise**.

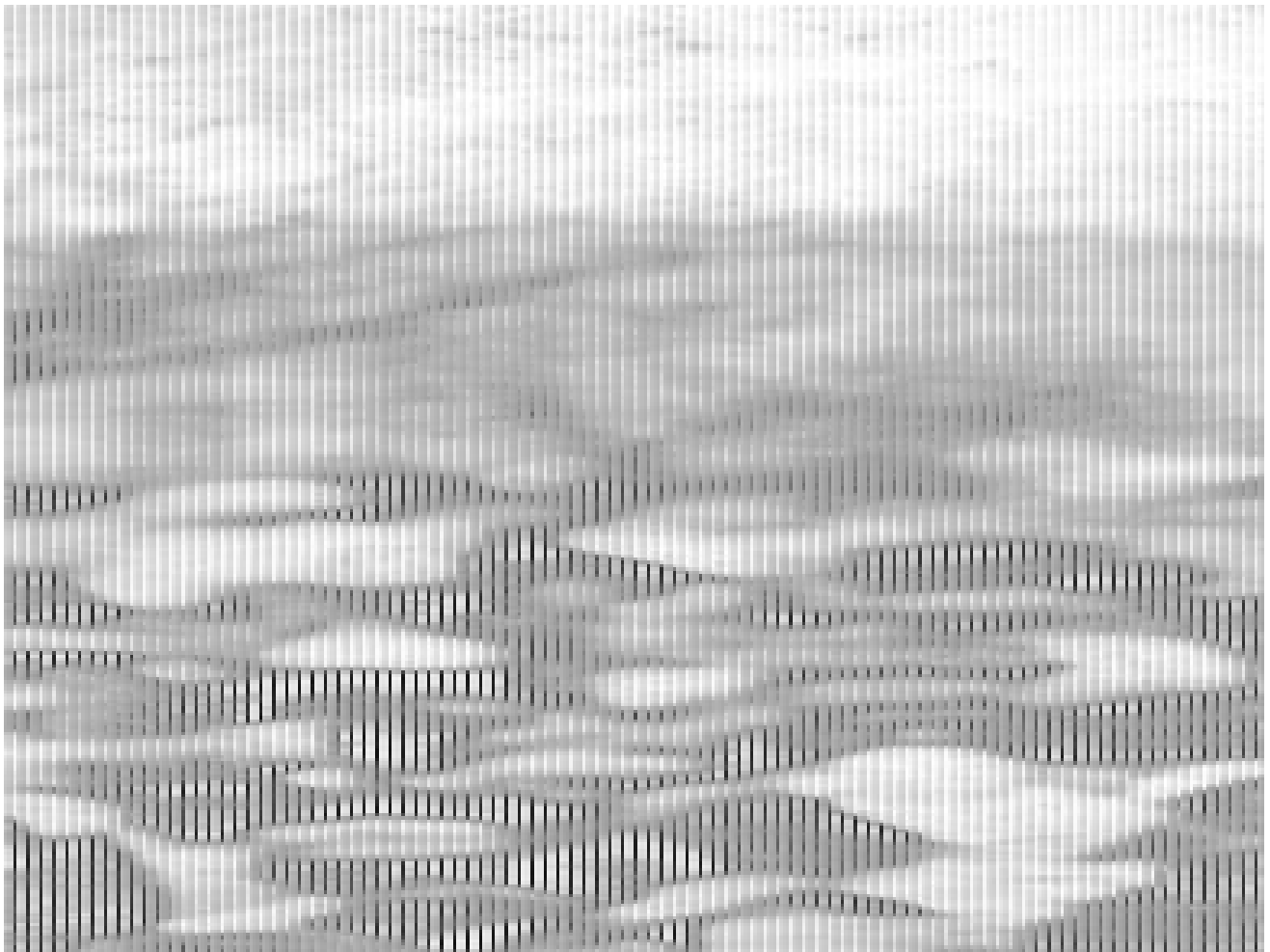


TERM TO KNOW

Atlanta Compromise

Speech by Booker T. Washington in which he urged African Americans to work hard and get along with others their White neighbors so as to earn their goodwill.

Rather than preoccupy themselves with political and civil rights, Washington called upon African Americans to ignore discrimination and instead work diligently for their personal and communal uplift and prosperity. Economic success and hard work, he indicated, would convince Southern Whites to grant them these rights.



In his Atlanta Compromise address, Washington urged his audience to “cast down your bucket where you are” and work hard to improve.

By encouraging his audience to focus on economic growth and community development and claiming that doing so would accomplish more than agitating for equal rights, Washington’s accommodationist message appealed to many African Americans in the South. A number of White Americans, including Progressives like Theodore Roosevelt, agreed with Washington’s views because they placed the burden of change on Black communities and required nothing of them.



