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# SPECIAL SECTION ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

## The Black Civil Rights Movement

by George Burson

*This article is part of the Aspen High School curriculum about the civil rights movement. It attempts to present the civil rights movement from a historical perspective by dealing with the following questions: 1) Why were blacks segregated and disenfranchised prior to the movement? 2) Why did the movement take place during the 1950s and 1960s? 3) What were the immediate results of the movement? 4) What is the present condition of blacks in American society?*

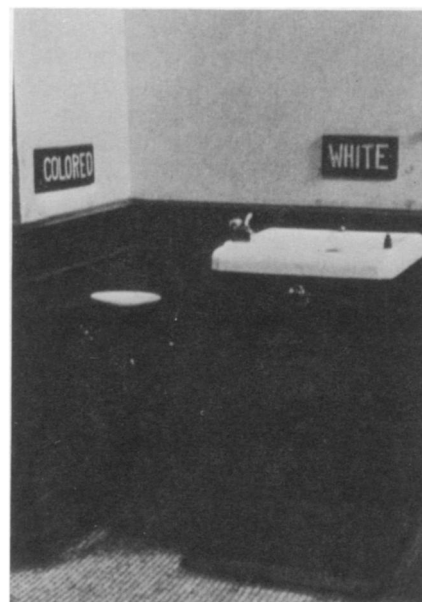
To understand the civil rights movement two things must be kept in mind. First, the United States' population has always had strong racist elements in it. Second, Americans generally believe in the creed of equality. Those two contradictory factors constantly played upon each other during the black drive for social, economic, and political equality and they account for many of the ambiguities in the white response.

American bigotry has often conflicted with American ideals. When the first Europeans came to the New World and met the Indians, they considered them different and therefore inferior. Since the Indians also occupied the land that the Europeans coveted they were exterminated or forcibly removed from their land and resettled on reservations.

The predominant Northern Euro-

pean culture in America did not discriminate only against Indians—anyone who was different was fair game. Anti-Catholicism was a strong factor in the formation of the Republican party in the 1850s and the immigration restriction of the 1920s. Asians were barred from entering the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; during World War II, Americans of Japanese descent were put into internment camps for no other reason than their race.

Spanish-surnamed people have continually been discriminated against. In the 1960s New York tried to forbid anyone from voting who could not read English. This action was supposedly aimed at stopping corruption, but in reality it was an attempt to dilute the political power of the city's Spanish-speaking population, which was rapidly growing due to increased immigration from the American colony of Puerto Rico. In places like California, where large numbers of Mexican-Americans live in compact districts, the districts are gerrymandered and politically emasculated. In 1970, for example, one of six Californians was of Mexican extraction. Yet there were no Mexican State Senators, only two assemblymen, and no statewide or federal elected representatives. The discrimination against blacks is better known because they make up the largest mi-



Dougherty Co. Courthouse, Albany, GA.  
Photo by Danny Lyon. From Lorraine

Hansberry, *The Movement*, (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1964).

nority in the country—about twelve percent of the population (28.6 million people).

Yet, as bigoted as Americans can be, they tend to respond to pleas to alleviate social injustices. Anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism have significantly declined in American society. Presently, Indians, Asians, blacks, and Hispanics have full political rights. The discrimination that still exists is societal (de facto), not legal (de jure). The United States is not unique or more racist than other countries, but when the black movement for equality came about in the late 1950s, ingrained racism deeply affected not only the enemies of black equality, but also its friends.

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations had to serve constituents who were diametrically opposed to each other, urban blacks and whites. Since World War I blacks had been moving North. They tended to settle in urban areas like New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles that were located in key electoral college "swing" states. Thus, their votes counted heavily in national elections. For example, the black urban vote effectively counterbalanced the white southern vote that Truman lost to the Dixiecrats in the 1948 election.

As long as the civil rights movement was confined to the South it had, in general, northern white sup-

port. But as northern blacks began to demand equality through affirmative action and school integration as well, many northern whites began to oppose the movement. The Republican party took advantage of this white dissatisfaction, which is a significant reason why it has been able to control the presidency, with the exception of Jimmy Carter, since the 1968 election. (Carter is the exception that proves the rule: Even though he was a southerner, more southern whites voted against him than for him; enough voted for him to allow him to carry the South with a combined black-white vote).

After Reconstruction, legal segregation had been instituted in the South. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and whites. Yet the black facilities were not equal: Blacks had separate schools, water fountains, hospital and bus waiting rooms, and bathrooms (often gasoline stations did not have bathrooms for blacks, and if they did, they were usually unisex). They were not allowed to swim in the public swimming pools, attend the local movie theater (or were segregated in the balcony), or use the public library. Restaurants and motels were for whites only. Segregation was total in the South, but not confined there. Las Vegas, Nevada, for example, refused to allow blacks to stay in its hotels or gamble in its casinos. The difference between southern and northern segregation was legality; if a black tried to use a southern public facility he had broken the law, not just a custom. In the North, segregation was preserved through segregated housing and social pressure.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded by, among others, W. E. B. Du Bois, had been working for black rights since the early 1900s. By the 1950s the NAACP believed that the time was ripe for an all-out attack on segregation. Many blacks had gone into World War II with the idea of a “double V for victory”—victory over the Axis and victory over segregation. The successful integration of the armed forces during the Korean



Dr. Martin Luther King leads demonstrators from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965. From Rabbi Henry Cohen, *Justice, Justice* (NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations 1969). Courtesy of the publisher.

