

# From Terror to Triumph: Historical Overview

By Ronald Davis, Ph.D

## Creating Jim Crow



**Richmond, VA**  
Historical marker  
posted in the 1920s

The term **Jim Crow** originated in a song performed by Daddy Rice, a white minstrel show entertainer in the 1830s. Rice covered his face with charcoal to resemble a black man, and then sang and danced a routine in caricature of a silly black person. By the 1850s, this Jim Crow character, one of several stereotypical images of black inferiority in the nation's popular culture, was a standard act in the minstrel shows of the day. How it became a term synonymous with the brutal segregation and **disfranchisement** of African Americans in the late nineteenth-century is unclear. What is clear, however, is that by 1900, the term was generally identified with those racist laws and actions that deprived African Americans of their civil rights by defining blacks as inferior to whites, as members of a caste of subordinate people.

The emergence of segregation in the South actually began immediately after the Civil War when the formerly enslaved people acted quickly to establish their own churches and schools separate from whites. At the same time, most southern states tried to limit the economic and physical freedom of the formerly enslaved by adopting laws known as **Black Codes**. These early legal attempts at white-imposed segregation and discrimination were short-lived. During the period of **Congressional Reconstruction**, which lasted from 1866 to 1876, the federal government declared illegal all such acts of legal discrimination against African Americans. Moreover, the passage of the **Fourteenth** and **Fifteenth** Amendments, along with the two Civil Rights Acts of **1866** and **1875** and the various **Enforcement Acts** of the early 1870s, curtailed the ability of southern whites to formally deprive blacks of their civil rights.

As a result African Americans were able to make great progress in building their own institutions, passing civil rights laws, and electing officials to public office. In response to these achievements, southern whites launched a vicious, illegal war against southern blacks and their white Republican allies. In most places, whites carried out this war in the late 1860s and early 1870s under the cover of secret organizations such as the **Ku Klux Klan**. Thousands of African Americans were killed, brutalized, and terrorized in these bloody years. The federal government attempted to stop the bloodshed by sending in troops and holding investigations, but its efforts were far too limited.

When the **Compromise of 1877** gave the presidency to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes in return for his promise to end Reconstruction, the federal government essentially abandoned all efforts at protecting the civil rights of southern blacks. It was not long before a stepped-up reign of white terror erupted in the South. The decade of the 1880s was characterized by mob lynchings, a vicious system of convict prison farms and **chain gains**, the horribly debilitating debt peonage of **sharecropping**, the imposition of a legal **color line** in race relations, and a variety of laws that blatantly discriminated against blacks.

Some southern states, for example, moved to legally impose segregation on public transportation, especially on trains. Blacks were required to sit in a special car reserved for blacks known as "The Jim Crow Car," even if they had bought first-class tickets. Some states also passed so-called **miscegenation** laws banning interracial marriages. These bans were, in the opinion of some historians, the "ultimate segregation laws." They clearly announced that blacks were so inferior to whites that any mixing of the two threatened the very survival of the superior white race. Almost all southern states passed statutes restricting suffrage in the years from 1871 to 1889, including **poll taxes** in some cases. And the effects were devastating: over half the

blacks voting in Georgia and South Carolina in 1880, for example, had vanished from the polls in 1888. Of those who did vote, many of their ballots were stolen, misdirected to opposing candidates, or simply not counted.

In the 1890s, starting with Mississippi, most southern states began more systematically to disfranchise black males by imposing voter registration restrictions, such as literacy tests, poll taxes, and the white primary. These new rules of the political game were used by white registrars to deny voting privileges to blacks at the registration place rather than at the ballot box, which had previously been done by means of fraud and force. By 1910, every state of the former Confederacy had adopted laws that segregated all aspects of life (especially schools and public places) wherein blacks and whites might socially mingle or come into contact.

The impetus for this new, legally-enforced caste order of southern life was indeed complex. Many lower-class whites, for example, hoped to wrest political power from merchants and large landowners who controlled the vote of their indebted black tenants by taking away black suffrage. Some whites also feared a new generation of so-called "uppity" blacks, men and women born after slavery who wanted their full rights as American citizens. At the same time there appeared throughout America the new pseudo-science of eugenics that reinforced the racist views of black inferiority. Finally, many southern whites feared that the federal government might intervene in southern politics if the violence and fraud continued. They believed that by legally ending suffrage for blacks, the violence would also end. Even some blacks supported this idea and were willing to sacrifice their right to vote in return for an end to the terror.

