

Introduction: The Struggle for Freedom

On August 28, 1963, before a crowd of over 200,000 people in Washington D.C., Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the most famous speech of the U.S. civil rights movement. “I have a dream,” he declared, “that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”

The March on Washington has become one of the most celebrated moments of the civil rights movement, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is the movement’s most famous leader. But the story of the fight for civil rights has more to it than large marches and speeches on national television.

Often out of sight of the national media, most civil rights activity occurred in local communities, in states like Mississippi, where thousands of everyday people organized themselves to fight against racial injustice. Instead of one national civil rights movement led by a few, we can think of the struggle of the 1950s and 1960s as a series of local movements for racial justice with many participants and leaders. Taken together, these local movements made up what is called the mass civil rights movement.

As Dr. King noted in his speech, Mississippi had a reputation as the most violent and oppressive racist state in the United States. Mississippi symbolized both the vicious, systemic racism that existed throughout the South, and the powerful black movement that developed in response. The civil rights movement that emerged in small towns throughout Mississippi rarely made national headlines, but thousands of black Mississippians put their lives on the line everyday in pursuit of a better life. They had numerous goals, includ-

ing desegregation, economic justice, and an end to the racial violence and intimidation that cast a shadow over their daily lives. By trying to register to vote, helping civil rights workers, or pursuing an education, local people in Mississippi worked to change their communities with small, often dangerous steps towards freedom.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was just one chapter in the black freedom struggle. As many historians have noted, African Americans have been fighting for their freedom since the first slave ships arrived in the Americas. The Civil War ended slavery in the United States, but emancipation did not bring equal rights or economic opportunities to black people. While the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s spurred the federal government into action and won many legal rights for African Americans, challenges remain today. The black freedom struggle continues.

In the following pages you will explore the civil rights movement and focus on events in Mississippi. Part I examines emancipation, the rise and fall of Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era in Mississippi—a period of racial violence and intimidation as well as inequality. Part II addresses the development of the mass civil rights movement, and explores how the movement played out in Mississippi. It culminates in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s attempt to be seated at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. An epilogue examines the outcome of the convention and the course of the civil rights movement in the years that followed. It also looks at the movement’s accomplishments and challenges that continue to this day.

Part I: The Meaning of Freedom

The story of the black freedom struggle begins with slavery. The North American colonial economy depended on the forced labor of enslaved Africans and African Americans. Their descendants remained enslaved well into the nineteenth century.

In this section you will read about the legacies of slavery that limited freedom for African Americans after emancipation. You will see how state and local governments and white citizens in the South worked to ensure that blacks remained at the bottom of Southern society, and examine how African Americans responded to this oppression.

The Civil War and Reconstruction

In 1861, the year the Civil War began, most enslaved black people in the South labored on plantations (large, white-owned farms). Many picked cotton in grueling conditions for white planters to sell in the international cotton market. Although slavery in the North had ended much earlier, the Northern economy was closely tied to the plantations of the South. In addition, African Americans in the North continued to face racism and discrimination.

The Union victory in the Civil War brought freedom to more than four million African Americans in the South. But the future of black people in the United States remained unclear. The passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865—officially banning slavery throughout the country—sparked questions about the meaning of emancipation. What would freedom look like? What opportunities, resources, and rights was the government responsible for providing? How could African Americans be made equal citizens of a country that had been built on their enslavement?

What was freedom like for African Americans in the South?

For African Americans in the South, freedom meant little without the resources and protection needed to achieve economic independence and develop prosperous communities. Since it had been illegal in most states for an enslaved person to learn how to read and write, the vast majority of freed slaves were illiterate. Most had little more than the clothes on their backs. Black freedmen and freedwomen pressed the federal government to provide them with equal rights



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Many African Americans fought for the North during the Civil War. Thousands of enslaved blacks fled their plantations to join the Union army. The military efforts of black soldiers positively influenced the racial attitudes of many white Northerners, including President Lincoln. They also helped make black freedom a focus of the war.

Part I Definitions

Hierarchy—Hierarchy is the concept of one group being ranked above another. During slavery a strict racial hierarchy developed where whites had more power and higher social status than African Americans, who were treated as inferior.

Disenfranchisement—Disenfranchisement is the denial of the right to vote.

and land on which to start their new lives. At the end of the Civil War, Union General William Sherman set aside land on the South Carolina and Georgia coast for black families to settle on forty-acre plots. This inspired hope in many freed people that they would receive land in the years to come. But the federal government returned the property to its former white owners, and was unwilling to distribute land to African Americans.

Without property or money to start their own farms, most blacks in the South became sharecroppers. Sharecroppers worked plots of land on white plantations in exchange for a share (usually one-half) when the cotton they grew on that land was sold. Most sharecroppers remained stuck in economic dependency and poverty.

White Southerners rejected the idea that freedom meant equal rights, land, and economic opportunity for black people. They did everything in their power to ensure that blacks remained second-class citizens. Following the war, white mobs attacked African Americans, beating and killing black professionals and soldiers who had fought for the Union army. Despite these hardships, newly freed men

and women worked to rebuild families that had been torn apart by slavery and to develop vibrant black communities.

