

The Importance of the Reconstruction Period in American History: An Overlooked Era that Recontextualizes the Modern Black Struggle in America

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Abstract

In America, the two main Black historical events taught in schools are the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves (1861-1865) and the Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow, and Black activism (1954-1969). Both events are connected by the Black fight for freedom and equality in the face of white supremacy, racism, and disenfranchisement. However, they are often taught as isolated events, which creates a false perspective that Black activism and discriminatory laws like Jim Crow started in the 1950s, when in reality, by studying the period after slavery, the Reconstruction period, we can see how the creation of both started immediately after slavery ended. This recontextualizes how long the Black struggle for equality has been in America by showing that Jim Crow and the Black activist movement had been happening for decades before the Civil Rights Movement. Understanding how the Reconstruction era contributed to the creation of the Black activism community and discriminatory laws and practices like Jim Crow also makes it easier to identify their iterations in the present day. Knowledge of Reconstruction leads to a more complete understanding of U.S. history and the African American struggle for equality by showing that Black activism and injustices against Black people have never been confined to a singular historical moment, while allowing the themes of Emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement to be connected to paint a fuller picture of the longevity of the fight for equality; making it an incredibly important time period in American history that is criminally overlooked.

Introduction

Despite the importance of African American history to America's story, how it's perceived and taught is quite fragmented. Most Americans are only familiar with two main events, whose themes are often treated as historically separate. One is slavery, the fight for freedom/equality, and the Civil War,¹ which led to the emancipation of slaves (1861-1865). The second is the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1969),² Black activism, and Jim Crow laws,³ which implemented racial segregation and discrimination. They are often presented as isolated events, with no cause and effect between them. Two-thirds of Americans agree that the history curriculum should cover the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement, and most Americans do know about both.⁴ But, currently, the way both events are taught creates the impression that the main facets of the Civil Rights Movement, Black activism, and Jim Crow only came into existence in the 1950s. It also implies that the fight for equality started during slavery and ended after emancipation, to be picked up again during the

1 "American Civil War." Wikipedia, December 1, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War.

2 "Civil Rights Movement." Wikipedia, November 27, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_rights_movement.

3 "Jim Crow Laws." Wikipedia, November 9, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_laws.

4 Sanders, Linley. "How Much Do Americans Think They Know about Black History?" YouGov, February 17, 2021. <https://today.yougov.com/society/articles/34229-americans-think-they-know-about-black-history>.

Civil Rights Movement in response to Jim Crow. This fragmented version of history, which presents slavery/ slave emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement as separate occurrences, severely understates how long, bloody, and laborious the fight against racism and disenfranchisement has been for Black people. The Reconstruction period (1865–1877) challenges the misconception that Jim Crow and Black political activism emerged only during the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, Reconstruction rapidly reestablished a racial hierarchy that placed Black Americans at the bottom, prompting organized Black activism while laying the groundwork for Jim Crow during the era’s later years and demonstrating the continuity of racial inequality in the United States.

In Appomattox, Virginia, in the spring of 1865, the Civil War officially ended with the Union victory over the Confederates. On December 6th, 1865, the 13th Amendment was ratified, and slavery was abolished in the United States. Here is where the misconception begins that racism and the African American struggle against it ended with emancipation and did not resume until the Civil Rights Movement a century later. In reality, the Reconstruction period, directly after the Civil War, saw the mass continuation of slave-era inequities against newly freed people and the creation of the Black activist movement in response. Restrictive laws called Black Codes⁵ were quickly passed that established crippling limitations on Black freedom that “prolong[ed] the conditions of slavery.”⁶ Their defining feature was the broad vagrancy law, “which allowed local authorities to arrest freed people for minor infractions and commit them to involuntary labor”⁷ which became “integral to the state’s modernization project, as captive, unpaid labor [was] used to expand and surface municipal and county roads.”⁸ Most Southern states also criminalized unemployment for Black people and enforced annual labor contracts that kept wages down and prevented negotiation for better pay and conditions. “Anti-enticement”⁹ measures were also passed to penalize anyone who offered higher wages to Black laborers already under contract. Black Codes protected white employers who did all they could to keep salaries low and hours long. Intimidation, fraudulent tricks, and physical beatings were frequently used to control and exploit Black labor, often going completely unpunished. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Freedmen’s Bureau,¹⁰ which was established by the federal government in 1865 to protect Black rights, focused instead on forcing Black people into these unfair jobs and labor contracts to restore the economy.¹¹ In response to these labor inequities, the Black community often rallied together to protest, forming organizations like the Colored National Labor Union (CNLU)¹² and the Longshore Men’s Protective Union Association (LPUA).¹³ “Organized sexual-assault raids against [B]lack women,”¹⁴ and workplace harassment by white employers were met with the creation of institutions to protect them, such as the Sons of Benevolence.¹⁵ Black churches and secret societies “provided other outlets for social, spiritual,

5 “Black Codes.” History.com, May 28, 2025. <https://www.history.com/articles/black-codes>.

6 Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, (Harvard University Press, 1998), 35.

7 “Black Codes.” History.com, May 28, 2025. <https://www.history.com/articles/black-codes>.

8 Haley, Sarah. “‘Like I Was a Man’: Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 1 (September 2013): 53–77. <https://doi.org/10.1086/670769>.

9 “Black Codes.” History.com, May 28, 2025. <https://www.history.com/articles/black-codes>.

10 “The Freedmen’s Bureau.” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed December 8, 2025. <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau>.

11 Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 24.

12 “Colored National Labor Union.” Wikipedia, September 17, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colored_National_Labor_Union.