In the end, black resistance to segregation was difficult because the system of land tenancy, known as sharecropping, left most blacks economically dependent upon planter-landlords and merchant suppliers. Also, the white terror at the hands of lynch mobs threatened all members of the black family--adults and children alike. This reality made it nearly impossible for blacks to stand up to Jim Crow because such actions might bring down the wrath of the white mob on one's parents, brothers, spouse, and children. Few black families, moreover, were economically well off enough to buck the local white power structure of banks, merchants, and landlords. To put it succinctly: impoverished and often illiterate southern blacks were in a weak position in the 1890s for confronting the racist culture of Jim Crow.

White terror did not end--as some blacks had hoped--with the disfranchisement of southern black men. To enforce the new legal order of segregation, southern whites often resorted to even more brutalizing acts of mob terror, including race riots and ritualized lynching, than had been practiced even by the old Klan of the 1870s. Some historians see this extremely brutal and near epidemic commitment to white supremacy as breaking with the South's more laissez-faire and paternalistic past. Others view this "new order" as a more rigid continuation of the "cult of whiteness" at work in the South since the end of the Civil War. Both perspectives agree, however, that the 1890s ushered in a more formerly racist South--one in which white supremacists used law and mob terror to deprive blacks of the vote and to define them in life and popular culture as an inferior people.

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**Surviving Jim Crow**



W.E.B. Du Bois

The Supreme Court's sanctioning of segregation (by upholding the "separate but equal" language in state laws) in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896 and the refusal of the federal government to enact anti-lynching laws meant that black Americans were left to their own devices for surviving Jim Crow. In most cases, southern blacks tried to avoid engaging whites as much as possible as the best means of avoiding their wrath. These efforts at avoiding whites meant supporting their own schools and community-based support groups as much as possible.

In the 1860s and early 1870s, many southern blacks actually preferred segregated schools, especially their all-**black colleges**, as a means of local autonomy and independence—even though they had little choice in the matter after 1890. Many of these colleges became the primary centers of black resistance to Jim Crow, although their administrators and staff frequently differed over how best to make their stand. At the primary and secondary school levels, truly heroic efforts were made by impoverished black teachers to educate their pupils, usually in face of white resistance that often included violence. Whites were generally so opposed to black education that many states in the South refused to build black public high schools until the twentieth-century. Despite the repression, the literacy rate of blacks nearly doubled from 1880 to 1930, rising from less than 45 percent to 77 percent—an incredible climb from the less than 7 percent who were literate in 1865.

Additionally, southern blacks survived the demeaning character of Jim Crow by organizing self-help associations that functioned as parallel institutions to those in the white community, ranging from lodges and social clubs to life insurance programs and volunteer fire departments. By 1910, a wide range of segregated black institutions in southern communities served as refuges and safe harbors from white terror and violence; these social clubs and lodges enabled a small, middle-class of prosperous black participants to live in dignity and with self-respect.

For the vast majority of southern blacks, the terror of Jim Crow meant that they were forced to live "behind the veil," in the words of the black intellectual, **W.E.B. Du Bois**. In dealing with whites, most southern blacks were forced to adopt accommodationist and appeasement tactics that played out in complicated ways across the region. Scholars refer to these tactics as "dissembling," or a psychological ploy in which blacks assumed positions and the appearances of non-confrontation. Sometimes it meant shuffling and feigning irresponsibility, and sometimes it meant turning the other cheek and walking away. Almost always these appeasement stances meant adhering to a demeaning racial etiquette.

Black customers were almost never served first in stores when white customers were present, seldom allowed to try on clothing in white businesses, and typically forced to wait patiently to be spoken to by white store clerks rather than to dare address them directly. Nor were adult African Americans afforded terms of respect, such as "Mister," "Mrs.," or "Miss." Instead, they endured words such as "boy," "girl," "uncle," "auntie," and often "nigger."

When among themselves, African Americans resisted these insults by mocking whites in song, jokes, and stories. They would even sing these songs of mockery as they worked when whites were present. This reflected a long history of "putting on the man," or playing Sambo, in order to manipulate white masters and better control the otherwise powerless situation of their lives in slavery. Tragically, many southern whites came to expect this type of docile behavior from all blacks, demanding it during and after slavery under the threat of violence. This Sambo character (an innately barbaric, passive, cheerful, childish, lazy, and submissive black) was commonly accepted as reality in both the southern and northern states.

