

## Creating Jim Crow

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**Richmond, VA**  
Historical marker  
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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 paste or burnt cork 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 Enforcements 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 gangs**, 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 formally 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.