

ernorship, and a substantial number of congressional seats in 1894. The two major parties realized that these farmers were a force to be reckoned with.

### *American Voices*

Populist organizer Mary Elizabeth Lease (1890):  
What you farmers need to do is raise less corn and more Hell!

### *What did "separate but equal" mean?*

Homer Plessy was seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth black. But when he tried to sit in a railroad coach reserved for whites, that one-eighth was all that counted. Plessy was arrested, in accordance with an 1890 Louisiana law separating railroad coaches by race. Plessy fought his arrest all the way to the Supreme Court in 1896. Unfortunately, this was the same Supreme

Court that had protected corporations as "persons" under the fourteenth Amendment, ruled that companies controlling 98 percent of the sugar business weren't monopolies, and jailed striking workers who were "restraining trade."

In *Plessy's* case, the arch-conservative, business-minded court showed it was also racist in a decision that was every bit as indecent and unfair as the *Dred Scott* decision before the Civil War. The majority decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* established a new judicial idea in America—the concept of "separate but equal," meaning states could legally segregate races in public accommodations, such as railroad cars and public schools. In his majority opinion, Justice Henry Brown wrote, "We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it." (Emphasis added.)

The problem with this fine notion, of course, was that every facet of life in the South was increasingly separate—schools, dining areas, trains and later buses, drinking fountains, and lunch counters—but they were never equal.

The lone dissenter in this case, as in so many others during this period, was John Marshall Harlan (1833–1911) of Kentucky. In his eloquent dissent, Harlan wrote, "The arbitrary separation of citizens, on the basis of race, while they are on a public highway, is a badge of servitude wholly inconsistent with the civil freedom and the equality before the law established by the Constitution. It cannot be justified upon any legal grounds.

"... We boast of the freedom enjoyed by our people above all other peoples. But it is difficult to reconcile that boast with a state of the law which, practically, puts the brand of servitude and degradation upon a large class of our fellow-citizens, our equals before the law. . . ."

In practical terms, the Supreme Court of this period had turned congressional Reconstruction upside down. Its perversion of the fourteenth Amendment had been used to protect corporations instead of blacks. *Plessy v. Ferguson* had given the court's institutional stamp of approval to segregation. It would be an-

other sixty years before another Supreme Court decision overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine.

### *Who was Jim Crow?*

With the blessing of the Supreme Court, the floodgates opened. In the years following the *Plessy* decision, almost every former Confederate state enacted "separate but equal" laws that merely gave the force of law to what had become a fact of life—slavery under a new name. And to blacks and whites alike, the name was "Jim Crow."

Like "Uncle Tom" of the minstrel shows that followed in the wake of Stowe's momentous novel, the name "Jim Crow" came from a white man in blackface. According to historian Lerone Bennet, Jr., a white entertainer named Thomas Dartmouth Rice wrote a song-and-dance tune that became an international hit in the 1830s.

Weel a-bout and turn a-bout  
And do just so  
Every time I weel about  
I jump Jim Crow.

"By 1838," writes Bennett, "Jim Crow was wedged into the language as a synonym for Negro." And the image it conveyed was of a comic, jumping, stupid rag doll of a man.

Jim Crow railroad cars came first, creating the situation addressed in *Plessy*. Afterwards came separate waiting rooms, factory entrances, and even factory windows. Eventually Jim Crow said that white nurses couldn't tend black patients and vice versa. Black barbers couldn't cut the hair of white women and children. Perhaps most damaging was the separation of education into white and black schools, a system in which white schools regularly received ten times the funding of black schools, and teaching was as segregated as the classrooms. Some states failed to provide blacks with high schools, a fact that carried over well into the twentieth century. In fact, there was no facet of life that was

untouched by Jim Crow, even criminal life; in New Orleans, prostitution was segregated.

At the roots of Jim Crow were two fears. One was sexual—the fear, either primal or institutionalized, of black men having sexual contact with white women. In the words of one notable southern politician of the time, “Whenever the Constitution comes between me and the virtue of the white women of the South, I say to hell with the Constitution.”

The other fear combined politics and economics. When the Populist movement threatened to unite poor blacks and whites, the old elite white regimes in the South drove poor whites back into line with fear of black economic power. Voting fell back along strict racial lines. Ultimately, Jim Crow meant the end of black voting power in the South, as restrictive registration laws kept blacks away from the ballot boxes through poll taxes, literacy requirements, and a dozen other technical tricks.

Where laws failed to keep blacks in their place, another technique proved even more effective: the terror of lynching. Blacks were strung up throughout the South with impunity through much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, often but not always on the pretext of the rape of a white woman. Lynchings of blacks became so commonplace that they were advertised in newspapers, providing a sort of spectator sport.

Out of this period stretching from the late nineteenth century to the recent past, the major black voice in America was one of accommodation. Booker T. Washington (1859–1915) was born a slave but was able to receive an education under congressional Reconstruction. Working as a janitor to pay his way through Hampton Normal and Agricultural School, he became a school-teacher. He was clearly an impressive figure who could mesmerize a crowd, as Frederick Douglass had done a generation earlier. Almost singlehandedly he built Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute from a shack beside a church into the major vocational training school for blacks in the country. In a sense, Washington was trying to adopt the rags-to-riches American dream for southern blacks, preaching the virtues of hard work and economic survival through education and advancement into the professions. Critics of Washington, both in his day and later, complained that his

accommodation to and acceptance of the status quo was weak, even cowardly. Others have defended Washington as one man who was doing his best in a time of very limited options. After all, he lived in a time when a lynch mob needed no more excuse to hang a man than that he was “uppity.”

### *American Voices*

Booker T. Washington, “The Atlantic Compromise” (1895):

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: “Cast down your bucket where you are. . . .”

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest of folly. . . .