DID YOU KNOW

Washington was the first African American that President Theodore Roosevelt invited to the White House in 1901.

3. The Niagara Movement

Some African Americans strongly opposed Washington’s approach and believed that immediate, uncompromising agitation for Black civil rights was necessary to protect their communities and achieve social progress.

In 1905, a group of prominent Black civil rights leaders, led by **W. E. B. Du Bois**, met in a small hotel on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls to develop a plan to achieve racial equality. They met in Canada because no

hotel on the American side of Niagara Falls would accommodate them: Segregation and discrimination were in effect in the North as well as the South. Du Bois, the first Black student to earn a doctoral degree from Harvard University, was a professor at the all-Black Atlanta University. He became a prominent spokesperson for the **Niagara Movement**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

W. E. B. Du Bois

Leading Black intellectual and civil rights activist; advocate of Pan-Africanism; prominent spokesperson for the Niagara Movement, which called for immediate political, social, and economic equality for African Americans; and cofounder of the NAACP and longtime editor of its journal *The Crisis*.



TERM TO KNOW

Niagara Movement

A campaign organized by W. E. B. Du Bois and other African American reformers; challenged Washington's Atlanta Compromise by calling for immediate political, social, and economic equality.



A portrait of the founders of the Niagara Movement. W. E. B. Du Bois is seated in the second row, center, wearing a white hat.

At the meeting, Du Bois and the other participants drafted the “Declaration of Principles.” This document

called for immediate political, economic, and social equality for African Americans. It included demands for universal suffrage, compulsory education, and the end of the convict lease system (which forced Black prisoners to endure slave-like conditions while working in road construction, mines, prisons, and penal farms). It also called for an end to Jim Crow segregation.

To achieve these goals, the founders of the Niagara Movement sought to enlist the Black, educated elite and to make use of their political leadership and litigation skills to challenge discrimination in all forms. Du Bois referred to this elite group as the “talented tenth.” The founders also did the groundwork for the establishment of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** (NAACP) in 1909.



TERM TO KNOW

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

A Black civil rights organization formed by an interracial coalition that included W. E. B. Du Bois, Florence Kelley, and other Progressive reformers.

Du Bois served as director of publications for the NAACP from its inception until 1933. As the editor of the journal *The Crisis*, Du Bois expressed his views on a variety of issues faced by African Americans in the late Progressive Era and during World War I and its aftermath.

4. African American Women Respond to Racial Violence

While Booker T. Washington encouraged Black self-improvement and W. E. B. DuBois demanded civil rights, racial violence (particularly lynching) remained a significant problem. African American women, including muckraker Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, publicized lynchings and investigated their causes.

Born into slavery in 1862, **Ida B. Wells** owned and operated the *Memphis Free Press* in the early 1890s. In 1892, after writing and publishing an editorial opposing the lynching of Black men for allegedly raping White women (an accusation Wells called “an old threadbare lie”), a White mob destroyed her newspaper office and forced her to move North. Undaunted, she continued to speak publicly against lynching and wrote three pamphlets between 1892 and 1900 that kept lynching and racial violence in the national conversation.

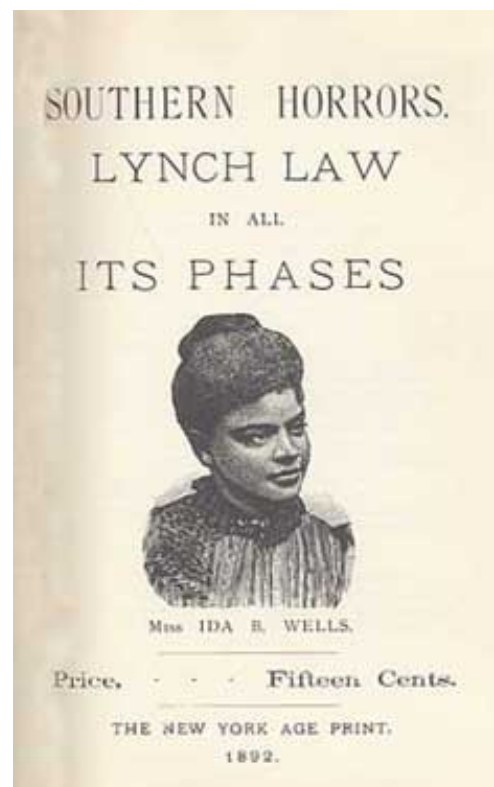


PEOPLE TO KNOW

Ida B. Wells

Muckraker journalist who was instrumental in investigating and bringing to national attention the lynching of African Americans in the South.