Over time, this Sambo-type image was immortalized in literature and film of the period, usually in the character of Uncle Tom, Uncle Remus, **Jim Crow** and "Old Black Joe." D.W. Griffith's classic silent film "**The Birth of a Nation**," released in 1915, depicts elected black congressmen during Reconstruction as ape-like characters, eating bananas on the floor of Congress. This image was

further repeated in white-produced movies with black film actors often cast as a lazy, submissive, and innately docile character who spoke in the same manner as did black slaves when in the presence of their masters or in the company of whites. That is, taking a posture of docility, holding their head down, and smiling all the time with their hat in their hands when talking to whites. In short, African Americans were forced to assume a multitude of personalities in order to cope with Jim Crow.

## Resisting Jim Crow



**Dallas, 1955**  
Protesting  
segregation of the  
Texas state fair--R.C.  
Hickman Collection

For most southern blacks, Jim Crow was not an easy or acceptable condition for them to tolerate, nor was it always possible for them to avoid whites. For thousands and indeed tens of thousands of African Americans, Jim Crow was met with resistance and determination to win back the civil rights that had been stolen from them after 1876. Often this resistance took the form of individual acts of defiance, and often it took the form of organized challenges. It is impossible to know, for example, how many of the nearly 4,000 (recorded) African Americans lynched (mutilated and burned alive) from 1882 to 1968, were men and women who had challenged Jim Crow by some overt act of defiance. Studies by **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**, the great anti-lynching crusader in the early twentieth-century, suggest that most of the lynch victims were random subjects of white rage. Clearly this was the case in the bloody urban riots in which mobs of whites swooped down on black neighborhoods, burning and killing any blacks who crossed their enraged paths. Numerous victims were lynched on trumped up charges, such as the case depicted in Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

It seems quite likely, however, that many of the black victims of mob violence had affronted whites by some form of unacceptable behavior that possibly included acts of defiance. One such case involved Ida B. Wells-Barnett's murdered friends in Memphis, whose only crime was that of owning a prosperous grocery store. Almost all blacks knew that to stand out in anyway as anything but a shuffling "darkey" amounted to an attack on white supremacy. That is why even some prosperous blacks in some communities lived in unpainted houses, owned run-down and unpainted stores and businesses, and avoided new carriages and automobiles. More than a few black newspapers editors, church leaders, and civil rights' advocates narrowly escaped the lynch mobs, whose members wanted them dead because of their outspoken defiance of Jim Crow. Ida B. Wells-Barnett had to flee Memphis, for example, because she dared to speak out in condemnation of the murders. How many others of the lynched were men and women like Wells-Barnett will probably never be known.

By 1905, the issue of how to most effectively deal with Jim Crow came to a head in the debate between the followers of **Booker T. Washington** and **W.E.B. Du Bois**. Washington, who was born in slavery, believed that accepting segregation for the time being and working hard at farming and in community-based support groups would best enable southern blacks to avoid the violence and terror all around them. He supported and helped found schools and colleges (**Tuskegee Institute**), often funded by white philanthropists, which educated blacks in agriculture and trained black vocational teachers. Such tactics, Washington argued, would in time bring a measure of economic security and eventually a middle-class basis for challenging disfranchisement and the terror of Jim Crow.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, on the other hand, a Harvard-educated, New England-born intellectual, found Washington's appeasement strategy of dealing with whites unacceptable. Although he clearly understood that blacks were powerless to end segregation immediately, he strongly believed that African Americans should insist upon all their Constitutional rights as

American citizens. He advocated efforts, among other things, to educate a talented elite of black Americans to lead the masses in political and economic resistance to Jim Crow.

Du Bois broke openly with Washington in 1903, with the publication of his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which included an essay highly critical of Washington. The split became nearly irreparable when he founded, along with **William Monroe Trotter** (a long-time and vehement critic of Washington) the **Niagara Movement**, which advocated vigilant protest and activism in place of Washington's gradualism and appeasement. Although the Niagara movement floundered within a few years, it helped set the stage for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (**NAACP**), an interracial organization that emerged in 1909/1910, and became the principal voice advocating legal resistance to segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching in the nation. In the 1920s, it conducted scores of lawsuits at the local level in defense of black civil liberties and civil rights, and it also lobbied Congress to pass a federal anti-lynching bill. Although it never achieved a federal anti-lynching law, its constant vigilance and exposure of lynching helped to greatly reduce the number of incidents by 1940.

