Historical Background

Jim Crow, or segregation, laws of the late 19th and early 20th centuries effectively divided the American South into black and white in almost every aspect of public life. The laws codified practices that had developed over many decades during and after slavery, and the laws made the custom of racial separation much more rigid. Jim Crow laws extended to restaurants, hotels, theaters, bus stations, parks, public restrooms and drinking fountains, public schools, and the United States military.

The term Jim Crow grew out of nineteenth-century minstrelsy and was first applied to segregated facilities in the pre-Civil War North. While there is evidence of the passage of some scattered Jim Crow laws in the South during Reconstruction, segregation enforced by law did not immediately replace slavery in the aftermath of emancipation. During the 1870s and 1880s, however, states began to pass Jim Crow laws, with one of the first passed by Tennessee in 1875. By 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that “separate but equal” did not violate the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Jim Crow placed a stigma on African Americans and promoted the idea that they were second-class citizens. At the same time, however, Jim Crow encouraged black entrepreneurship and a strong sense of community within black schools and neighborhoods. In sum, though, the costs of Jim Crow far outweighed any benefits. Civil Rights leaders began their effort to dismantle segregation by focusing on the inequality between black and white schools in the South. The Civil Rights movement finally brought an end to segregation by law with the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Negro drinking at "Colored" water cooler in streetcar terminal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma [1939 July]

Suggestions for Teachers

Students today often have a difficult time understanding Jim Crow laws and their pervasiveness a century ago. You can find a wide variety of sources on the Library of Congress Web site to illustrate the presence of segregated facilities, schools, and businesses in American history. You can use these sources to initiate class discussion around this difficult topic.

Begin by having students analyze the sources looking for evidence of Jim Crow. Discuss these questions together: Are there more images that designate “colored” places or “white” places? If a facility did not have a sign, what do you think it was assumed to be, and how would that have suggested a distinction between the races? How might each example of Jim Crow have influenced an individual, both black and white? Did “colored” facilities always appear inferior to “white” facilities? What benefits might some African Americans have found in separate facilities? What would have been some of the practical costs to communities of enforcing Jim Crow? How do the signs make you feel today?
Secondhand clothing stores and pawn shops on Beale Street, Memphis, Tennessee [1939 Oct.?]

Street scene near bus station in Durham, North Carolina [1940 May]

At the bus station in Durham, North Carolina [1940 May]


Railroad station, Manchester, Georgia [1938 May]
Fish restaurant for colored in the quarter cotton hoers are recruited. Memphis, Tennessee [1937 June-July]

Cafe in warehouse district during tobacco auction season. Durham, North Carolina [1939 Nov. ?]

Lunchroom near Belle Glade, Florida [1939 Jan.]

Drinking fountain on the county courthouse lawn, Halifax, North Carolina [1938 April]

Rex Theatre for colored people. Leland, Mississippi Delta [1930 November]

Beale Street, Memphis, Tennessee [1939 Oct.]
Tourist cabins for Negroes. Highway sign, South Carolina [1939 June]

Pleasant Green School--one-room colored school near Marlinton, W. Va.--Pocahontas Co... [1921 Oct. 6]

PLEADS FOR JIMCROW SCHOOL.

Iola, Kan.—Separation of white and Colored pupils in the public schools of this city is probable as the result of a majority—petition filed by the Colored people with the school board here. The petition asks that separate school rooms and Colored school teachers be provided as soon as practical. The petition will be granted as soon as arrangements can be made.

In support of the movement D. J. S. Bass and M. Miller, leaders among the city’s Colored population, contend that separate schools would make the race less dependent upon the whites.

Pleads for Jim Crow School [from newspaper] [07/03/1915]

Colored School at Anthoston. Census 27, enrollment 12, attendance 7... [1916 September 13]

Jump Jim Crow [between 1966 and 1968]

Click here for an audio recording.

Jim Crow Resort? [from newspaper] [10/09/1915]
Desegregation landmark, Little Rock Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas [between 1980 and 2006]

Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn., 1900 - Theological Hall [1900?]

Click [here](#) for more images of Fisk University.

Barbara Blount Hall, University of Tennessee, Knoxville [c1903]

2. View from northeast - University of Mississippi, Lyceum Building, University Circle, Oxford, Lafayette County, MS [1975]

Integration at Ole Mississippi University [1962 Oct. 1]


Hine, Lewis Wickes, photographer. “Pleasant Green School—one room colored school near Marlinton, W. Va.—Pocahontas Co. It is one of the best colored schools in the County, with a capable principal holding a first-grade certificate. All the children are Agricultural Club workers. Location: Pocahontas County—Marlinton, West Virginia / Photo by L. W. Hine.” Photographic print. October 6, 1921. From the Library of Congress, National Child Labor Committee Collection. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004005115/PP/.


Trikosko, Marion, photographer. “Integration at Ole Mississippi University”. Film negative. October 1 1962. From the Library of Congress, Miscellaneous Items in High Demand. [http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003688159/]