

Segregation and Discrimination

MAIN IDEA

African Americans led the fight against voting restrictions and Jim Crow laws.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Today, African Americans have the legacy of a century-long battle for civil rights.

Terms & Names

- Ida B. Wells
- poll tax
- grandfather clause
- segregation
- Jim Crow laws
- *Plessy v. Ferguson*
- debt peonage

One American's Story

Born into slavery shortly before emancipation, **Ida B. Wells** moved to Memphis in the early 1880s to work as a teacher. She later became an editor of a local paper. Racial justice was a persistent theme in Wells's reporting. The events of March 9, 1892 turned that theme into a crusade. Three African-American businessmen, friends of Wells, were lynched—illegally executed without trial. Wells saw lynching for what it was.

A PERSONAL VOICE IDA B. WELLS

“Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Lee Stewart had been lynched in Memphis . . . [where] no lynching had taken place before. . . . This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized . . .”

—quoted in *Crusade for Justice*

African Americans were not the only group to experience violence and racial discrimination. Native Americans, Mexican residents, and Chinese immigrants also encountered bitter forms of oppression, particularly in the American West.



▲ Ida B. Wells moved north to continue her fight against lynching by writing, lecturing, and organizing for civil rights.

African Americans Fight Legal Discrimination

As African Americans exercised their newly won political and social rights during Reconstruction, they faced hostile and often violent opposition from whites. African Americans eventually fell victim to laws restricting their civil rights but never stopped fighting for equality. For at least ten years after the end of Reconstruction in 1877, African Americans in the South continued to vote and occasionally to hold political office. By the turn of the 20th century, however, Southern states had adopted a broad system of legal policies of racial discrimination and devised methods to weaken African-American political power.

VOTING RESTRICTIONS All Southern states imposed new voting restrictions and denied legal equality to African Americans. Some states, for example, limited the vote to people who could read, and required registration officials to administer a literacy test to test reading. Blacks trying to vote were often asked more difficult questions than whites, or given a test in a foreign language. Officials could pass or fail applicants as they wished.

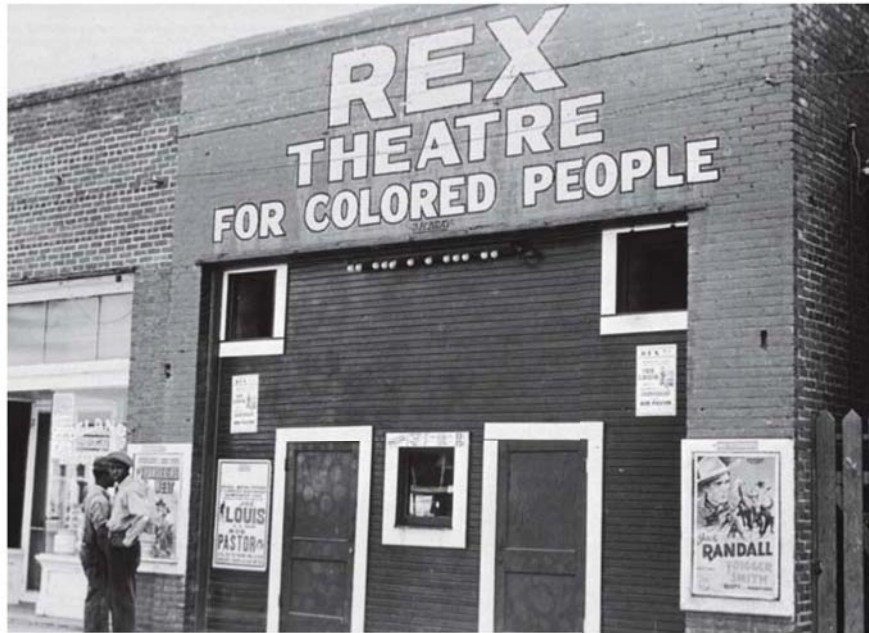
Another requirement was the **poll tax**, an annual tax that had to be paid before qualifying to vote. Black as well as white sharecroppers were often too poor to pay the poll tax. To reinstate white voters who may have failed the literacy test or could not pay the poll tax, several Southern states added the **grandfather clause** to their constitutions. The clause stated that even if a man failed the literacy test or could not afford the poll tax, he was still entitled to vote if he, his father, or his grandfather had been eligible to vote before January 1, 1867. The date is important because before that time, freed slaves did not have the right to vote. The grandfather clause therefore did not allow them to vote.

