

# SEGREGATION MANIA



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## WORDS TO KNOW

**racial segregation**

**civil disobedience**

***Plessy v. Ferguson***

**Jim Crow**

**nativist**

**Dawes Act of 1887**

**ordinance**

**assimilate**

**13th, 14th and  
15th Amendments**

## THINK BEFORE YOU READ

**What makes you feel welcome in a community?**

**What makes you feel unwelcome?**

**What forces make people move from one place to another?**

**What forces limit where people can move?**

Cover: Man drinking at "Colored" water cooler in streetcar terminal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1939.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

On a warm New Orleans day in 1892, Homer Plessy, a mixed-race shoemaker and activist, stepped aboard a train holding a first-class ticket to Covington, Louisiana. He took his seat in the first-class car. The conductor stopped to take Plessy's ticket. "What race do you belong to?" the conductor asked. "Colored," replied Plessy. "Then you will have to retire to the colored car," the conductor said. Even though it was against the law for a mixed-race person to ride in the first-class "Whites only" car, Plessy shook his head.

*"I am an American citizen," he said. "I have paid for a first-class ticket and intend to ride in the first-class car."*

Plessy's refusal set a chain of events in motion. He was arrested by a private detective, taken off the train, and jailed overnight. Plessy getting arrested was part of a plan. Plessy was working with a citizens' committee to oppose laws that divided public spaces according to race. The committee challenged the law he broke all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The outcome changed the course of American history. In **Plessy v. Ferguson**, the Supreme Court decided that segregated facilities were allowed under the Constitution as long as the facilities for Blacks and Whites were the same—a principle called "separate but equal." Separation of the races was now officially the law of the land.

## TESTING THE PROMISE OF EQUALITY

Plessy's test was based on a promise. After the Civil War ended in 1865, Congress passed three major amendments to the Constitution. The **13th Amendment** outlawed slavery. The **14th Amendment** promised "equal protection under the law" for all Americans. The **15th Amendment** prohibited the government from denying access to voting "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

But just a few decades later, Americans were not being treated equally. Beginning around 1890, many White people worked to create greater separation between the races. They promoted **racial segregation**, a phrase that means setting groups of people apart based on their race. Across the country, new laws divided people along lines of race, ethnicity, and religion. The wave of new laws was so intense that historians have called the 1890s an era of "segregation mania."

## WHAT CAUSED THE MANIA?

In the late 1800s, American communities were changing fast. People in power wanted to control that change. Immigration and migration sparked some of the mania. Immigrants from Europe were coming in large numbers to take factory jobs in northern and western cities. American-born Blacks and working-class Whites also



Advertisement for the East Louisiana Railroad Company, the line Homer Plessy rode during his 1892 act of civil disobedience. Courtesy of the The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1974.25.37.57

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Nebraska	5,641.00	36.65	Wisconsin	1,069.00	17.00
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WALTER L. FISHER,                      ROBERT G. VALENTINE,  
Secretary of the Interior.                      Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

Poster advertising "Indian Land for Sale" by the United States Department of the Interior in 1911. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

moved from the country into cities for work. In urban neighborhoods, these new arrivals all lived close together. People of different races and ethnicities mixed, mingled, and, sometimes, clashed. Different languages, religions, foods, and ideas swirled together. Many White Americans worried about whether all these changes might take away from their own culture, power, and wealth. Politicians started to create laws to dictate where people could live, work, and travel. Each law was part of a widespread effort to enforce ethnic, racial, and religious separation across society. One of those new laws was the one Homer Plessy defied in his act of civil disobedience: the 1890 Louisiana Separate Car Act, assigning separate railroad cars to Black and White riders.

## THE SPREAD OF SEGREGATION

People used local laws called **ordinances** to draw invisible boundaries around neighborhoods according to race, religion, and ethnicity. Northern cities such as Chicago funneled Black residents into jam-packed neighborhoods or makeshift houses on the outskirts. In Southern cities such as Atlanta and Richmond, ordinances pushed Black residents into segregated blocks. Barrios and colonias, or neighborhoods for Spanish-speaking people, were created in southwestern cities such as El Paso and Los Angeles.