In the 1930s, the NAACP, under its leader **Walter White** and the head of its legal department, Charles Hamilton Houston, began to focus more of its attention on a campaign to challenge segregation and disfranchisement in the United States Supreme Court. Ultimately, the Association's constant agitation, unstinting legal investigations, and numerous court litigations at all levels of the legal system resulted in the overthrowing of segregation in public schools in 1954 by the Supreme Court in the landmark case of *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education*. This decision not only reversed the Court's support for the "separate but equal" doctrine, it also opened the floodgates through which a sea of civil rights litigation and legislation flowed over the nation in the 1950s and 1960s.

Joining with the NAACP in contesting Jim Crow in the 1920s and 1930s were an array of political organizations like the **National Urban League**, the National Negro Congress, and more radical groups such as the Communist Party. In the latter case, the Communist Party gained significant support in the black community for its energetic defense in the 1930s of the **Scottsboro Boys** by the party's League of Struggle for Negro Rights. This case, which involved the trumped up convictions of nine black youths falsely accused of assaulting two white women, attracted many unemployed workers to the party in the 1930s. Some rural African Americans also joined the socialist backed **Southern Tenant Farmers' Union** in the 1930s in defense of their economic rights in the plantation districts of the South.

In addition to the organized, political, and personal resistance to Jim Crow, African Americans attacked white supremacy in non-political but defiant cultural expressions. The new musical forms of **ragtime** and **jazz**, presented an in-your-face side of black culture that had grown up largely in the shadow of segregation and Jim Crow. The distinctive richness of jazz syncopation and its adaptation of African and plantation-based rhythms to European harmony defied white expectations and the stereotypes presented in the so-called "coon songs" of the Jim Crow minstrel shows. Both musical forms expressed the joyful exuberance of a complex and sophisticated black culture based in the urban centers, especially New Orleans, of the American South.

The rural-based blues music of the Yazoo and Texas deltas spoke more of coping with misery and the "low-down and dirty" side of living as penniless sharecroppers and field hands in the Jim Crow South. The message presented by blues singers in hundreds of southern "juke joints" was one of desperation, anguish, and perseverance—of a "lowdown achin' heart disease, like consumption, killin' by degrees." They sang of a pervasive sadness that was always present: "I've got the blues before sunrise, with the tears standing in my eyes, ..." At the same time, the blues also celebrated the human joys of the black community, including love, sexual desire, and heroic actions in the midst of hard times.

Along side the blues and jazz, a tradition of black protest literature also shouted loudly in defiance

of white supremacy. This literary movement of resistance had begun in the previous century but reached its fullest expression in the **Harlem Renaissance** of the 1920s. Based in Harlem, New York, which was the "New World" (along with Chicago) for thousands of black migrants from the South, the Renaissance featured a "New Negro" poetry and literature that emphasized self-respect and defiance. Its greatest artists explicitly expressed the deepest feelings of African Americans about racism, segregation, and discrimination. The essays, poems, and novels of the Harlem Renaissance rejected sentimentality, romanticism, and escapism to focus directly on the root causes of the crippling plight of black America: white racism.

## Escaping Jim Crow



### Nicodemus, KS

Two pioneers of the famous town settled by African Americans in 1870s.

On a day-to-day level, many southern blacks resisted Jim Crow by hoping for the day when they could escape the Jim Crow South—much as their ancestors had used the Underground Railroad to escape slavery by going to the North. Thousands of blacks had indeed left for Kansas and Oklahoma in the 1880s and the 1890s. The movement to Kansas became known as the "**Kansas Exodus**," and even today there exist several nearly all-black towns in the state. Thousands of other black sharecroppers moved to southern towns and cities in the 1880s and 1890s. Some African Americans even tried to establish all-black towns within the South, like Mound Bayou in the Mississippi delta, in hopes of completely isolating themselves from whites altogether while staying in the region of their births. But the vast majority of black migrants from the South traveled to eastern and mid-western cities and towns, beginning in the 1890s. In a three-year span from 1916 to 1919, in what has been called the

"Great Migration," over half a million blacks fled the South. Another million left in the 1920s. During the Great Depression, when black sharecroppers were turned off the land, thousands of them joined relatives and friends in Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, and Los Angeles.

Many of these black migrants were pushed out of the South by a series of natural disasters, such as floods and the boll weevil scourge which devastated cotton crops from Texas to Georgia. Other were pulled to the North by the opportunity for jobs created by the labor shortage during World War One and the cut-off of European immigration to the U. S. in the 1920s. But it was also the years of pent up anger and smoldering rage that propelled southern blacks to leave the land of Jim Crown laws and lynchings at their first opportunity. Although escaping to northern and midwestern cities did bring an end to the most overt forms of Jim Crow for southern blacks, the North was not a "promised land," one completely free of racial strife. Many white city dwellers bitterly resented the influx of blacks, and violent race riots erupted all over the nation from 1890 to 1945. Major ones occurred in East St. Louis, Houston, Chicago, and Tulsa in the years 1917 through 1921. In nearly every case black people defended themselves and their families against roving mobs of white racists.

