

2.4 African American Life After Reconstruction

After Reconstruction, how did African Americans respond to racial discrimination?

Explore

White Supremacy

How was racial discrimination practiced by private citizens after Reconstruction?

Many Americans who supported [segregation](#) justified racial discrimination by claiming that white people of European ancestry were superior to people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. They believed that nonwhites should not have a voice in American politics and society, and that African American society should remain separate from mainstream white culture.

As a result of this belief, societal norms and customs in the South and beyond were established to maintain a system of white supremacy. Racial discrimination was enforced not only by the government, but also by private citizens and institutions, including businesses and churches. Private citizens and institutions used a variety of techniques to preserve white supremacy. For example, African Americans were expected to speak deferentially, or with respect, even to younger whites by calling them “sir” or “ma’am.”

White supremacists in the South and elsewhere also used acts of violence and intimidation to enforce white supremacy. Groups of citizens often publicly punished African Americans who were thought to have violated racial norms. Because of this, African Americans lived with the threat of personal harm or even death for failing to show sufficient respect for whites. [Lynching](#), an often public act of murder committed by a group of citizens as punishment for a perceived crime, was commonplace.

The [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) (NAACP), a civil rights organization, created an Anti-Lynching Committee in 1916 to establish a public awareness campaign about this horrific act. In 1919, the committee published a study called *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1918*. The committee found that more than 3,200 African Americans were lynched during this period.

In the South, political leaders openly supported policies designed to maintain white supremacy. For example, Benjamin R. Tillman, governor of South Carolina from 1890–1894 and later a U.S. senator, was a known white supremacist. Tillman was a strong supporter of lynching as an appropriate law-enforcement policy. With leaders, such as Tillman, creating policies that kept African Americans in a cycle of poverty and limited civil rights, African Americans found it difficult to improve their living conditions.