

Race Relations in the New South

There was a tentative peace in the south between blacks and whites, but it had severe limitations. White Southerners expected blacks to keep to themselves, to socialize and worship in separate venues, to work for white people in menial jobs and for meager wages, and to never request or demand anything, including equal rights.

When slaves were emancipated, the white South lost its labor supply and the slaves lost their shelter. Instead of owning the slaves, white men became landlords, charging high rent to slave families who often could not pay with cash. These slaves effectively became indentured servants to their former owners as they tried to pay off their debts through service—an impossible task, with the interest tacked on by the landlords.

Freedmen also encountered the difficulties of sharecropping. With little land available to purchase and few skills other than knowing how to work in the fields, former slaves participated in the sharecropping system that provided a share of the crop for the worker's service. A similar practice was known as crop liens, in which the owner of the land—usually a freedman or a poor white man—would offer a lien on his crop to a merchant in exchange for cash or supplies. Sharecropping and crop liens were idealistic plans used by crooked bookkeepers and white land owners who kept black men in perpetual debt.

Blacks did have some allies, albeit self-serving ones. The Populist Party of the 1890s needed numbers to gain power, and blacks were numerous. Populists brought blacks en masse into their folds, even giving them prominent leadership positions. Not surprisingly, these actions stirred up the Redeemers who wanted to repress the northern influence of equality for former slaves. They also did not want to lose elections to the growing Populist Party.

Since the Fifteenth Amendment ensured that the Redeemers could not outright disenfranchise blacks, they had to be crafty. Redeemers developed voting rules for their states that were known as “literacy tests,” although they were impossible tests meant solely to weed out black voters. In addition, the Redeemers implemented poll taxes that they knew many blacks could not afford to pay. While this did eliminate most of the black vote, it also kept many poor, uneducated whites from voicing their opinions at the polls. Still, the narrow-minded Redeemers considered this a victory for the South.

The Redeemers felt further justified when Mississippi took their actions a few steps further. In 1890, at a state constitutional convention, harsher voting requirements were enacted. The first of these requirements was a residency rule, which stated that all voters had to have lived in the state's borders for a minimum of two years. Furthermore, each voter had to prove residency within their election district for a minimum of one year. Since many blacks were transient, moving to follow jobs throughout the south, few met the strict residency requirements and lost their voting privileges under the Mississippi Plan.

Those who had maintained a proper residence in Mississippi also had to meet other requirements. All taxes had to be paid by February 1st of the voting year. Even those who met this requirement were sometimes not allowed to vote when election officials “lost” the receipt in the months prior to the election. Under Mississippi's rules, voters also had to pass a literacy test and not have been convicted of certain crimes. Again, these rules prohibited some poor white voters from participating in elections, although the rules were sometimes not enforced for the white constituency. Regardless, it was apparent to all that the harsh rules targeted blacks.

The Mississippi Plan was adopted by seven additional states over the next 20 years. Many of these states added their own exceptions that would qualify white voters who were kept from voting under Mississippi's rules. For example, South Carolina's literacy requirement had a loophole that exempted voters from this requirement if they owned \$300 worth of property. Likewise, Louisiana invented the “grandfather clause” in 1898, which allowed illiterates to vote if their fathers or grandfathers had been eligible to vote on January 1, 1867. This excluded blacks since blacks did not have voting rights at that time. Exceptions like this were the norm as governments attempted to exclude only black voters without violating the Fifteenth Amendment.

This exclusionary attitude infused the South. A series of seven cases before the Supreme Court ruled that discrimination against blacks by corporations or individuals was in violation of federal Civil Rights laws. However, their rulings did not prohibit states from enacting segregation laws.

Proponents of the New South took up the “Separate but Equal” battle cry. Under this agenda, segregation of blacks and whites became common as long as each had “equal” facilities. However, although blacks and whites might both have facilities that served the same purpose, such as public restrooms, railroad cars, and theater seats, the facilities were rarely equal. The railroad cars for white patrons would typically be cleaner and more comfortable than the car for blacks. The state laws legalizing this practice were known as “Jim Crow laws,” named after a black character in old minstrel shows.

These segregation laws were first tested in a case known as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which went before the Supreme Court in 1896. Homer Plessy was a man with one-eighth black ancestry who was ordered to leave the whites-only railroad car. He refused the order and was arrested and later convicted of this crime. He appealed the case all the way to the highest court, but the Supreme Court validated Plessy’s conviction, and the southern states took that as a green light to enact segregation laws on a wide scale.

One Supreme Court Justice, John Marshall Harlan of Kentucky, dissented in the Plessy verdict. He believed that validating Plessy’s conviction would promote aggressive attitudes toward blacks. Such attitudes were already firmly entrenched in Southern society, and as Harlan predicted, the ruling increased the violence. Lynchings, already a common practice, hit record highs in the late 1800s, with nearly 90% of the victims being black.

Two black men, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, risked their lives to stand up against the violence and lead their fellow blacks, albeit in opposite directions. Washington, a former slave, had overcome the odds to receive an education at Hampton Institution, and he later built the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Washington encouraged blacks to keep to themselves and focus on the daily tasks of survival, rather than leading a grand uprising. He believed that building a strong economic base was more critical at that time than planning an uprising or fighting for equal rights. Washington also stated in his famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech in 1895 that blacks had to accept segregation in the short term as they focused on economic gain to achieve political equality in the future.

W.E.B. Du Bois, born after the Civil War and the first African American to earn a Harvard PhD, was one of Washington’s harshest critics. He believed that Washington’s pacifist plan would only perpetuate the second-class-citizen mindset. Du Bois felt that immediate “ceaseless agitation” was the only appropriate method for attaining equal rights, especially for those he dubbed the “talented tenth” of African Americans who deserved total equality immediately. As editor of the black publication “The Crisis,” Du Bois publicized his disdain for Washington and was instrumental in the creation of the “Niagara Movement,” which later evolved into the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Eventually, Du Bois grew weary of the slow pace of racial equality in the United States. He renounced his citizenship and moved to Ghana in 1961, where he died two years later.

Both Washington and Du Bois had loyal followers and both are legendary black leaders for the progress they made—even on different paths—toward equality. Each served as important role models for later leaders of the civil rights movement.