What was Reconstruction?

In April 1865, just three days after the end of the Civil War, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Abraham Lincoln. The job of unifying and rebuilding the country fell in the hands of Lincoln's vice president, Andrew Johnson.

Johnson wanted to return the country to normal quickly. He allowed Southern states to elect all-white governments and many Confederate leaders returned to power. These governments immediately passed laws called the "Black Codes" to control the newly freed black population. By criminalizing unemployment and putting limitations on black freedom, these laws kept African Americans poor and dependent on whites for employment.

A group of Northern politicians known as the Radical Republicans had a different vision than President Johnson. They believed that in order for African Americans in the South to be truly free, the federal government needed to protect them from racist policies and violence, and ensure their right to vote. The Radical Republicans pushed the federal government to "reconstruct" the South before admitting former Confederate states back into the Union.

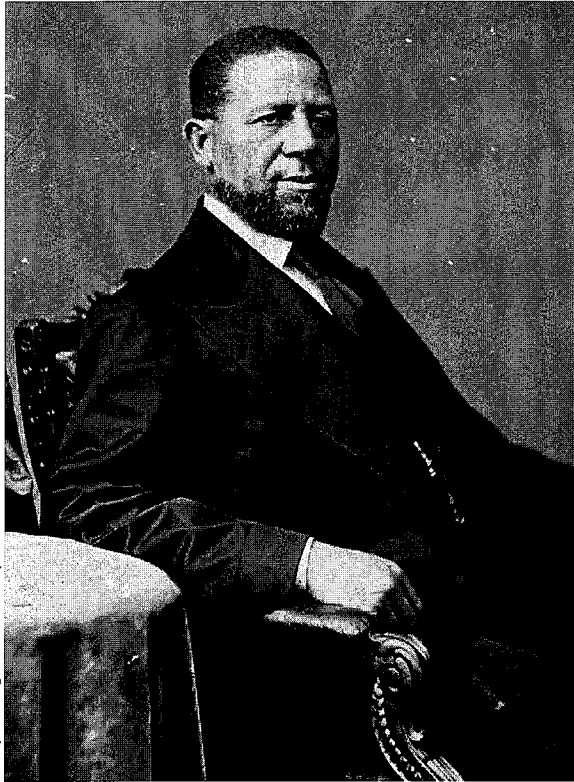
The Reconstruction Act of 1867 allowed the federal government to govern the South until Southern governments did more to protect the rights of African Americans. The federal government deployed troops and appointed military leaders to oversee the region. During the Reconstruction period, Congress

Reconstruction Amendments of the U.S. Constitution

Thirteenth Amendment (1865)—officially outlaws slavery throughout the country.

Fourteenth Amendment (1868)—establishes that all persons born in the United States are citizens, grants all citizens equal protection under the law and the right to due process, regardless of race, color, or prior condition of servitude.

Fifteenth Amendment (1870)—grants all male citizens the right to vote, regardless of race, color, or prior condition of servitude.



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In 1870, Hiram Revels of Mississippi became the first African American in the U.S. Senate, filling the seat once held by Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

passed the Fourteenth Amendment, granting equal protection under the law to all citizens regardless of race, and the Fifteenth Amendment, giving black men the right to vote. These Reconstruction amendments empowered the federal government to demand that states respect the rights and freedoms of African American citizens. Southern states would be readmitted to the Union only after they had ratified the Fourteenth Amendment.

Reconstruction opened up many political and economic opportunities for African Americans. Black voters went to the polls in large numbers and elected black officials to government posts. In some places, 90 percent of registered black voters cast their ballots. During the Reconstruction period, over fifteen hundred African Americans held political office, and sixteen African Americans were elected to the U.S. Congress.

Black politicians, working with a small number of white Republican allies, enacted

legislation that helped African Americans throughout the South. Biracial state governments created public school systems that served both black and white students. The “Black Codes” were abolished. Hundreds of black men served on Southern juries, bringing a degree of fairness to the court system. Reconstruction gave African Americans hope that freedom and opportunity were possible.

How did white Southerners react to Reconstruction?

Most white Southerners resisted Reconstruction and opposed the new amendments to the Constitution. They sought to restore the white supremacy that existed during slavery. (The total control of Southern society by whites was often referred to as “white supremacy.”) Although white Southerners varied in their attitudes toward blacks, most resented the rising status of African Americans and the federal government’s attempts to interfere with Southern politics and society.

During slavery, white slaveholders had thought of African Americans as property, not full human beings. When slavery ended they were unwilling to consider freed blacks their equals. White landowners depended on cheap black labor for their economic success. They wanted African Americans to remain poor, working on plantations as sharecroppers. Many poor whites, who had always had a higher status than African Americans under slavery, did not want black people to rise above them on the social ladder.