In the cities of the North, the NAACP and the National Urban League, both interracial groups, worked to integrate blacks into the economic mainstream of American life. A third organization, the largest mass movement among blacks prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, was less concerned with integration than with economic development. An admirer of Booker T. Washington, the UNIA founder, **Marcus Garvey**, advocated self-help and black autonomy over integration. He also launched a movement to send blacks to Africa that attracted the interest of thousands of African Americans, including many who had moved to Oklahoma and Kansas in the 1880s and 1890s.

Much of the desire to flee the South and to resist segregation legally and politically had resulted from the experience of African-American soldiers in World War I. Young black soldiers home from

Europe found Jim Crow especially grueling, and many of them joined their neighbors and relatives who had moved to northern cities during and before the war, enticed by jobs in the war industries. A similar pattern occurred after World War II, when over a million and a half African Americans left the South for eastern and midwestern cities and the west coast.

Most importantly, black Americans in the 1940s refused to accept a segregated military or lack of access by blacks to government jobs in the war industries. The African-American leader **A. Philip Randolph** threatened in 1941 to lead 50,000 blacks in a non-violent "March on Washington D.C." to secure fair employment in the war industries. President Franklin Roosevelt responded by opening the defense industries to equal employment, monitored by the Fair Employment Practices Agency. Northern blacks were attracted to the Democratic Party in the 1930s and 1940s because of FDR's support for labor, the various welfare benefit programs that aided impoverished blacks, and Eleanor Roosevelt's advocacy for civil rights. This switch in political parties represented a monumental shift from the party of Lincoln to the party of FDR, and it laid the political ground for challenging Jim Crow in the 1950s.

## The Transition From Segregation to Civil Rights



Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The new militancy of black Americans in the post war era ushered in the transition from segregation to civil rights. The NAACP had supported numerous legal battles from the 1920s forward--usually local litigation and investigations of lynching, challenging the unequal facilities of state institutions and laying down thereby a body of legal precedent used by the courts in the 1950s. In 1944, the Supreme Court struck down the **white primary**, a measure used to exclude blacks from the Democratic Party primaries in the South. The number of southern, African Americans registered to vote rose from 150,000 in 1940 to more than a million by 1952.

The transition was complete when the NAACP lawyers convinced the Supreme Court to reverse the doctrine of "separate but equal" in education. Other court cases followed, along with ground-breaking federal legislation, and waves of protests by black and white activists determined to implement the Court's rulings and to end segregation and disfranchisement. This activism became known as the Civil Rights Movement, and the era is frequently called the "Second Reconstruction" because it effectively completed the Civil Rights revolution begun by Congress and embodied in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments passed in the decade after the Civil War.

This incredibly successful challenge to Jim Crow coincided with the de-colonization of non-white nations throughout the world. It was no accident that the great African-American leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, Martin Luther King Jr., drew his greatest inspiration from the non-violent tactics espoused by Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India's independence from Great Britain.

With the passage of the *Civil Rights Act of 1965* and the *Voting Rights Act of 1966*, legalized segregation and the disfranchisement of African Americans was finally ended. It had taken almost one hundred years of resistance to terror and discrimination to achieve what had been promised to African Americans at the end of the Civil War. The struggle from terror to triumph had not been an easy victory, but it was a war valiantly fought--and it was a war in which justice ultimately prevailed.

In fact, so dead is the historical meaning of the word Jim Crow that the average college student today is unaware of its significance. According to a survey of students in American history classes at a major university, less than 20 percent recognized the word at all. And most of them have only

a vague notion that the word once had something to do with segregation.

Yet, if Jim Crow is legally buried, the belief in white superiority and the legacy of segregation and racial discrimination still lives on in the hearts, minds, and actions of many Americans. The recurrent outbreaks of race riots in American cities are telling reminders that voting rights and integration of public schools represent only part of the solution to the problem of race in America. Indeed, the lack of equal access by African Americans to adequate and rewarding jobs, quality education, and affordable housing strongly suggests to many observers that the spirit of Jim Crow still haunts the social and economic landscape of the American nation.