

# African American History

## Essential Content

### Unit 5: Impact of African Americans at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

- De facto segregation occurs when widespread individual preferences, sometimes backed up with private pressure, lead to separation, while de jure segregation is separation enforced by law.
- After Reconstruction, states and local communities passed laws that segregated blacks in virtually every aspect of public and social life (schools, trains, restrooms, water fountains, parks, dance halls, barbershops, penitentiaries, restaurants, theaters, hospitals, asylums, institutions for the blind and deaf, cemeteries). As early as 1870, Tennessee, regarded as having pioneered in effecting Jim Crow legislation, passed a law prohibiting interracial marriages.
- Under Jim Crow was the disfranchisement of African Americans, although gradual. Initially, whites opposed to black political equality did not always bother to disfranchise blacks; sometimes they simply used bribery, violence, intimidation, and ballot-stuffing to record black votes for the Democratic Party. In fact, there were enough black voters between 1877 and 1901 to enable eleven black southerners (all Republicans) to sit in Congress. In 1890, however, Mississippi became the first state to effectively disfranchise African Americans, using a literacy test (it required an interpretation of the state constitution) and a poll tax as its methods. Other legal methods used in the South were the grandfather clause and white primary; extralegal methods included violence and terror (for example, lynchings, and riots) and the denial of credit and employment to blacks. By 1915 the combined use of such methods had effectively stripped southern blacks of the franchise.
- Two key decisions by the Supreme Court added to the difficulties that blacks faced during the post- Reconstruction period. In 1883 the Supreme Court invalidated the 1875 Civil Rights Act, contending that the Fourteenth Amendment did not apply to discriminatory acts by individuals or local governments. Even more far-reaching was its Plessy v. Ferguson ruling in 1896, which upheld a Louisiana law requiring separate railroad coaches for blacks. This ruling established the "separate but equal" doctrine that became the key legal sanction for Jim Crow laws.
- The Colored Farmers Alliance was founded as an agrarian association to assist the economic plight of Black farmers in Houston County, Texas, in 1886. It became within five years the largest African-American organization of the 19th century -- comprising well over one million Black farmers with members in every Southern state. The Colored Farmers Alliance, while being segregated from the broader Southern and Northern Alliances, was integrally related to the farmer-led movement which came to be known as the Populist movement.
- An increase in violence against African Americans, especially lynchings, accompanied the rise in Jim Crowism. During the 1890s, lynchings occurred with greater frequency than in any other decade. In 1892, for example, 161 blacks were lynched in the South, the highest yearly total ever (3,446 blacks were lynched between 1882 and 1964).

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- Ida B. Wells – Anti-Lynching Crusader  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8Qr62pANjc&safe=active>
- Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday, Anti-Lynching song [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=h4ZyuULy9zs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=h4ZyuULy9zs)
- The Great Migration was the mass movement of about five million southern African Americans to the North and West between 1915 and 1960. The first significant movement of blacks out of the South, approximately six thousand migrants from Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Tennessee, and Kentucky, trekked to Kansas, where they established, in one instance, an all-black community, Nicodemus (1879). Roughly a decade later, in 1890, about seven thousand blacks from Arkansas, joined the "rush" to Oklahoma. They also moved to major cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle.
- African Americans left the South to escape from oppressive economic and social conditions and to take advantage of the war time economic boom that took place during War Worlds' I and II.
- Emigration to Africa also continued to appeal to some southern blacks. During the period about four thousand left the country and settled in Africa, principally Liberia. Several groups were responsible for organizing these repatriation efforts: they ranged from the American Colonization Society, to the International Migration Society of the AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, to Chief Sam, an alleged Ashanti chief, who in 1915 carried a few hundred blacks from Oklahoma to the Cold Coast (Ghana). These emigration activities provided a continuum for interest in emigration to Africa that was to appear more markedly shortly thereafter in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association.
- Between the late 1870s and the early twentieth century the modern African American community was born. African Americans became more urban and increasingly residents of all-African American neighborhoods, and blacks undertook greater self-help initiatives in order to survive the de facto and de jure debasement received from all levels of white society. Among the social and economic changes was a decline in the size and status of an entrepreneurial class (such as caterers and skilled artisans) dependent on a white clientele and the emergence of a class of professionals (such as doctors and lawyers) and businessmen (such as undertakers and storekeepers) that catered largely to the African American community.
- Greek-letter fraternities were founded (Alpha Phi Alpha in 1906 was the first). It was, however, the fraternal orders that enjoyed perhaps the most phenomenal success; through their "mutual aid" function, many served as incipient insurance companies. In the forefront of this growth were the Odd Fellows, the Masons, and the Knights of Pythias.
- The 1890s saw the rise of Pentecostal churches (Holiness, Sanctified), of which the Church of God in Christ, founded in Memphis, became the largest. Through such churches, located mainly in the rural South, certain slave religious practices rooted in African traditions (for example, shouts, hand-clapping, foot-stomping, and jubilee songs) were continued and expressed in

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forms of worship that included spirit possession, improvisatory singing, and the use of drums and other percussive instruments.

- The nation's two oldest civil rights organizations were formed during this period. The NAACP, established in 1909 by African Americans and white Progressives, used mainly litigation to win equal rights for African Americans and the Urban League, which was formed in 1911 to address the problems (notably employment and housing) that newly arrived black southern migrants encountered in northern cities.
- African American women had a part in entrepreneurial activities, for example, Madame C.J. Walker, a native of Louisiana turned her cosmetology business, which catered to African American women, began in 1905 in Saint Louis and moved in 1910 to Indianapolis, where its manufacturing plant ultimately employed three thousand people. By the time of her death in 1919, Madame Walker had amassed a fortune of a million dollars. A second notable woman was Maggie Lena Walker of Richmond, Virginia. Having successfully managed a black mutual benefit society, in 1903 she founded and became president of the Saint Luke Penny Savings Bank; she was thus the nation's first African American woman bank president. The bank she established, which absorbed the other African American banks in Richmond and became the Consolidated Bank and Trust Company, is the oldest continuously existing African American- owned and operated bank in the nation.
- The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement composed mainly of Harlem-based artists and intellectuals that began during the 1920s and helped make Harlem the center of African American intellectual and cultural life. It is perhaps best remembered as a literary expression; Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston (a Floridian), James Weldon Johnson, Wallace Thurman, and Jessie Redmon Fauset, were among its more celebrated figures.
- Others identified with the Harlem Renaissance were performing artists such as the actor/singer Paul Robeson, singer Roland Hayes, composer J. Rosamond Johnson, and the jazz musicians Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Fletcher Henderson, and Louis Armstrong. They were joined by visual artists such as the painters Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson, Hate Woodruff, Palmer Hayden, and Malvin Gray Johnson and the sculptors Augusta Savage, Richmond Barthe, and Sargent Johnson, as well as such intellectuals as the bibliophile Arthur Schomburg, Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, A. Philip Randolph, Cyril V Briggs, Hubert Harrison, W.A. Domingo, and Walter White.
- Alain Locke, a Howard University philosophy professor and the first black Rhodes Scholar, was the foremost advocate and interpreter of the Harlem Renaissance. His anthology, *The New Negro*, published in 1925, was instrumental in conveying the artistic and social goals of the movement. And another Washington, D.C. resident also exemplified the extraordinary scope and character of black intellectual and scholarly life in the 1920s. This was Carter G. Woodson, the "Father of African American History." Founded in 1915, the Association for the Study of

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Negro Life and History and the Journal of Negro History the following year, in 1926 Woodson inaugurated the celebration of Negro History Week, which in 1976 was transformed into Black History Month.