To restore white supremacy, white Southerners used violence to drive blacks from politics and take control of all political and economic power in the South. Several white terrorist organizations developed in the period, the most famous of which was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The KKK and other groups used violence and fear to force black elected officials and voters out of politics entirely. While not all white Southerners engaged in or approved of violence against black people, most believed that white supremacy was the “natural order” of life in the South. The few whites in the South who supported the Re-

publican Party's Reconstruction policies were ridiculed or worse.

At various times during Reconstruction, the federal government took action to suppress white violence and protect the rights of African Americans. The federal government's interest in intervening on behalf of African Americans began to dwindle in the 1870s.

How did Reconstruction come to an end?

As the 1870s wore on, federal Reconstruction began to lose steam. An economic crisis struck the country, and the Republican Party grew more concerned with the state of the economy, and less interested in the plight of former slaves. Northern politicians began to sympathize with white Southerners who blamed economic problems and political corruption in the South on the new black leadership.

“It is the dregs of the population [dressed] in the robes of their intelligent predecessors, asserting over them the rule of ignorance and corruption.... [I]t is barbarism overwhelming civilization by physical force.”

—James S. Pike, *New York Tribune*, 1873

Democrats regained control of several southern state governments, due to the fraud, violence, and intimidation used by whites against black voters. These white groups called themselves “Redeemers” because they believed they were “redeeming” their state governments from control by black Republicans.

The controversial presidential election of 1876 marked the retreat of the federal government from the South. In an informal deal—known as the Compromise of 1877—southern Democrats agreed not to dispute Republican Rutherford B. Hayes' election if he promised to stop federal interference in Southern affairs and end Reconstruction. Shortly after coming to power, Hayes removed federal officials from the South. With those officials gone, many of the policies that had helped



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Jim Crow was a famous character in white minstrel shows. These shows used racist humor to caricature black people in the South. The name Jim Crow was later used to describe the laws that legalized racial segregation following the end of Reconstruction.

African Americans during Reconstruction were rolled back. Many African Americans felt betrayed by the Republican Party.

“The whole South...had got into the hands of the very men who made us slaves.”

—A free African American, 1876

How did the Mississippi Constitution of 1890 disenfranchise African Americans?

Violence against black voters was particularly fierce in Mississippi, where black voter participation dropped off more steeply than in any other state in the South.

“[I]t is no secret that there has not been a full vote and a fair count in

“Scientific Racism”

Although there are no significant biological differences between people of different races, in modern times people have used biology to justify the oppression of certain racial groups. This is sometimes called “scientific racism.” Slave owners in the United States claimed that white people were biologically superior to black people in order to justify the enslavement of African Americans. In the 1890s, intellectuals in the North began to argue that African Americans were poor because they were biologically inferior to white people. In reality, black poverty was caused by a lack of land and money, discriminatory laws, racial violence, and other legacies of slavery. The rise of scientific racism contributed to the perception among many white Americans that segregation and white supremacy were the “natural order” of society.

Mississippi since 1875.... In plain words, we have been stuffing ballot boxes, committing perjury and... carrying the elections by fraud and violence until the whole machinery for elections was about to rot down.”

—J.B. Chrisman, white judge from Mississippi, 1890

The Fifteenth Amendment prohibited the denial of voting rights based on race. But in 1890, Mississippi adopted a new constitution designed to prevent African Americans from voting. The state introduced literacy tests that most black people could not pass and poll taxes that most black people could not afford. These requirements for voter registration were usually only imposed on African Americans. By 1892, black Mississippians had been all but eliminated from politics. When the U.S.

Supreme Court upheld the Mississippi constitution in *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898), other states were free to pursue policies that disenfranchised blacks.