On the West Coast, people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry also faced housing segregation. White violence and **nativist** intolerance often kept people of Asian descent hemmed into segregated Chinatowns, Little Tokyos, and Little Manilas. They were often prohibited by law from buying properties in White neighborhoods.

New laws also controlled Indigenous people's freedom to move. In the 1890s, the U.S. government began pushing Indigenous people to **assimilate** to non-Native ways of life. Many Native youth were taken from their homes and sent to boarding schools, where they were given uniforms, haircuts, and religious instruction with the goal of replacing their families' cultural practices. The **Dawes Act of 1887** broke up reservations that many Native people had shared and called home for decades. The land was carved up into small farms for single families, destroying land-sharing

### ANOTHER JIM CROW CAR CASE.

#### Arrest of a Negro Traveler Who Per- sisted in Riding With the White People.

On Tuesday evening a negro named Adolph Plessy was arrested by Private Detective Cain on the East Louisiana train and locked up for violating section 2 of act 111 of 1890, relative to separate coaches.

It appears that Plessy purchased a ticket to Covington, and shortly before his arrest the conductor asked him if he was a colored man. On the latter replying that he was the conductor informed him that he would have to go into the car set aside for colored people. This he refused to do, and Mr. Ca then stepped up and requested him to go into the other coach, but he still refused, and Mr. Cain thereupon informed him that he would either have to go or go to jail. He replied that he would sooner go to jail than leave the coach, and was thereupon arrested.

He waived examination yesterday before Recorder Moulin, and was sent before the criminal court under \$500 bonds.

News article announcing Plessy's arrest in New Orleans' *Daily Picayune* on June 9, 1892. *Daily Picayune*

traditions and leaving many families with unproductive farmland. Over 90 million acres of land was taken from Native nations and sold to non-Native buyers for farming, ranching, and mining.

Anti-Black racism was central to the era of segregation mania. After the Civil War, millions of free Black Americans, now living all over the country, tested the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments' promises of freedom and equality. Many White people refused to honor those promises, instead creating a system of social customs and strict laws that controlled every part of life for Black Americans. In the southern U.S. these were called **Jim Crow** laws, after a stereotyped stage character. Under Jim Crow, there were two of everything. Black and White people had to use separate restrooms, water fountains, libraries, schools, textbooks, theater seats, train and bus seats, waiting rooms, hospitals, jails, restaurants, and shops. Jim Crow laws were enforced by threats and, often, violence. Racial separation became the norm.

## A SEGREGATED NATION

Together, all these laws ensured a segregated society. By 1920, segregation was being built right into American cities as they grew. The best homes and neighborhoods were set aside for White people. Choices about where to live, instead of being free and personal, were now being set in stone. In time, many Americans forgot that segregation had not always existed in this way and accepted it as normal, permanent, and natural. In reality, segregation was created using laws and power, and was carried out by everyday, local people in their schools, banks, real estate offices, police stations, courts, churches, and town halls.

Grocery store in Chinatown, New York City, 1942.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Segregation touched entertainment too. This man in Belzoni, Mississippi, travels up the stairs to the "colored entrance" of a movie theater, 1939.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress



SOJ  
HAKOON—YTERPAB—NAMITZAS



Sign posted directly opposite the Sojourner Truth Homes, a federal housing project, in Detroit, Michigan, 1942. White residents had attempted to prevent Black families from moving into their community. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Why did so many White Americans allow for laws to control where people could live rather than letting people decide for themselves?
- What do you think would have happened if Homer Plessy had won his Supreme Court case? Would the nation be different today or not?
- Even though segregation laws ended more than 50 years ago, many American cities and schools are still segregated. Why do you think that is?
- Should there be laws that determine where people can and can't live? If so, under what conditions?

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