

American History Online

Jim Crow laws

Jim Crow laws refer to the series of laws and state constitutional provisions that made racial segregation a legal and ubiquitous part of life in the Southern United States during the last decades of the 19th century and first half of the 20th.

One impetus for Jim Crow laws began in the 1870s with a series of court decisions. The most sweeping decision was made by the Supreme Court in 1883 when it struck down the [Civil Rights Act of 1875](#), stating that the Constitution did not protect against discrimination by private business or individuals, but only from discrimination by the government. As a result, Southern states began adopting laws to segregate African Americans and whites and limited the activities of African Americans. A series of court cases followed, the most notable being the [Slaughter-House Cases](#), *United States v. Reese* (1876), and [United States v. Cruikshank](#) (1875). These cases culminated with [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) in 1896; here the Supreme Court ruled that "separate but equal" facilities could be provided for African Americans even under the terms of the Fourteenth Amendment. Southern states began to further restrict the access of African Americans by creating "whites only" or "colored" water fountains, restrooms, restaurants, motel accommodations and even by limiting entrances at libraries, courthouses, and movie theaters. These separate accommodations did not by any stretch of the imagination meet the constitutional provision of "equal."

However they continued to multiply and flourish. States began adopting [literacy tests](#), [poll taxes](#), and [grandfather clauses](#) to limit the voting power of African Americans. Aggression at polling places and threats of violence also limited the number of African Americans who voted. Segregation laws further legalized the idea of white supremacy by banning interracial marriages, dating, and even any mixing of the two races in areas such as sports competitions. Among the many effects of Jim Crow laws was to further weaken the economic power and freedom African Americans possessed. Banks were often extensions of the Jim Crow enforcers, refusing to give loans to African Americans and thus making it nearly impossible for African Americans to purchase and own property. Thus, most African Americans were forced to eke out a living in rural areas as sharecroppers, indebted to their former masters. Many fled north in search of jobs and to escape life under brutal and demeaning Jim Crow laws.

For nearly a century the federal government did little to assist African Americans. Some found ways to cope on their own. Towns such as Mound Bayou, an all-African-American community, popped up in the south as a way to escape segregation and violence. Organizations such as the [Niagara Movement](#), which advocated vigilant protest, and movements such as the "Tuskegee Machine," which advocated education in trade fields as a means of achieving equality over time, sprang up as means to deal with the inequality. No organization had quite the lasting effect as the [National Association of Colored People](#) (NAACP). The NAACP advocated use of courts as a way of overturning unconstitutional segregation laws. At its inception the NAACP concentrated on fighting lynching that was occurring with alarming regularity and was widespread even in states like Kentucky that had not joined the Confederacy in the [Civil War](#). The next focus of the NAACP was fighting for the [civil liberties](#) of African Americans. In the 1930s their attention turned to fighting school segregation and, as an extension, the constitutionality of "separate but equal." African Americans used a variety of methods to cope such as legal challenges, public awareness campaigns, and self-help through the formation of their own schools, music and literature, and religious institutions.

The [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) and the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#) ended decades of Jim Crow laws and segregation. Today the legacies of slavery and more than a century of segregation after the abolishment of slavery still shape our country. Years of unequal access have left a disproportionately low number of African Americans owning their own homes, earning college degrees, and achieving economic security. On the other hand, enormous strides have been made and Jim Crow laws have been relegated to the dustbin of history.

Further Information

Dailey, Jane, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon. *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000

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