Jim Crow Mississippi

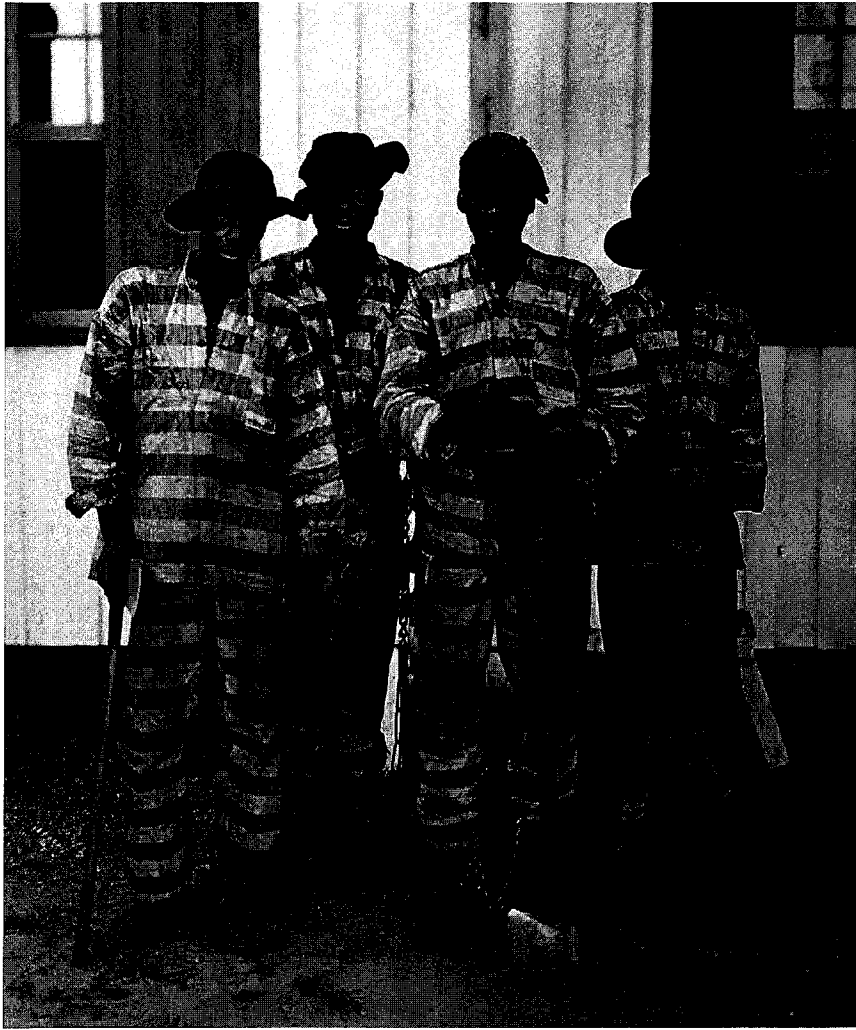
The Jim Crow era in the South—the period between 1890 and World War II—was marked by extreme segregation, inequality, and racial violence. Although the Thirteenth Amendment had freed black people from bondage, African Americans remained at the very bottom of southern society, denied political rights and economic opportunity.

What were the Jim Crow laws?

In Mississippi and across the South, local governments passed laws segregating nearly every aspect of public life, including rest

Convict Leasing

Following Reconstruction, white Southern governments enacted vagrancy laws making it illegal for adults to be unemployed. These laws technically applied to all races, but in practice local police only arrested African Americans for vagrancy. During the Jim Crow period, local jails began to fill up as Southern governments arrested black men at high rates. Looking to make a profit, white businessmen and plantation owners asked the government to allow them to use prisoners as workers on plantations and railroads, and in mines and lumber camps. The government agreed and a new system of convict-leasing was born, giving many white business owners a steady supply of unpaid workers. The working conditions for prisoners were horrendous. As many as one in ten convicts working on plantations and in labor camps died each year. Although some prisoners were white, the vast majority of leased convicts were African Americans. When the convict leasing system came to an end in the late nineteenth century, Mississippi found a new way to profit from prison labor. The state created a large prison called Parchman Farm, where inmates performed manual labor for the state under brutal conditions. Mississippi argued that black inmates needed to learn to become disciplined workers.



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Southern prisoners in the early 1900s.

rooms, public school classrooms, and streetcars. Black and white prisoners could not share jail cells. Hospital patients of different races were kept apart, and nurses were forbidden from treating people of other races. In the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the federal government ruled that segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment's requirement of equal protection under the law. Black and white people could be legally separated as long as they were provided with equal services and opportunities. This policy became known as "separate but equal." But equality was never the reality in Mississippi, or anywhere in the United States. African Americans consistently received vastly inferior services.

Mississippi had a strictly followed tradition of racial inequality and oppression. African Americans and whites typically lived in separate neighborhoods. Local customs ensured that interactions between the two typically reinforced African American's inferior social status. For example, whites used demeaning names like "boy" or "auntie" to refer to black adults, and African Americans had to look down or get off the sidewalk when they passed white people on the street. This code of racial "etiquette" was a constant part of life in Mississippi, and when African Americans failed to heed it, they put their lives at risk.

How was violence used to reinforce white supremacy?

Whites in Mississippi maintained white supremacy by attacking individuals who failed to submit to whites. African Americans were beaten or killed simply for standing up for themselves. Violent white groups also attacked people who symbolized black achievement and political activism. Black landowners, doctors, political leaders, and voters were particularly vulnerable. Following World War I, white groups attacked black veterans returning to Mississippi.

“If it is necessary every Negro in the state will be lynched; it will be done to maintain white supremacy.”

—Mississippi Governor James K. Vardaman, 1907

The official legal system never gave black Mississippians a fair trial, and white mobs often took justice into their own hands. When black Mississippians violated the racial hierarchy of Jim Crow society, white supremacists responded with violence, including public lynchings (executions). White people from all classes gathered to watch mobs torture and hang black people. Often whites justified lynchings by claiming that the victim had raped a white woman, but these accusations were almost always false. Although some white leaders spoke out against violence, the majority of white society felt that lynchings were necessary to maintain the social order and control African Americans. When critics in the North complained about lynching, Mississippi officials responded by blaming black people for not understanding their place in Southern society.

“This is strictly a white man’s country.... If the northern negro-lover wants to stop negro lynching in the South, he must first get the right conception of the proper relation that must necessarily exist between the races and teach and train the negro race along these lines and in this way remove the cause of lynching.”

