

Tennessee in the Era of Jim Crow

Essential Question: How did W.E.B. DuBois, James Napier and Mary Church Terrell respond to Jim Crow?

With the end of Reconstruction, African Americans saw the rights they had gained through the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments disappear once Federal troops were withdrawn from the South. In Tennessee, the story was somewhat different. Because Tennessee was not part of the military reconstruction in the South, African-American men had never gained the same political power that they held in states such as Mississippi during Reconstruction. However, African American men were not completely stripped of their voting rights when Reconstruction ended because Republicans and sometimes urban Democrats used African American votes to ensure victory for their candidates or issues. This gave African Americans in Tennessee leverage to negotiate better treatment in the era of Jim Crow.

Tennessee passed its first Jim Crow law in 1875. Jim Crow laws legalized segregation of African Americans and whites. The laws were named after a character from a popular traveling show in the late 1800's. The Jim Crow character, played by a white actor in blackface makeup, portrayed African Americans as stupid, brutish, and completely inferior to whites. The 1875 law, Chapter 130 of the Acts of Tennessee, allowed discrimination in hotels, trains, theaters, and most other public places. Under the law, business owners could simply refuse service to anyone they chose. If a patron complained, he or she could be fined up to one hundred dollars. In 1883, the United State Supreme Court ruled the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. This opened the way for segregation of railroad cars and streetcars. The 1870 Constitution included a provision that revenue from the poll tax would go to support schools, but not schools that were integrated. By the turn of the century, Tennessee was a segregated society in which African Americans were considered to be second class citizens.

The African American community was divided on its response to Jim Crow. In 1895, Booker T. Washington put forth the idea that African Americans should not agitate for social or political equality. Instead, Washington argued, African Americans should take advantage of the educational and economic opportunities available to them so that they might advance the interests of their race through toil and struggle. Washington also favored the idea of separate spheres for African Americans saying that "in all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Washington put his ideas into practice at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Washington also worked with Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears Roebuck, to build schools for African Americans children

throughout the South. Eventually, more than five thousand schools were constructed and by 1928 one-third of all African American children in the South attended a Rosenwald school. Washington's ideas were popular with whites who were vehemently opposed to social equality or integration as well as many rural African Americans who agreed with Washington's statement that "the opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house."

Washington created the National Negro Business League as part of his plan to encourage economic opportunities for African Americans. Successful Nashville businessman, James Napier was elected president of the organization. Napier, who was a close friend of Washington's, embodied his ideas about working for economic success. Napier was a founder of the One Cent Bank for African American patrons, served on the Nashville City Council, the boards of Fisk and Howard universities and Nashville's Negro Board of Trade. Napier's greatest achievement was serving as Register of the United States Treasury from 1911-1913 under President William Howard Taft.

While Washington's ideas were popular with many African Americans and whites, not everyone was willing to embrace the idea of social and political inequality. Washington's strongest critic was W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois, who was born in Massachusetts, received his first taste of southern Jim Crow while attending Fisk University from 1884-1888. Du Bois represented the views of wealthy, intellectual and professional African Americans who resented that no matter how well educated or successful they became, they would never be seen as equals. Du Bois shared Washington's view that education was the key to change for the African American community. However, Du Bois argued that the "talented tenth", the elite of the African American community should be groomed for leadership in black colleges like Fisk. Du Bois believed that these leaders would be able to push for social and political equality.

In 1905, Du Bois called for meeting of leaders in opposition to Washington. The Niagara Movement, named for the power of the falls, rejected Washington's conciliatory stance. Du Bois demanded that African Americans enjoy the same rights as all other citizens. The group issued a statement that read in part, " We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans. It is a fight for ideals, lest this, our common fatherland, false to its founding, become in truth the land of the thief and the home of the Slave—a by-word and a hissing among the nations for its sounding pretensions and pitiful accomplishment."

Washington used his influence with African American newspapers to kill stories on the Niagara Movement. As a result, the movement gained little momentum. In 1909, a race riot in

Springfield, Illinois, the hometown of Abraham Lincoln, led to a meeting of white and African American activists. The National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed as a result of the meeting. Du Bois became the editor of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis* in 1910. By 1918 the organization had one hundred and sixty-five branches and over forty thousand members. Du Bois was the voice of the organization and used his position as editor of *The Crisis* to rail against racial injustice in all its forms. Du Bois left the NAACP in 1938, but continued to champion civil rights for the remainder of his life.

Mary Church Terrell, daughter of wealthy Memphis businessman Robert Church, began her work as an advocate for African American women in 1896 when she founded the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). The NACW was a self-help organization in the mode of Booker T. Washington that encouraged African American women to improve their lives by providing mutual support. By 1901, Terrell had modified her approach to focus on interracial tolerance. Terrell, disappointed by the unequal treatment of African Americans by New Deal programs and the segregation of African American troops in World War II, became more militant activist for civil rights. In 1950, Terrell and two other people filed a lawsuit after they were refused service in a Washington D.C. restaurant. Terrell organized picketing, sit-ins and other demonstrations against segregation in the nation's capital. Terrell won a victory when the court ruled that segregation in Washington's restaurants was unconstitutional on June 8, 1953. Terrell lived to see the Supreme Court rule against school segregation in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* before her death on July 24, 1954.

Sources:

Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith. *Tennesseans and Their History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

Barbara Jones, "Mary Church Terrell." *Tennessee Encyclopedia*. Tennessee Historical Society. <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/mary-eliza-church-terrell/>

Richard A. Couto, "W. E. B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt)." Tennessee Historical Society. <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/w-e-b-du-bois-william-edward-burghardt/>

Herbert Clark. "James C. Napier." Tennessee Historical Society. <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/james-c-napier/>

Richard Wormser. "NAACP Founded." *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. PBS. https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_naacp.html

Richard Wormser. "The Niagara Movement ." *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. PBS.
https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_niagara.html

Richard Wormser. "Booker T. Washington ." *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. PBS.
https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_people_booker.html

Booker T. Washington " Address to Atlanta Exposition." *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. PBS.
https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/historical_docs/hist_doc_altantacomp1.html

National Trust for Historic Preservation. *Rosenwald Schools*.
<https://savingplaces.org/places/rosenwald-schools#.XRN2KehKjIU>

Student Activity

Compare Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois and James Napier and Mary Church Terrell using the venn diagrams below.

Booker T. Washington

W.E.B. Du Bois

