

# African Americans in North Carolina

## EDUCATOR NOTEBOOK



### JIM CROW DAYS

“Jim Crow” is a term associated with the racial and social climate that evolved in the United States following Civil War Reconstruction, when legislatures across the south began creating and enacting laws that defined legal segregation and made racial separation the norm. The 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in particular, established a “separate but equal” precedent that allowed for decades of Jim Crow legislation. The ruling not only led to an erosion in the civil rights that had been gained by minority people after the Civil War but also allowed governments, businesses, organizations, and individuals to legally and openly discriminate on the basis of race and color *as long as* another “separate but equal” allowance or opportunity was provided.

In the early years of Reconstruction, Lincoln’s Republican party controlled most national elected offices and introduced policies that strengthened programs and opportunities for minorities, especially formerly enslaved persons. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, however, North Carolina Democrats maintained strength in the General Assembly and passed laws (many with the help of bribery, intimidation, and fraud) that influenced voter registration and the voting process. By the 1890s, though, the Democrats were being challenged by a coalition of Populist-party politicians (supported primarily by farmers) and Republicans. This “Fusion” coalition enabled slates of Republicans to be elected to power in 1894, and they worked to overturn laws that restricted voting rights and to pass new legislation that expanded voting rights for illiterate whites and blacks and for blacks in general. That progress came to an end in the 1898 election—partially through a white supremacy campaign of violence and intimidation—and resulted in the Democratic Party regaining control of the General Assembly.

To assure their continued power, the new Democratic legislature quickly approved wording for a constitutional amendment that would restrict voting rights, again, and authorized a special election be held in August 1900 to approve and ratify the “Suffrage Amendment” to North Carolina’s 1868 Reconstruction-era constitution. The amendment passed and instituted a poll tax for anyone who wished to vote, along with a literacy requirement—though a grandfather clause allowed illiterate white men to vote. Still,

poor whites could not afford to vote; in addition, with “men of color” effectively disenfranchised, the governorship returned to Democratic control in 1900, and Republican Congressman George H. White, who had represented nine counties in the Coastal Plain, lost his seat—he was the last African American to sit in Congress until 1929.

Between 1900 and 1902, white voter turnout plummeted and black turnout was almost nonexistent; still that was only the start of Jim Crow. After eliminating voting rights, laws were enacted over the years that *required* separation, or segregation, of races—especially African Americans from whites but also American Indians and other “non-white” citizens from white citizens: on trains, and, eventually, on buses; in movie houses, in restaurants, and in hotels. Separate libraries and recreational facilities had to be built, if funding could be found; if no funding was available, an institution was built just for whites—or it was built with one space for whites and separate space for minorities, and the spaces had separate entrances, separate staffs, separate water fountains and amenities, and separate purpose areas: one for whites and another for minorities. In many areas, separate fire stations existed to serve white *or* black residents, and even hospitals and banks were segregated, to serve white but not “colored” citizens—or vice-versa.

These Jim Crow laws, as they were commonly known, formed a complex web of legislation that mandated—with some violations being harshly punishable—lines to separate the races. Over several decades, race-based legislation became entrenched in society, and by the mid-1900s it impacted everyday customs and practices.

Perhaps the most harmful of all segregationist practices was the Jim Crow treatment of education. Schools for African American children never approached the “equal” in the “separate but equal” ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. While entirely separate school systems had existed in North Carolina during the 1800s, school segregation now became entrenched, with separate bureaucracies and separate funding by the legislature—but funding for black schools was always lacking; American Indian schools fared even worse. Supplies and textbooks were often old and outdated, having been used in white schools for many years, and teachers of minorities earned lower salaries than teachers in white schools. Eventually, the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional and had to end, served as a step in starting the process of ending legal separation.

Despite the restrictions of Jim Crow, African Americans in North Carolina worked hard to gain educations and to create business and social communities. In Durham, for example, African American institutions were thriving in the 1920s. Author and activist W. E. B. Du Bois even recognized that Durham’s “social and economic development is perhaps more striking than that of any similar group in the nation.” In addition, African

American educators Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Mary McLeod Bethune emerged as nationally known speakers, each promoting education as a means for racial improvement.

Throughout this time period, African Americans organized to end segregation and Jim Crow; their efforts beginning with boycotts in the 1930s, continuing with returning soldiers from World War II, and strengthening with *Brown v. Board of Education* to culminate in the Civil Rights movement and the slow demise of Jim Crow—and the offensive, inflammatory term—during the 1960s.

Articles from the *Tar Heel Junior Historian* magazine can be read aloud, or they can be copied so students can read them individually; the *NCPedia* article can be printed. Lesson plans accompany some articles.

1. “Assigned Places,” by Flora Hatley Wadelington. *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, Spring 2004.
  - Lesson Plan: Understanding Jim Crow, the Character
  - Lesson Plan: Voting Under Jim Crow
2. “What One Young African American Woman Could Do: The Story of Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown and the Palmer Memorial Institute,” by Charles W. Wadelington. *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, Fall 1995.
  - Lesson Plan: Charlotte Hawkins Brown—School Rules, Then and Now
3. “Wilmington Race Riot,” by LeRae Umfleet. *NCPedia*, posted September 17, 2010.
  - Lesson Plan: What Do You Know? Wilmington Race Riot
4. “Middle-Class Durham during the Age of Jim Crow,” by Beverly W. Jones. *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, Fall 1995.
  - Lesson Plan: Durham: A Thriving Community
5. “The Great Migration and North Carolina,” by Dr. Shepherd W. McKinley and Cynthia Risser McKinley. *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, Spring 2006.
6. “Challenging the Chain Stores,” by Dr. Lisa Tolbert. *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, Spring 2007.
7. “Work and Opportunity: African Americans in the CCC,” by Dr. Olen Cole Jr. *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, Spring 2010.