

# History of Segregation in America

Throughout world history, one race has often viewed itself as greater and superior to another. The sense of superiority among others created the concept of segregation; the legal or social practice of separating people based upon their race or ethnicity. Although segregation was often perceived to occur in the South, the unjust concept was found in every section of the United States at one time or another. Segregation was a major impediment to unity throughout the country during the 1950's and 1960's. Even so, the separation of races led to the momentous Civil Right's movement.

The concept of segregation was formulated because there were no more slaves after the Civil War. De jure segregation, or segregation by law, is when the local, state, or national laws necessitate racial separation, became widely used after the war. According to Wexler Sanford, blacks in the South faced segregation or outright exclusion from schools, taverns, and other public places (42). After the war, Southern state legislatures, which were dominated by ex-Confederates, passed unequal laws known as black codes that severely limited the rights of blacks. The codes varied slightly from state to state, but they all limited property owning and included vagrancy laws under which blacks could be forced to work for whites if they were considered unemployed (Sanford 43). For example, Mississippi prohibited blacks from renting property in towns or cities and had severe penalties for blacks who did not sign labor contracts consenting to work for whites. Peter B. Levy believed these codes effectively segregated blacks into the rural areas of the state where they were practically forced to become farm workers (89). The government also passed laws that segregated schools, courts, and juries. The black codes successfully, but unjustly, prevented the newly freed slaves from improving their status in society.

In response to the black codes, Congress, in 1866 took actions to remake the South. The Republicans of Congress wanted to ensure that the South was rebuilt with the newly freed blacks as workable members of society. Under Reconstruction, blacks gained the right to vote throughout the former Confederate states and they were even elected to political office in the discriminatory South. By 1868, reformed and integrated Southern legislatures had repealed the majority of the laws that deliberately discriminated against blacks. Noticeable achievements of Reconstruction were the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the 14th Amendment, the 15th Amendment, and a series of "enforcement acts" designed to implement the new amendments. In 1875, Congress passed a new Civil Rights Act, designed to prohibit segregation in public facilities and accommodations, such as theaters, hotels, and restaurants.

Unfortunately, by 1877, the Democratic Party had regained control of the Southern states, which ended the Reconstruction. The advancements and progress that blacks had made-holding political offices, having the right to vote, and participating as equal members of society-were reversed. Since the Democrats were back in power, the South began to impose the racially discriminatory laws once more. The unfair laws achieved two main goals-disenfranchisement and segregation. In order to take away black political power gained during Reconstruction, the Democratic Party in the South began to prevent them from voting. According to McElrath, there were many methods to stop blacks from voting, such as poll taxes, fees which were charged at the voting booth and were too expensive for most blacks; and literacy tests, which required that voters be able to read (2). Since it had been illegal to teach a slave how to read, most adult blacks were illiterate. The Democrats also began to create a segregated society that separated blacks and whites in almost every aspect of life. They passed laws that formed separate schools and separate public facilities.

After 1900, Southern legislators took segregation to more extreme levels. Tackach stated that a 1914 Louisiana statute required separate entrances at circuses for blacks and whites; a 1915 [Oklahoma](#) law segregated

telephone booths; a 1920 Mississippi law made it a crime to advocate or publish "arguments or suggestions in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and Negroes (101)." Arkansas even provided for segregation at racetracks. Meanwhile, Texas prohibited integrated boxing matches. Kentucky not only required separate schools, but also stated that no textbook issued to a black would "ever be reissued or redistributed to a white school child" or vice versa. Similarly, Florida required that schoolbooks for blacks be stored separately from those for whites. Alabama prohibited blacks and whites from playing checkers together. All Southern states prohibited interracial marriages. Georgia prohibited black ministers from performing a marriage ceremony for white couples. Historians generally believe that many southern states had laws providing for segregation in all aspects of life (Sanford 10).

By the time the United States entered World War, the South was a fully segregated society. Every school, restaurant, hotel, train car, waiting room, elevator, public bathroom, college, hospital, cemetery, swimming pool, drinking fountain, prison, and church was either for whites or blacks but never for both. Segregation had gone to extremes where in courtrooms, blacks swore on one Bible and whites on another. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Southerners were born in segregated hospitals, educated in segregated schools, and buried in segregated graveyards.