JIM CROW LAWS During the 1870s and 1880s, the Supreme Court failed to overturn the poll tax or the grandfather clause, even though the laws undermined all federal protections for African Americans' civil rights. At the same time that blacks lost voting rights, Southern states passed racial **segregation** laws to separate white and black people in public and private facilities. These laws came to be known as **Jim Crow laws** after a popular old minstrel song that ended in the words "Jump, Jim Crow." Racial segregation was put into effect in schools, hospitals, parks, and transportation systems throughout the South.

PLESSY v. FERGUSON Eventually a legal case reached the U.S. Supreme Court to test the constitutionality of segregation. In 1896, in **Plessy v. Ferguson**, the Supreme Court ruled that the separation of races in public accommodations was legal and did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision established the doctrine of "separate but equal," which allowed states to maintain segregated facilities for blacks and whites as long as they provided equal service. The decision permitted legalized racial segregation for almost 60 years. (See *Plessy v. Ferguson*, page 290.)

Turn-of-the-Century Race Relations

African Americans faced not only formal discrimination but also informal rules and customs, called racial etiquette, that regulated relationships between whites and blacks. Usually, these customs belittled and humiliated African Americans, enforcing their second-class status. For example, blacks and whites never shook hands, since shaking hands would have implied equality. Blacks also had to yield the sidewalk to white pedestrians, and black men always had to remove their hats for whites.



▲ This theater in Leland, Mississippi, was segregated under the Jim Crow laws.

Vocabulary

minstrel: one of a troupe of entertainers in blackface presenting a comic variety show

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

▲ How did the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling affect the civil rights of African Americans?

HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

WASHINGTON VS. DU BOIS

Booker T. Washington argued for a gradual approach to racial equality—suggesting that “it is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.”

Ten years later, W. E. B. Du Bois denounced this view of gradual equality. Du Bois demanded full social and economic equality for African Americans, declaring that “persistent manly agitation is the way to liberty.”

In 1909 the Niagara Movement, founded by Du Bois in 1905, became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), with Du Bois as the editor of its journal, *The Crisis*. He wrote, “We refuse to surrender . . . leadership . . . to cowards and trucklers. We are men; we will be treated as men.” The NAACP continues the fight for racial equality today.

Some moderate reformers, like Booker T. Washington, earned support from whites. Washington suggested that whites and blacks work together for social progress.

A PERSONAL VOICE BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

“To those of the white race . . . I would repeat what I say to my own race. . . . Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth. . . . 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.”

—Atlanta Exposition address, 1895

Washington hoped that improving the economic skills of African Americans would pave the way for long-term gains. People like Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois, however, thought that the problems of inequality were too urgent to postpone. **B**

VIOLENCE African Americans and others who did not follow the racial etiquette could face severe punishment or death. All too often, blacks who were accused of violating the etiquette were lynched. Between 1882 and 1892, more than 1,400 African-American men and women were shot, burned, or hanged without trial in the South. Lynching peaked in the 1880s and 1890s but continued well into the 20th century.

DISCRIMINATION IN THE NORTH Most African Americans lived in the segregated South, but by 1900, a number of blacks had moved to Northern cities. Many blacks migrated to Northern cities in search of better-paying jobs and social equality. But after their arrival, African Americans found that there was racial discrimination in the North as well. African Americans found themselves forced into segregated neighborhoods. They also faced discrimination in the workplace. Labor unions often discouraged black membership, and employers hired African-American labor only as a last resort and fired blacks before white employees.

