

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 9: 1870-1920)”

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The period beginning in the 1870s may be one of the bleakest times in African-American history. Slavery had been abolished; blacks had gained both citizenship and the right to vote. For a brief time, blacks held *many* public offices. Then it was virtually all stripped away. White supremacists gained the upper hand in the South through intimidation, violence, and murder. Federal troops were withdrawn in 1877, leaving the freed slaves with no one to protect them. White pastors kept peaching that blacks *belonged* in subjugation. Race-based slavery had been abominable. This ... this may have been *worse*.

It didn't help when a bank that Congress had set up to help the freed slaves failed during a recession. Many blacks had been saving up money. When the bank collapsed, they got *nothing*.

Many African-Americans decided to leave the South. Their destination: Kansas – the state that had fought bitterly against slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War. There were also economic incentives; anyone could develop a plot of land in Kansas and gain the right to purchase it. So in 1877, some former slaves from Kentucky made their way to Kansas and settled the town of Nicodemus. The next year, 2,400 blacks left Tennessee and settled in Dunlap, Kansas, encouraged and supported by Pap Singleton, a former slave who had become a noted activist, businessman, and community leader. In 1879, some 40,000 black refugees fled Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. This group was destitute; they left with little more than the clothes on their backs. It was an Exodus, in search of a Promised Land; they are called “the Exodusters.” Many of them made it to Kansas, Oklahoma, or Colorado. Many others got stuck in St. Louis when white steamboat captains refused to grant them passage across the Mississippi River. Black churches in St. Louis, Quaker relief organizations, wealthy philanthropists in the Northeast, and a Freedman's Aid Society in Kansas all provided much-needed financial assistance to the Exodusters.

Black schools in the South desperately needed teachers. In 1881, a “School for Colored Teachers” was founded in Alabama. Its first principal was Booker T. Washington, a former slave who spent 35 years of his life developing the school. He gained support from many white philanthropists, including Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. He also brought George Washington Carver, a prominent black scientist, to the faculty. In time the school grew to become Tuskegee University.

Blacks in the South were dealt a major blow in 1885 when the Supreme Court struck down many provisions in the 1875 Civil Rights Act and ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment prohibits *states* from discriminating against blacks – but *individual citizens and businesses* may discriminate all they want. Across the South, blacks were prohibited equal access to trains, stagecoaches, steamboats, lecture halls, hotels, restaurants, saloons, public parks and gardens, theaters, skating rinks, swimming pools, zoos, opera houses, horse races, hospitals, infirmaries, cemeteries, and more. In many cases blacks just had to sit or stand in a different section; in other cases, they were entirely excluded. There were separate poorhouses, orphanages, institutions for the deaf and dumb, insane asylums, and prisons for the black

population. Beginning in 1887, these practices were backed up by laws. It was the era of the “Jim Crow” laws – a derogatory term, derived from a song-and-dance caricature of black people.

In 1890 Mississippi adopted a new constitution that created poll taxes, voter registration laws, and literacy tests. The poll taxes were expensive; the voter registration laws required complicated proofs of residency; the literacy tests were arbitrary. Mississippi had found a legal means to prevent many blacks from voting. These laws also reduced the presence of blacks on juries, for only people who could vote were allowed on juries. These laws hurt poor whites in addition to the blacks, but that was a price Mississippi was willing to pay. Over the next 30 years, nine other Southern states passed similar laws. By the early 1900s, only about 2% of the blacks in these states were legally allowed to vote.

Intimidation, violence, and murders of blacks continued. More than 4,000 blacks were lynched in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The perpetrators were almost never arrested or convicted. Sometimes pictures of the dead bodies hanging on trees were sold as postcards. A black teacher named Ida Wells wrote articles for a black-run newspaper in Memphis. She began writing about lynching, with investigative reports that proved it wasn't being done solely to criminals, as many white people claimed. Her office was destroyed by a white mob; she had to flee for her life, and resettled in Chicago. Just this past May (2020!) she was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer prize for her “outstanding and courageous reporting on the horrific and vicious violence against African Americans during the era of lynching.”

In 1895, Booker T. Washington was invited to give a speech at an International Expo in Atlanta. He had earned the respect of many whites because he promoted education and entrepreneurship for blacks, without protesting segregation, disenfranchisement, and the Jim Crow laws. He said: “As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers ... we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” Whites in the audience cheered. Some blacks who heard it cried. There was a division in the black community, whether it was better to fight against injustice, or just accept it. A bishop in the AME Church objected to Washington's words: “With all due respect to Prof. Washington personally, for we do respect him personally, he will have to live a long time to undo the harm he has done to our race.”