Throughout the South, segregation had the support of the legal system and it was enforced by the police. Beyond the law, however, there the constant threat of terrorist violence against blacks who attempted to challenge or even question the established order. According to Sanford, during Reconstruction, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the Knights of the White Camellia, and other terrorist organizations murdered thousands of blacks and even some whites in order to prevent them from voting and participating in life (121). The Klan and other white terrorist groups directed their violence against black landowners, politicians, and community leaders, as well as whites who supported the Republican Party or simply racial equality. The threat of violence and the power of state governments made resistance to segregation difficult. Nevertheless, blacks fought segregation at the ballot box, in the courtrooms, and through organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was founded in 1909. For example, the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass gave a major speech to a large, but peaceful, protest meeting at Lincoln Hall in Washington, D.C. In addition to protest meetings, blacks organized the Brotherhood of Liberty to plan legal and political action in opposition to segregation.

Another form of opposition to segregation was the great migration, which began during World War I and expanded dramatically in the 1940s and 1950s. The great migration was the movement of a large number of blacks from the South to the North and West for an assortment of motives including better jobs, better schools, and a less racist environment. It began during World War I, continued during the 1930s, and expanded dramatically in the 1940s and 1950s. The migration changed the nature of black population in two ways such as a massive movement of blacks from the South into the North. The second change in the black population was that blacks in both the North and South became increasingly urbanized throughout the twentieth century. After World War I, blacks won numerous local elections throughout the North. In 1928, in part because of the movement of Southern blacks into Chicago, Oscar DePriest became the first black to serve in the U.S. Congress since 1901. In addition to individual black officeholders, blacks outside of the South began to affect the election of whites. In Ohio, Kansas, and California, for example, blacks helped elect and defeat whites who supported or opposed civil rights advances. The power of urban black voters changed the political landscape and accelerated the pace of civil rights. A final impetus to the reinvigorated civil rights

movement was World War II. The struggle against Nazism forced some Americans to reconsider the legitimacy of racism in the United States. The Holocaust and the murder of six million Jews, merely because of their ethnicity, led some Americans to realize that racism could be a threat to democracy itself.

After the war, the push to end segregation began in earnest, led by NAACP lawyers, veterans, and social activists. Ironically, the first victory came not from lawyers or activists, but from the actions of a single white businessperson. That practice ended in 1945 when Branch Rickey, general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, concluded that segregation in major-league professional baseball was morally wrong. The same year, he signed Jackie Robinson, who hit a home run in his first game and was an instant star. His actions led to the integration of major league baseball. During the 1960s demonstrators in the Civil Rights Movement protested segregation throughout the South and in many Northern cities. The protesters held rallies, boycotted segregated businesses, worked to register black voters, and marched to try to end Southern segregation. Organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were active throughout the South to try to rally people to challenge segregation.

Many demonstrators were beaten by police, and scores were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and other white terrorist organizations. Two important Southern civil rights leaders, Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr., were assassinated by opponents of integration. In Philadelphia, Mississippi, the police conspired with local members of the KKK to murder three civil rights workers (two white and one black) and bury their bodies in a dam. In response to the civil rights protests, Congress passed new and stronger civil rights laws in 1964, 1965, and 1968. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited racial discrimination in public education, public accommodations and by employers or voter registrars. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 suspended the use of voter-qualification tests such as literacy tests and later amendments to the act banned their use. The 1968 act outlawed racial discrimination in federally funded housing projects.

Although de jure segregation was abolished by 1968, de facto segregation was still prevalent in most Northern and Southern cities. Blacks tended to live in all-black neighborhoods, often called ghettos. There were three main reasons for the formation of these neighborhoods. First, housing patterns were dictated by real estate agents, banks, and city zoning decisions. Often real estate agents would not show blacks homes in white neighborhoods while banks often refused to loan money to blacks moving into white neighborhoods. Finally, suburbanization also increased de facto segregation, as whites increasingly left the cities for suburban communities.

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