Sometimes the competition between African Americans and working-class whites became violent, as in the New York City race riot of 1900. Violence erupted after a young black man, believing that his wife was being mistreated by a white policeman, killed the policeman. Word of the killing spread, and whites retaliated by attacking blacks. Northern blacks, however, were not alone in facing discrimination. Non-whites in the West also faced oppression. **C**

Discrimination in the West

Western communities were home to people of many backgrounds working and living side by side. Native Americans still lived in the Western territories claimed by the United States. Asian immigrants went to America’s Pacific Coast in search of wealth and work. Mexicans continued to inhabit the American Southwest. African Americans were also present, especially in former slave-holding areas, such as Texas. Still, racial tensions often made life difficult.

MEXICAN WORKERS In the late 1800s, the railroads hired more Mexicans than members of any other ethnic group to construct rail lines in the Southwest.

MAIN IDEA

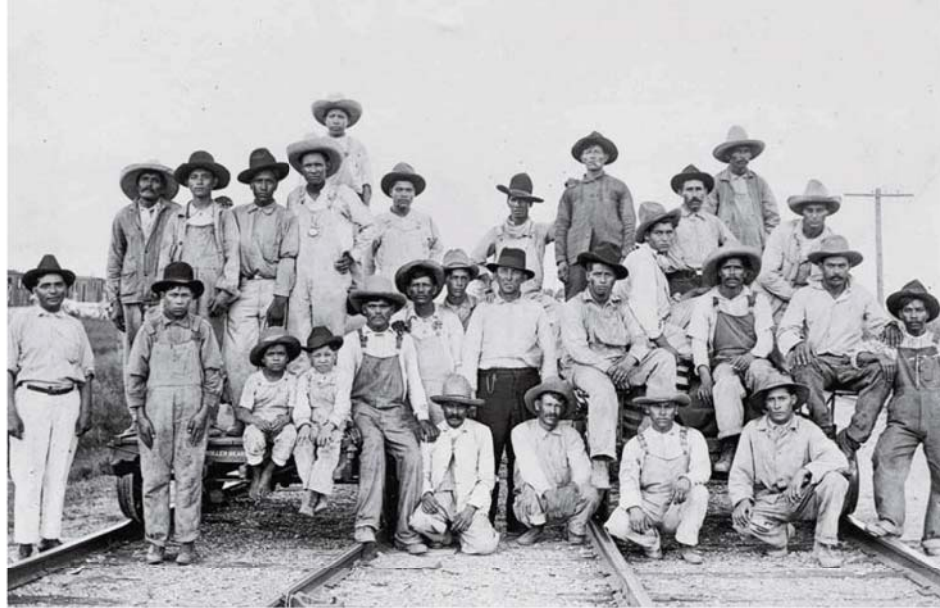
Summarizing

B What were Booker T. Washington’s views about establishing racial equality?

MAIN IDEA

Contrasting

C How did conditions for African Americans in the North differ from their circumstances in the South?



◀ Mexican track workers for the Southern Pacific railroad posed for this group photo taken sometime between 1910 and 1915.

Mexicans were accustomed to the region's hot, dry climate. But the work was grueling, and the railroads made them work for less money than other ethnic groups.

Mexicans were also vital to the development of mining and agriculture in the Southwest. When the 1902 National Reclamation Act gave government assistance for irrigation projects, many southwest desert areas bloomed. Mexican workers became the major labor force in the agricultural industries of the region.

Some Mexicans, however, as well as African Americans in the Southwest, were forced into **debt peonage**, a system that bound laborers into slavery in order to work off a debt to the employer. Not until 1911 did the Supreme Court declare involuntary peonage a violation of the Thirteenth Amendment.

EXCLUDING THE CHINESE By 1880, more than 100,000 Chinese immigrants lived in the United States. White people's fear of job competition with the Chinese immigrants often pushed the Chinese into segregated schools and neighborhoods. Strong opposition to Chinese immigration developed, and not only in the West. (See Chinese Exclusion Act, page 259.)