In 1896, another important case reached the U.S. Supreme Court. A man named Homer Plessy bought a ticket on a Louisiana railway. He took his seat in the “whites only” car. He then revealed to the train conductor that he was one-eighth black. The conductor told him to leave that car and sit in the car for “coloreds.” Plessy refused and was arrested. A group of concerned citizens had expected this would happen – indeed, Plessy had agreed to be a test case. The citizens group fought for him all the way to the Supreme Court – and lost. The Court ruled that “separate but equal” facilities were allowed by the U.S. Constitution. This resulted in 58 more years of legalized discrimination against black people.

Many blacks began boycotting white-run businesses and public transportation to protest the discrimination. They walked to work, or devised simple wagons and carriages. In the early 1900s, there were streetcar boycotts in 25 Southern cities. But nothing changed, and eventually the boycotts ended.

By the year 1900, there were 8.8 million blacks in the United States, overwhelmingly in the South. 3 million were school-aged, but there were schools and teachers for only about half of those.

There were only 92 black high schools in the entire country. Only 646 blacks graduated from high school in 1900. The education system for blacks was still *nowhere remotely close* to what was truly *needed*.

In 1900, Booker T. Washington founded the National Negro Business League, “to promote the commercial and financial development of the Negro.” It was comprised of black small-business owners, doctors, farmers, and other professionals, and it received financial support from Andrew Carnegie. It helped the number of black-owned businesses to double by 1915. Washington was invited by President Theodore Roosevelt to a dinner at the White House – the first such social invitation to a black man, ever. But some black leaders, like W. E. B. DuBois – the first black man to earn a Ph.D. – felt that Washington’s approach was too conciliatory. DuBois held a meeting in Niagara Falls in 1905 to discuss civil rights.

Racial tensions erupted in Atlanta in 1906, and in Springfield, Illinois, in 1908. In both cases, thousands of whites attacked black neighborhoods, destroying homes and businesses, clubbing, beating, stabbing, and shooting black men and women. Both events were triggered by allegations that a few black men had assaulted some white women. Many blacks were killed; many others were left homeless.

In 1909 W. E. B. DuBois, Ida Wells, and numerous other civic leaders – black *and* white – created the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It grew out of the meeting at Niagara Falls. Its goal: “to promote equality of rights and eradicate caste or race prejudice among citizens of the United States; to advance the interest of colored citizens; to secure for them impartial suffrage; and to increase their opportunities for securing justice in the courts, education for their children, employment according to their ability, and complete equality before the law.” The NAACP, of course, still exists now.

Woodrow Wilson became President in 1912, the first real Southerner since the Civil War. Firmly believing that racial segregation was in everybody’s best interest, he began segregating federal offices.

The Ku Klux Klan was reborn in 1915. The new KKK wore white costumes ... and burned crosses.

The outbreak of World War I led to a labor shortage in many industrial cities in the North. They began offering incentives to blacks in the South, including free transportation and low-cost housing. Many blacks welcomed the chance to leave the South. Their departure was hastened by a series of riots in 1919 in more than three dozen cities. In most cases, whites attacked blacks. The worst incident was in a rural county in Arkansas, where some 200 blacks were massacred. Over *one and a half million* blacks left the South in a 25-year period. They resettled all over the place: Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City, Boston, New Haven, Newark, Buffalo, Rochester, Pittsburgh, Columbus, Cincinnati, Youngstown, Dayton, Erie, Toledo, Flint, Grand Rapids, Muskegon, Saginaw, Indianapolis, Gary, Peoria, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver, and other industrial cities. It was called “the Great Migration.” It was a *radical* reshaping of the racial landscape of America.

What is most striking to me in all this is the utter *silence* of the churches in the South. I’ve read a lot in the last few weeks, and I’ve seen *no indication* that the white churches in the South did *anything* to help the blacks. White churches in the North were sending money, sending teachers, supporting black business and economic development. White churches in the South, as far as I can tell, did nothing to help black schools; they said nothing about black lynchings; they did not object to discrimination and disenfranchisement. Maybe there were some exceptions here and there, but by and large, the Southern white church turned a blind eye to gross injustice. The Gospel of Jesus Christ had been compromised.

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