Mary Church Terrell, born in 1863 to formerly enslaved parents, was another anti-lynching advocate. Terrell was one of the first Black women to earn a college degree (a bachelor’s degree from



Cover page of Ida Wells’s 1892 pamphlet “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases.”

Oberlin College in 1884). In 1896, Terrell, with Ida Wells and the famous abolitionist Harriet Tubman, founded the National Association of Colored Women. She served as the organization's first president and later became a founding member of the NAACP.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Mary Church Terrell

National activist for Black civil rights and vocal advocate against lynching, cofounder and first president of the National Association of Colored Women, and founding member of the NAACP.

Like Wells, Terrell publicly criticized lynching, most notably by writing an article in 1904 (in rebuttal to Thomas Nelson Page's assertions on the subject) that refuted the false allegations behind the lynchings in the South.

Mary Church Terrell, Excerpt From Her Rebuttal to Thomas Nelson Page

"At the last analysis, it will be discovered that there are just two causes of lynching. In the first place, it is due to race hatred, the hatred of a stronger people toward a weaker who were once held as slaves. In the second place, it is due to the lawlessness so prevalent in the section (the South) where nine-tenths of the lynchings occur." (pp. 860–861)

Terrell went on to argue that the "spirit of intolerance and of hatred" behind lynching and other forms of racial violence was also behind Jim Crow, which a number of White Progressives saw as a suitable solution to racial problems. She concluded as follows:

"Until there is a renaissance of popular belief in the principles of liberty and equality upon which this government was founded, lynching, the Convict Lease System, the Disfranchisement Acts, the Jim Crow Car Laws, unjust discrimination in the professions and trades and similar atrocities will continue to dishearten and degrade the negro, and stain the fair name of the United States." (p. 868)



Portrait of Mary Church Terrell, taken between 1880 and 1900.

In Washington, Du Bois, Wells, and Terrell, African Americans found leaders who fought for their rights during the Progressive Era. These leaders, each in their own way, promoted racial equality and social justice and challenged segregation and other forms of social control that were accepted by many Progressives.



SUMMARY

African Americans across the nation built an agenda for civil rights and economic opportunity during the Progressive Era but disagreed on how to accomplish their goals during a time of universal discrimination, disfranchisement, segregation, and racial violence in the South. African Americans—led by Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida Wells, and Mary Church Terrell—strove for civil rights and economic opportunity. Although their philosophies and strategies differed, they challenged Progressivism and paved the way for later movements to expand opportunity and citizenship.

Source: This tutorial curated and/or authored by Matthew Pearce, Ph.D with content adapted from Openstax "U.S. History". access for free at openstax.org/details/books/us-history LICENSE: **CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0 INTERNATIONAL**

REFERENCES

Page, T. (1904). "The Lynching of Negroes: Its Cause and Its Prevention." The North American Review, 178(566), 33-48. Retrieved from bit.ly/2qWTjn9

Terrell, M. (1904). Lynching from a Negro's Point of View. The North American Review, 178(571), 853-868. Retrieved from bit.ly/2qjX1bM

Wells-Barnett, I. B., & Royster, J. J. (2016). Southern horrors and other writings: the anti-lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells. Boston: Bedford.



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Mary Terrell](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Southern Horrors](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Railcar Cartoon](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Atlanta Compromise

Speech by Booker T. Washington in which he urged African Americans to work hard and get along with their White neighbors so as to earn their goodwill.

Direct Primary

A political reform that permits the nomination of candidates by a direct vote by party members rather than selection by delegates at conventions.

Jim Crow

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

Lynchings

Public hangings, often by vigilante mobs, for perceived offenses or challenges to White supremacy.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

A Black civil rights organization formed by an interracial coalition that included W. E. B. Du Bois, Florence Kelley, and other Progressive reformers.

Niagara Movement

A campaign organized by W. E. B. Du Bois and other African American reformers; challenged Washington's Atlanta Compromise by calling for immediate political, social, and economic equality.

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

Supreme Court case that affirmed the doctrine of "separate but equal" in public accommodations.

**PEOPLE TO KNOW****Booker T. Washington**

Born into slavery, he became an influential Black leader during the Progressive Era, who called on African Americans to work diligently for their own uplift and prosperity through vocational education and community development.

Ida B. Wells

Muckraker journalist who was instrumental in investigating and bringing to national attention the lynching of African Americans in the South.

Mary Church Terrell

National activist for Black civil rights and vocal advocate against lynching, cofounder and first president of the National Association of Colored Women, and founding member of the NAACP.

W. E. B. Du Bois

Leading Black intellectual and civil rights activist; advocate of Pan-Africanism; prominent spokesperson for the Niagara Movement, which called for immediate political, social, and economic equality for African Americans; and cofounder of the NAACP and longtime editor of its journal *The Crisis*.