Racial discrimination posed terrible legal and economic problems for non-whites throughout the United States at the turn of the century. More people, however, whites in particular, had leisure time for new recreational activities, as well as money to spend on a growing array of consumer products.

Vocabulary

peon: a worker bound in servitude to a landlord creditor

SECTION 3

ASSESSMENT

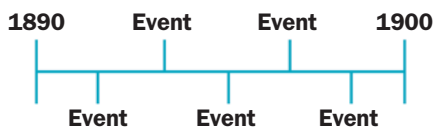
1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Ida B. Wells**
- grandfather clause**
- Jim Crow laws**
- debt peonage**
- poll tax**
- segregation**
- Plessy v. Ferguson**

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Review the section, and find five key events to place on a time line as shown.



Which of these events do you think was most important? Why?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS

How did segregation and discrimination affect the lives of African Americans at the turn of the 20th century?

4. COMPARING

What did some African-American leaders do to fight discrimination?

5. CONTRASTING

How did the challenges and opportunities for Mexicans in the United States differ from those for African Americans? **Think About:**

- the types of work available to each group
- the effects of government policies on each group
- the effect of the legal system on each group



PLESSY v. FERGUSON (1896)

ORIGINS OF THE CASE In 1892, Homer Plessy took a seat in the “Whites Only” car of a train and refused to move. He was arrested, tried, and convicted in the District Court of New Orleans for breaking Louisiana’s segregation law. Plessy appealed, claiming that he had been denied equal protection under the law. The Supreme Court handed down its decision on May 18, 1896.

THE RULING The Court ruled that separate-but-equal facilities for blacks and whites did not violate the Constitution.

LEGAL REASONING

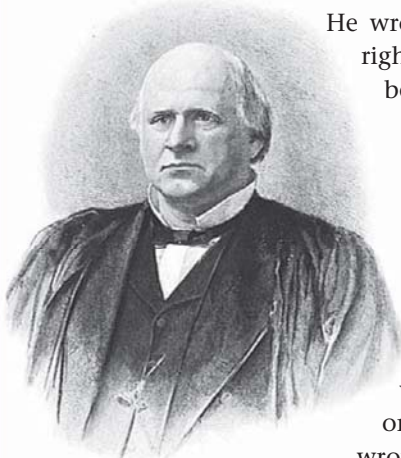
Plessy claimed that segregation violated his right to equal protection under the law. Moreover he claimed that, being “of mixed descent,” he was entitled to “every recognition, right, privilege and immunity secured to the citizens of the United States of the white race.”

Justice Henry B. Brown, writing for the majority, ruled:

“The object of the [Fourteenth] amendment was . . . undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but . . . it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either. Laws permitting, and even requiring, their separation in places where they are liable to be brought into contact do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other.”

In truth, segregation laws did perpetrate an unequal and inferior status for African Americans. Justice John Marshall Harlan understood this fact and dissented from the majority opinion.

He wrote, “In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.” He condemned the majority for letting “the seeds of race hate . . . be planted under the sanction of law.” He also warned that “The thin disguise of ‘equal’ accommodations . . . will not mislead any one, nor atone for the wrong this day done.”



Justice John Marshall Harlan

LEGAL SOURCES

LEGISLATION

U.S. CONSTITUTION, FOURTEENTH AMENDMENT (1868)

“No state shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

LOUISIANA ACTS 1890, NO. 111

“. . . that all railway companies carrying passengers in their coaches in this State, shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored races.”