—Mississippi Governor Theodore Bilbo,
July 1, 1919

Violence and fear were a part of everyday life for African Americans living in Mississippi during the Jim Crow era. Between 1889 and 1945 at least 476 people were lynched in Mississippi, more than any other state in the



Two sharecroppers in Mississippi. Summer, 1937.

Library of Congress. LC-USZ62-106936.

country. Of those, 439 were black men. Lynching made black political activism extremely dangerous.

How did African Americans in rural Mississippi make a living during Jim Crow?

While a small number of African Americans owned farms in the Jim Crow era, 85 percent of African Americans worked on land owned by white planters—most as sharecroppers.

The sharecropping life was very difficult. Though some landowners treated tenants fairly, many exploited them, using fraud, racist laws, and threats of violence to maintain control over their plantations. Men, women, and children all had to work long hours during peak seasons. Women often worked doubly hard, tending to the fields and the household at the same time.

Sharecropping families often spent most of their earnings paying down debts they had accumulated during the year. Merchants imposed high interest rates on sharecroppers, who had to buy most of their products on credit until the harvest payout. Some landlords deliberately cheated sharecroppers when calculating their earnings. In the end, very few black sharecroppers earned enough money to buy their own land. Most remained stuck in a state of economic dependency not unlike slavery.

“Just work all the year long and at the end of the year, what they say—‘You done fine Jim or John, you come out just even.... Maybe you do better next year.’”

—Mississippi sharecropper, 1935

What was life like for African Americans living in cities?

The majority of black Mississippians lived in the countryside. But the black population in cities and towns increased five-fold between 1890 and 1940, as African Americans began looking for work in growing southern cities. While they were often better off than sharecroppers, African Americans living in urban areas were usually only able to get jobs that whites considered the least desirable. They worked as servants, gardeners, cooks, janitors, porters, and bellhops. Black men did some of the most difficult and dangerous work in cities including factory work, construction, and maintenance. Black women were domestic workers in the homes of wealthy and middle-class whites. When whites and blacks did perform the same jobs, for example as teachers, whites received far better pay.

“All the good jobs are for white folks... and the hard ones are for black folks.”

—Jim Evers, father of civil rights leaders Medgar and Charles Evers

Skilled jobs were limited for African Americans in Mississippi during the early twentieth century. Many whites refused to hire black carpenters and builders. Black professionals were also rare, and they usually worked exclusively within the black community. For example, black doctors could only count on black patients for their business. Black lawyers had been relatively commonplace during Reconstruction, but by 1900 there were few still practicing. Judges often excluded black attorneys from courtrooms, and the state’s white bar association frequently tried to revoke black lawyers’ licenses.

What educational opportunities did African Americans receive under Jim Crow?

Without representation in state government, black Mississippians received very few public services. Black students were taught in separate, inferior schools—often in log cabins, churches, or stores because the school buildings were so run down. No state spent as little on the education of black children as Mississippi. By 1930, the Mississippi government was spending an average of \$31.33 per year on each white student, but only \$5.94 on each black student.

Despite the lack of state support, black Mississippians believed that education was key to improving their situation. They often raised funds among themselves and collected donations from northern philanthropists to raise money for schoolhouses and supplies. Black teachers developed innovative ways of teaching with few resources and were often highly respected members of the black community.

“All the black folks understood that their passport to a better community was a good education.... It was a general position of my parents and other parents of that generation, that if we got an education, we would be free.”

—James Miller, black Mississippian, 1994

Black schools rarely went beyond the eighth grade. In 1916, there were no four-year black public high schools in all of Mississippi, and only a few black universities. Many white leaders feared that if black children received a good education they would be able to pass the voter registration tests and challenge the strict racial hierarchy of southern society. They argued that black students did not need to be educated in math, literature, or the sciences. If they promoted black education at all, white southerners advocated for agricultural and industrial education that would train black youth to be “efficient,” “disciplined” workers with good manners and hygiene.

“People talk about elevating the race by education...it comes pretty nearly [to] being criminal folly. The negro isn’t permitted to advance, and their education only spoils a good field hand.”

—James K. Vardaman, future governor of Mississippi, 1889

Living with Jim Crow

Black Mississippians responded to the hostile realities of Jim Crow in a variety of ways. Sometimes they fled to states they thought would offer a better life. They also developed strategies for surviving within an oppressive society and fighting back against inequality and injustice. The next section is

divided into three parts that describe African Americans’ different responses to the harsh realities of Jim Crow—survival, flight, and resistance. Sometimes these strategies overlapped. In a society that prevented black people from living healthy, prosperous lives, surviving could be an act of resistance, and flight could be a matter of survival.

■ Survival

African Americans developed a variety of ways to cope with the oppressive nature of Mississippi society. Black children learned at a young age how to avoid provoking whites—to stare at the ground when speaking to white people, to refer to all whites with titles of respect, and to hold back when a white person insulted them. Only in the safety of all-black spaces could African Americans freely speak their minds and act as they pleased.