War proved that blacks and whites could work together. The Cold War made segregation an embarrassment to the national government in its fight against communism. The movement of blacks from the South, where they were disfranchised, to the North, where they could vote, gave them political power.

The NAACP challenged school segregation in the courts, and in May of 1954, the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* reversed the Plessy decision, stating “that in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. The Court was correct in its statement that ‘Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.’” The state of Mississippi was a prime example. Although blacks comprised over 50 percent of the school-age population, in the 1960-61 school year the state spent \$46 million on white education versus \$26 million for black education. Nine counties in Mississippi did not even have a black high school. As late as 1950, Mississippi employed over 700 black teachers who had not completed high school. Ten years after the Brown decision, a black teacher in Mississippi with a bachelor’s degree made \$350 less than a white teacher with identical

credentials. Mississippi, like most southern states, required a literacy test to register to vote. And, as the U.S. Civil Rights Commission reported in 1965: “The quality of education afforded Negroes has been so poor that any test of educational skill as a prerequisite to voting would necessarily discriminate against them.”

The Court ordered school districts to integrate with “all deliberate speed.” The border states moved toward compliance, but the deep south resisted bitterly. In 1964, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina had less than one percent of their school-age blacks in school with whites. It took a 1968 Supreme Court decision before the Court finally declared that “all deliberate speed” meant “at once.” Yet, as late as 1970, over 18 percent of the South’s black children were still in segregated schools, and almost 62 percent went to schools over half black.

Using the Brown decision as a catalyst, blacks began to work actively for the right to vote in the South and the right to use public facilities. Beginning in December of 1955, blacks under the leadership of Dr. Martin

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ions. Griffith seemed puzzled by all the controversy even though President Woodrow Wilson remarked of the film after a private White House screening, "It was like writing history with lightning, and my one regret is that it is all so terribly true" (Griffith, 37).

In the mid-1950s and 1960s, during what historian C. Vann Woodward has termed "the second Reconstruction," blacks were still struggling against many of the negative stereotypes that had maligned and plagued them since the 1870s. Hollywood movies that used blacks as character actors preserved and actually strengthened racist characterizations, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Stepin Fetchit, Manton Moreland, and Willie Best were three of the many actors, used mainly for comic relief, who portrayed blacks as white audiences perceived them. Blacks were rarely shown simply as human beings with the dignity and failings, strengths and weaknesses of the white movie-goers who saw them on the screen.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the Black Power movement and other activist groups urging black pride, Hollywood turned to the opposite pole and showed blacks as cool heroes and sexual supermen. Critics both black and white claimed that productions such as *Superfly*, *Shaft*, and *The Legend of Nigger Charlie* simply exchanged one stereotype for another, and although the new image was preferable to the old one, as a portrait of a people it was equally untrue. Only occasionally did films such as the *The Defiant Ones*, *Sounder*, and *In the Heat of the Night* portray blacks as believable human beings.

*The Birth of a Nation* has great potential as a classroom tool for understanding black social and cultural history (Gianetti, 67). Screening the film would be valuable when discussing historical interpretations of the Reconstruction period or when studying white attitudes during the Progressive Era, when the film was produced and first shown in movie theaters. Units on the Cold War period or on modern American history, which usually deal with the civil rights movement in some way, would

also be an ideal time for showing Griffith's movie. Black protests and white reactions in the fifties, sixties, and seventies cannot be ignored, whether discussing the place of blacks in the armed forces; *Brown vs. the Board of Education*; the Montgomery bus boycott and the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr.; civil rights under Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy; or the progress of blacks since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Showing and analyzing *Birth of a Nation* can be an effective way to show the beliefs underlying white opposition to black struggles for equality and civil rights in the post-war era. How could anyone who saw blacks through Griffith's eyes take seriously their demands to be treated with dignity and respect?

Many students find it difficult to sit through *Birth of a Nation*, which is three hours and five minutes long and requires four class periods to show, because it has no sound at all. In this world of portable tape players and stereo television, many viewers do not consider silence golden. One simple solution is to obtain long-playing recordings or cassette tapes of music by ragtime composers such as Scott Joplin, Tom Turpin, and James Scott from a public library or record store. This is the kind of music that was played by a theater pianist or organist when the silents were in vogue. Even though the records or cassettes may not be perfectly synchronized with the action on the screen, playing the music will make the story a more exciting experience for those who have never before seen a full-length silent feature. So dim the lights, load the VCR and prepare to use an old film in a new way.

#### LIST OF SOURCES

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Luther King, Jr., boycotted the Montgomery, Alabama segregated bus system. When the boycott succeeded, King went on to lead other attacks on segregation and, until his April 1968 assassination, he was the movement's most influential spokesman.