RELATED CASES

CIVIL RIGHTS CASES (1883)

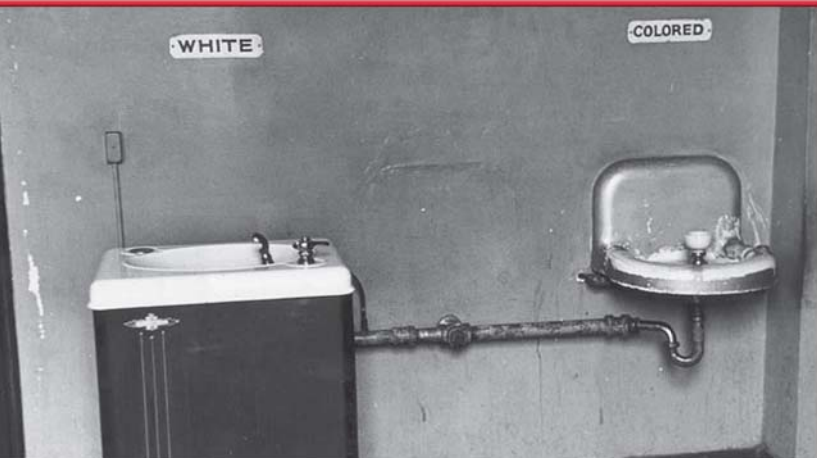
The Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment could not be used to prevent private citizens from discriminating against others on the basis of race.

WILLIAMS v. MISSISSIPPI (1898)

The Court upheld a state literacy requirement for voting that, in effect, kept African Americans from the polls.

CUMMING v. BOARD OF EDUCATION OF RICHMOND COUNTY (1899)

The Court ruled that the federal government cannot prevent segregation in local school facilities because education is a local, not federal, issue.



- ▲ One result of Jim Crow laws was separate drinking fountains for whites and African Americans.

WHY IT MATTERED

In the decades following the Civil War [1861–1865], Southern state legislatures passed laws that aimed to limit civil rights for African Americans. The Black Codes of the 1860s, and later Jim Crow laws, were intended to deprive African Americans of their newly won political and social rights granted during Reconstruction.

Plessy was one of several Supreme Court cases brought by African Americans to protect their rights against segregation. In these cases, the Court regularly ignored the Fourteenth Amendment and upheld state laws that denied blacks their rights. *Plessy* was the most important of these cases because the Court used it to establish the separate-but-equal doctrine.

As a result, city and state governments across the South—and in some other states—maintained their segregation laws for more than half of the 20th century. These laws limited African Americans’ access to most public facilities, including restaurants, schools, and hospitals. Without exception, the facilities reserved for whites were superior to those reserved for nonwhites. Signs reading “Colored Only” and “Whites Only” served as constant reminders that facilities in segregated societies were separate but not equal.

HISTORICAL IMPACT

It took many decades to abolish legal segregation. During the first half of the 20th century, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led the legal fight to overturn *Plessy*. Although they won a few cases over the years, it was not until 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the Court overturned any part of *Plessy*. In that case, the Supreme Court said that separate-but-equal was unconstitutional in public education, but it did not completely overturn the separate-but-equal doctrine.

In later years, the Court did overturn the separate-but-equal doctrine, and it used the *Brown* decision to do so. For example, in 1955, Rosa Parks was convicted for violating a Montgomery, Alabama, law for segregated seating on buses. A federal court overturned the conviction, finding such segregation unconstitutional. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court, which upheld without comment the lower court’s decision. In doing so in this and similar cases, the Court signaled that the reasoning behind *Plessy* no longer applied.



- ▲ As secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, Rosa Parks had protested segregation through everyday acts long before September 1955.

THINKING CRITICALLY

CONNECT TO TODAY

1. **Analyzing Primary Sources** Read the part of the Fourteenth Amendment reprinted in this feature. Write a paragraph explaining what you think “equal protection of the laws” means. Use evidence to support your ideas.



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R22.

CONNECT TO HISTORY

2.  **INTERNET ACTIVITY** [CLASSZONE.COM](https://www.classzone.com)

Visit the links for Historic Decisions of the Supreme Court to research and read Justice Harlan’s entire dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Based on his position, what view might Harlan have taken toward laws that denied African Americans the right to vote? Write a paragraph or two expressing what Harlan would say about those laws.