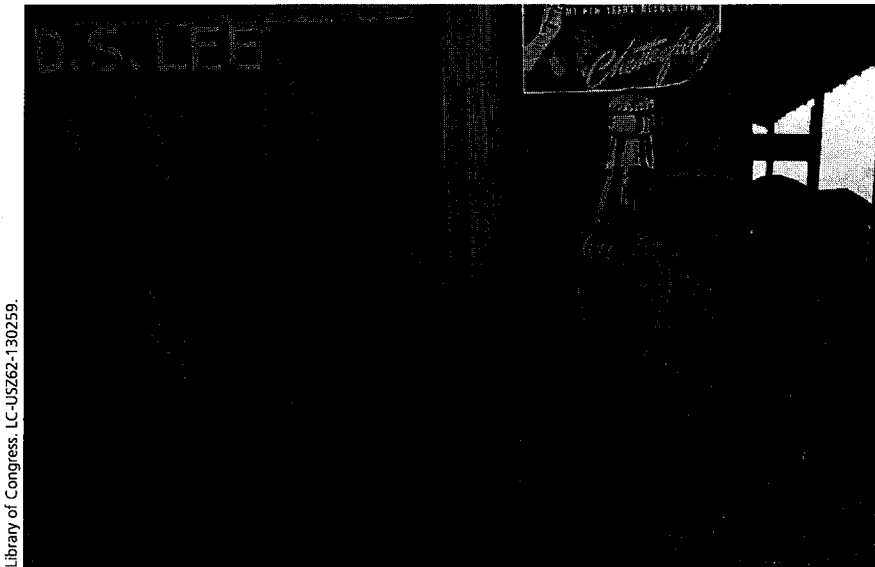
“When you are in front of white people, think before you act, think before you speak. Your way of doing things is all right among our people, but not for white people. They won’t stand it.”

—Richard Wright, renowned African American novelist, recalling the advice his school principal gave to him when he was a child

Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington was one of the most famous black leaders during the Jim Crow era. Born a slave, he worked his way through college and eventually established the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama—an industrial school that taught young black men to be well-mannered, hard-working laborers. Washington wanted to train black people for the difficult manual labor jobs that were available to them at the time. He believed that black people needed to prove that they were responsible and diligent workers before they could demand political rights. Prominent white businessmen funded Washington’s educational programs. But many black leaders criticized his reluctance to challenge white supremacy.

After the release of Washington’s autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, President Theodore Roosevelt invited him to visit the White House. Some Southern whites were unwilling to see any African American, no matter how moderate, getting national attention. Extreme racist leaders in the South criticized Roosevelt for showing such respect to a black man.



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Residents of Mound Bayou, Mississippi in front of a general store in January 1939. Established in 1887, Mound Bayou was one of a number of all-black towns founded across the South and West in this period. Mound Bayou's founders wanted to create a community where they could control their own affairs free from white interference. The town was home to six hundred residents, a town hall, a bank, a telephone company, a newspaper, and more than forty small businesses. Mound Bayou exists to this day.

Although most African Americans resented the injustice of Jim Crow laws, few black Mississippians wanted complete integration. Racial separation gave them the opportunity to live apart from hostile whites.

Black Mississippians developed churches, schools, and social clubs that served only black people. These institutions were important spaces for socializing away from whites. The church provided a place for political and social gatherings, and brought people together to talk about their daily struggles. Women played an important role in many of these institutions, passing on local knowledge and history that helped to unify the black community and encourage racial pride.

Seeking to free themselves from dependence on white people, black Mississippians also started their own insurance companies, banks, and a variety of small businesses that exclusively served the black population. Despite these efforts, the majority of African Americans remained impoverished during the period. Black companies often lacked start-up funds, and struggled to keep their prices low

enough to compete with white businesses. In 1929, despite making up over half of Mississippi's population, African Americans owned just 12 percent of the businesses and accounted for less than 1 percent of the state's total sales.

Why did some black leaders try to work with moderate whites?

Booker T. Washington was part of a group of black leaders who believed that African Americans needed to take responsibility for working themselves out of poverty. These leaders thought that aggressively confronting the injustices of Jim Crow society would be dangerous and ineffective. They felt that progress towards racial equality could only happen slowly, and that the best way for African Americans to improve their lives was through hard work and self-discipline.

These leaders placed their hopes for African Americans in moderate white politicians. They thought that racism was primarily a problem with poorer, less educated whites. If they could show that African Americans were intelligent and hardworking, they felt they would win the respect of the educated white population and eventually win black political rights. But throughout the Jim Crow period, whites from all classes worked to keep black Mississippians at the very bottom of society.

Moderate white leaders praised figures like Booker T. Washington for their nonconfrontational stance on racial issues. But some black leaders called them "accommodationists" or "gradualists" for being content to wait for change and unwilling to challenge white supremacy.