After the election of John F. Kennedy, the movement picked up momentum, and as black discontent grew (Kennedy's rhetoric for black rights far outpaced his actions), there was a comparable increase in Southern resistance. The Civil Rights Commission reported in 1963 that, "Citizens of the United States have been shot, set upon by vicious dogs, beaten and otherwise terrorized because they sought to vote." Less dramatic than violence, but even more effective, was economic intimidation. Since most jobs in the South were controlled by whites, it was easy for southern racists to ensure that blacks who attempted to register to vote or were active in the desegregation movement lost their jobs.

In August of 1963 a quarter of a million blacks and whites marched on Washington to demand black equality. After the death of Kennedy, Johnson helped to pass both the 1964 Civil Rights Act that forbade discrimination in public accommodations and the 1965 Voting Rights Act which ensured blacks the right to vote. In 1964 the 24th Amendment to the Constitution made the poll tax illegal. Legal discrimination had ended in the United States, but economic and social discrimination continued.

The introduction of chemical weed killers in the early 1950s permitted the economical use of tractors and mechanical cotton pickers on southern plantations. Southern black hand labor was no longer needed and millions of uneducated, unskilled blacks were thrown off the plantations and many of them moved North, replacing whites, who were moving out of the cities into the suburbs, as the occupants of the inner cities. In the 1950s segregation still existed in the North and the black ghetto was vertically integrated. Blacks of all classes

and levels of education and achievement lived there—doctors, lawyers, teachers, entrepreneurs, persons of strong religious beliefs, and lower-income groups. Ironically, black gains in integrated housing ended this situation; the black middle class no longer lives in the inner city, and the stable working class is moving out as rapidly as possible.

Although the majority of blacks are doing markedly better than they were before the civil rights movement, one-third are still below the poverty line. And for a core group of 2-3.5 million chronically poor and alienated inner city and southern rural blacks, conditions seem to be deteriorating, with no improvement in sight.

This underclass at the bottom seems beyond the reach of existing social programs, and may be growing. Its plight can be captured by statistics:

- In 1950, 16% of children born to blacks and other minorities had unwed mothers, compared with 12.8% of whites.
- In 1955, blacks and other minorities had an unemployment rate of 8.2%, compared with 3.7% for whites. In 1985, black unemployment was 14.9%, compared with 5.9% for whites. For black teenagers the rate was 41.6%, compared with 15.9% for white teenagers.
- In 1983, about 46% of all persons sent to prison were black and most of the victims of their crimes were black.
- The black infant mortality rate is almost twice that of whites (19.2 deaths per 1,000 live births versus 9.7 deaths per 1,000 live births).
- Black median family income in 1984 was \$15,432, compared to a white median family income of \$27,686.

The inner city is populated almost exclusively by the most disadvantaged—people outside the mainstream, criminals, families with long-term spells of poverty and welfare dependency. The black ghetto is increasingly isolated from mainstream America, creating the danger that a permanent underclass based on race could again develop in American society. 🐞

## ACTIVE HISTORY

# Students work with Mariner's Museum to preserve vanishing skills

by Joseph A. Gutierrez

On a cool day last October, eleven students from Warwick and Ferguson High Schools in Virginia gathered to watch as master boatbuilder Billy Moore felled a giant loblolly pine tree. The sounds of chain saw and broadaxe which accompanied the tree-felling marked the beginning of a unique educational program sponsored by Newport News Public Schools and The Mariners' Museum. Under the watchful eye of Moore and his two sons, David and Mark, the students would construct a Chesapeake Bay deadrise oyster boat.

The Chesapeake Bay deadrise evolved early in the twentieth century in response to the specialized needs of local watermen who use the vessels for many different types of fishing, including crabbing, oystering, and net fishing. The special characteristics of the deadrise boat make it compatible with the rough weather and shallow water that the watermen of this area often work in. The essential purpose of the Newport News program was to preserve the vanishing skills of this traditional method of boat construction, but the students learned much more than woodworking and boatbuilding techniques. They also became familiar with the culture and history of the Bay, the economic importance of its food resources, and the role of the watermen who fish there. The project exercised

the full range of the students' intellectual skills, demanding that they use their abilities in science, social studies, and even English (all students were required to write journals on their experiences). Moore taught the students boat construction by the inquiry method of instruction to develop the skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

After the tree was felled in October, the students returned to their regular classrooms until the wood was dry in late January, when they began to report to the Museum on a daily basis. In addition to their construction work, students spent time in the classroom to gain further insights into the Bay and its fishing industry. The Museum's Education Department worked with the young boatbuilders in a series of sessions which provided them with information on navigation, the evolution of small craft, and the economic importance of the Bay in world trade. The students were also introduced to the history of the Bay and to the concept that form follows function. Each classroom session included a hands-on component, a gallery exercise using the international collections of the museum, and an information sharing activity. These experiences helped the students gain a wide perspective on the boat they were building.

The task of construction itself of-