■ Flight

Many African Americans opted to escape the hardship of Jim Crow life through migration. Since the early Jim Crow period a steady stream of black people had migrated out of Mississippi. In 1915, this stream grew into a flood. Between 1915 and 1920, 500,000 African Americans left the South—100,000 of them from Mississippi. In total, from 1910 to 1960, nearly one million black people left Mississippi seeking a better life—more than the state’s entire black population in 1900. This pattern of black movement from the South to the North was called the Great Migration.

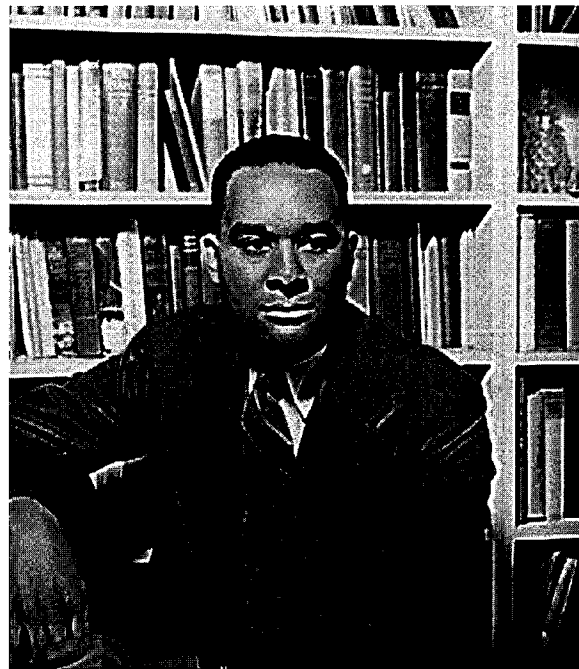
What factors contributed to black migration northward?

Although racial violence and injustice played a role, the causes of black migration were largely economic. During World War I, northern manufacturers needed more workers to provide supplies to the military. They also hoped to use the influx of black workers to force wages down. As a result, many black migrants faced hostility from northern white workers.

Companies sent advertisements to the South to try to convince black workers to make the trip north. Sharecroppers stuck in endless debt, manual laborers working long hours, and domestic workers paid as little as two dollars a week all responded to the call of steady jobs, higher pay, and better conditions in the North.

“I’ve been working here for a dollar and four bits a day that’s good wages for a [black person] in Jackson. Flour is costing me nearly two dollars a sack, meat is so high I can’t eat it. I am leaving because I can’t buy food...on what I make. If you white folks want [black people] to stay in the South you will have to...pay us more money.”

—A black Mississippian, July 22, 1917



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Writer and poet Richard Wright, 1943. The Great Migration brought various black artists from the South to the North. Wright moved from Mississippi to Chicago and then to New York and Paris. His autobiography, *Black Boy*, details his experiences of the physical and emotional violence of racism in Mississippi.

How did the Great Migration affect Mississippi?

The steady stream of African Americans to Northern cities hurt black communities in the South. Most of the migrants were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four and many had received a basic education. A high number of women left to seek domestic employment in northern homes. The migrants left behind a disproportionate number of children, elderly, and poorly educated people.

Some white Mississippians initially expressed happiness to see black people leaving the region. But businessmen and plantation owners soon realized that they were losing an essential labor force. They tried to prevent African Americans from leaving the state by banning Northern employers from advertising. They spread propaganda that described the poor conditions of life in the North, and sometimes forcefully prevented black people from getting on trains. Their efforts were largely

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The blues, a musical style developed by African Americans in the Mississippi Delta and the South, also traveled North during the Great Migration. It became popular in Northern cities like Chicago and inspired the most famous rock and roll bands. One of the great blues artists was Muddy Waters, pictured above in 1971. Waters was born in 1915 in Mississippi and moved to Chicago in 1940.

ineffective. The flow of black people to the North continued throughout the early twentieth century.

What was life like for black migrants in the North?

Escaping to northern cities like Chicago and New York brought an end to much of the daily violence and humiliation that black people faced in Mississippi. Black migrants wrote letters to their families back home, describing the freedom and dignity of their new lives.

“I should have been here twenty years ago. I just begin to feel like a man. It’s a great deal of pleasure in knowing that you have got some privilege. My children are going to

the same school with the whites and I don’t have to [h]umble to no one. I have registered—will vote the next election and there isn’t any ‘yes sir’ and ‘no sir’—it’s all yes and no and Sam and Bill.”

—A black migrant in Chicago, writing to family in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 1917

But the North was no “promised land.” Racism and discrimination existed in the North as well. Black people often remained impoverished, usually confined to low-paying factory work and manual labor. Many urban whites resented the arrival of black workers. Race riots broke out in some northern cities, including Chicago and St. Louis. Whites attacked and killed black residents and set fire to homes and businesses.

■ **Resistance**

Many white Mississippians believed that African Americans were content under Jim Crow. In reality the majority of black Mississippians longed to fight back against a system that kept black people poor, uneducated, landless, and without representation in government. Although it was often extremely dangerous, many black people found ways to resist the injustices that marked their daily lives.

How did black people fight for their voting rights?

Throughout the Jim Crow era, black Mississippians asserted their desire for political representation.

“We want only one thing, primarily... that is the ballot. Ballot everywhere. My people cannot vote down here.... We want the damnable curse of disenfranchisement in primary elections removed in every form of state government.”

—C.E. Johnson,
a black Mississippian, 1920

Despite the risk of violence, African American citizens continued to go to the polls and demand the ballot. After the U.S. government granted women the right to vote in 1920, black women began trying to vote. Some communities organized night schools in an attempt to help blacks pass the literacy tests that barred them from registering. Others went to court to challenge the laws that restricted their ability to vote. Black political leaders across the country called on the federal government to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment.

Attempts to resist the system that disenfranchised thousands of black voters had little effect. From 1890 to World War II, only a small fraction of the black population was able to overcome the difficult barriers to voting. Black people remained unrepresented by the all-white Mississippi government.

How did black farm workers resist the sharecropping system?

Despite extreme danger, some black sharecroppers and farmers organized unions and cooperatives to fight for their rights as workers. In the 1930s, hundreds of Mississippi farmers joined the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to fight against the dependency and poverty of the sharecropping system.

White resistance to black sharecroppers' unions was particularly intense in Mississippi. White landlords had the local police arrest union members or force them out of the state. By the 1940s, they had effectively crushed the union movement in Mississippi.

Black workers also used other, less dangerous methods to fight back against injustice. Just as their ancestors had under slavery, black field workers found ways to frustrate white employers. For example, they would deliberately work slowly, sabotage equipment, and pretend to be sick. In these ways, field workers were able to limit white planters' ability to control their lives.

In addition, the vast majority of black Mississippians kept guns in their homes. Although armed resistance could be extremely

dangerous, the fact that black families were armed deterred some racist violence.

How did black Mississippians resist the segregation of public spaces?

Black Mississippians usually protested the lack of racial equality rather than segregation itself. They understood that white leaders would be more likely to support equitable services than the end of racial segregation. But some black Mississippians came to believe that equality could not be achieved if black and white people were constantly separated, and they fought to end the segregation of public spaces.

“No grander lie was ever enacted into law than that that declares for ‘separate but equal accommodations’.... Separation presupposes and invites inequalities.”

—A black Mississippian, 1917

In January 1904, under pressure from white voters, the Mississippi legislature declared that street trolleys needed to provide separate cars or compartments for black passengers. This new “Jim Crow car” was often crowded and left uncleaned. Blacks in five of the seven Mississippi cities with streetcars organized a boycott, refusing to ride the trolleys. Although the boycott did not succeed in integrating the trolleys, it represented strong, organized resistance to segregation. Over time, more African Americans in Mississippi and around the country came to see segregation as a moral injustice.

What was the NAACP?

Nationally, a growing population of black leaders began to advocate for direct challenges to the Jim Crow system. One of these leaders was W.E.B. Du Bois, an intellectual who graduated from Harvard University. In 1903, he published the book *The Souls of Black Folk*. The book criticized Booker T. Washington's philosophy of self-help and accommodation,

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Visual Materials from the NAACP Records. LC-DIG-ppmsca-09705.



A flag flown from the window of the NAACP headquarters in New York City, 1936. The NAACP sought to raise awareness in the North about lynching in Southern states.

and advocated for the black right to vote and an end to racial discrimination.

In 1909, W.E.B. Du Bois and a coalition of civil rights supporters founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—one of the primary organizations advocating for black rights throughout the twentieth century and into the present day. The NAACP became the channel for resisting Jim Crow in the court of law. NAACP legal teams provided representation for black criminal defendants, protected black civil liberties, challenged the exclusion of blacks from juries, and fought for equal salaries for black public school teachers.

The NAACP also launched a campaign to end lynching in the South. The organization's newspaper, *The Crisis*, published accounts of lynching, exposing the horrors of Jim Crow for the world to see. The NAACP pushed the federal government to pass anti-lynching legislation, but southern senators defeated the bill by arguing that a federal anti-lynching law

would violate the rights of individual states to make their own laws.

Why was resistance to Jim Crow more difficult in Mississippi than in other states?

The NAACP established branches in major cities throughout the South. But until World War II it was never able to sustain more than five offices in Mississippi—less than any state in the South. In Georgia, Alabama, and Arkansas, the NAACP organized voter registration drives, “don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns, and protests against police brutality and racial inequality. None of

this was possible in Mississippi. White opposition to black political groups was so intense, and the possibility of violent backlash so great, that NAACP branches in Mississippi needed to operate almost entirely in secret. In Mississippi, a meaningful challenge to white supremacy was not yet possible.

In Part I, you have read about the end of slavery and the Civil War. You considered the progress made by African Americans during the Reconstruction era, and saw the ways in which many of those gains were lost through the Jim Crow system that developed in the South. You examined what life was like for African Americans living in Jim Crow Mississippi. In Part II, you will read about the rise of a mass movement for civil rights in the United States, with a focus on the local movement in Mississippi. As you read, remember to reflect back on Part I, and the nature of the Jim Crow society that African Americans were fighting to change.