13 “International Longshoremen’s Association.” Wikipedia, November 12, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Longshoremen’s_Association.

14 Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 33.

15 Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 34.

and political expression, as well as economic cooperation.”¹⁶ Many meetings, like the Black Convention Movement,¹⁷ and clubs, like the Union League,¹⁸ focused on political activism, and the Reconstruction era also saw more than 2,000 African American officials holding office before white supremacy could fully reassert control in the South. By looking at Reconstruction, we can see how strong organized Black political networks were established long before the Civil Rights Movement, as numerous Black organizations were created in response to poor education, inadequate health resources, political disenfranchisement, unfair working conditions, and white violence brought on by racism. Black activism seen during the Civil Rights Movement did not come out of nowhere; it has been a staple of the Black community for decades.

Despite achieving some strides towards equality, African Americans could not halt the impending Jim Crow period, nor could they prevent the majority of white people who were committed to maintaining white supremacy. Jim Crow took root by building on the practice of racial disenfranchisement and discrimination established during the Reconstruction period through Black Codes. The discriminatory intent behind Black Codes was replicated in Jim Crow laws, which then expanded into an extensive and stricter system of state and local laws that enforced widespread racial segregation and disenfranchisement while dismantling Reconstruction-era progress, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1875 and the 14th and 15th amendments. The 14th Amendment to the Constitution “granted citizenship to all persons “born or naturalized in the United States,” including formerly enslaved people, and provided all citizens with “equal protection under the laws,””¹⁹ while the 15th Amendment “prohibited states from disenfranchising voters “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.””²⁰ The Civil Rights Act of 1875²¹ was meant to enforce the 14th Amendment by prohibiting racial discrimination in public accommodations and jury selection. All three legislations were put in place to establish equal rights for formerly enslaved people as American citizens, but Jim Crow laws and the Supreme Court cases after Reconstruction, like the Civil Rights Cases in 1883,²² Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896,²³ and Williams v. Mississippi in 1898,²⁴ completely sabotaged them and allowed Jim Crow ordinances to take hold and treat Black people as unequal to whites without being unconstitutional. The Civil Rights Cases in 1883 established that, while states could not discriminate, Congress could not prevent private individuals or businesses from racial discrimination. Southern states immediately seized on this to implement Jim Crow statutes that segregated as many public places as possible, such as parks, schools, churches, bathrooms, restaurants, and transportation, while keeping the “Blacks only” spaces rundown, outdated, and inconvenient. Plessy v. Ferguson further legalized this practice of racial segregation and discrimination with its “separate but equal” doctrine, which ruled that as long as accommodations were equal, racial segregation was not unconstitutional. Of course, the equal part was almost always ignored, with no penalty. Williams v. Mississippi allowed states to

16 Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom, 67.

17 “Colored Conventions Movement.” Wikipedia, May 24, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colored_Conventions_Movement.

18 “Union League.” Wikipedia, November 21, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_League.

19 “Landmark Legislation: The Fourteenth Amendment.” U.S. Senate: Landmark Legislation: The Fourteenth Amendment, August 7, 2023. <https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/senate-and-constitution/14th-amendment.htm>.

20 “Landmark Legislation: The Fifteenth Amendment.” U.S. Senate: Landmark Legislation: The Fifteenth Amendment, August 7, 2023. <https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/senate-and-constitution/15th-amendment.htm>.

21 “Landmark Legislation: Civil Rights Act of 1875.” U.S. Senate: Landmark Legislation: Civil Rights Act of 1875, August 8, 2023. <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/CivilRightsAct1875.htm>.

22 “The Civil Rights Cases (1883).” National Constitution Center – constitutioncenter.org. Accessed December 6, 2025. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/supreme-court-case-library/the-civil-rights-cases>.

23 “Plessy v. Ferguson.” Wikipedia, December 4, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plessy_v._Ferguson.

24 “Williams v. Mississippi.” Wikipedia, September 14, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Williams_v._Mississippi.

implement strategies that prevented Black people, specifically, from voting, such as literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses. Since most African Americans were denied good pay and education, they often could not pass literacy tests or afford poll taxes. Grandfather clauses exempted people from these voting restrictions if their grandfather could vote before a certain date. Southern states purposefully chose dates before slave emancipation when most Black people's grandparents were slaves and could not vote, making them ineligible for exemption. States allowed their white citizens, including sheriffs and poll inspectors, to use underhanded tactics like assigning polling places far away from Black people's homes, "stuff[ing] the voting boxes, intimidat[ing] [B]lack voters, and alter[ing] and discard[ing] [B]lack ballots"²⁵ to further disenfranchise the Black community by preventing political involvement and representation. One of the first widely acknowledged Jim Crow laws, Chapter 130 of the Acts of Tennessee in 1875 (which allowed the refusal of service in public places without any basis, allowing racial discrimination),²⁶ was passed *during* Reconstruction. An examination of the Reconstruction period shows that Jim Crow and widespread racist disenfranchisement and intolerance were affecting Black people long before the Civil Rights Movement, recontextualizing the longevity of racism against African-Americans in America.

Many systems created during Reconstruction endured by evolving rather than disappearing. Although America no longer has Jim Crow laws (which were based on Black Codes made during Reconstruction), the spirit of racial profiling by law enforcement and the justice system continued. Currently, despite only representing about 14% of the population,²⁷ Black people make up around 38% of the inmate population.²⁸ "African Americans are pursued, convicted, and sent to death at a disproportionately higher rate than any other race,"²⁹ and "more than 75% of murder victims in cases resulting in execution were white."³⁰ American policing has always disproportionately targeted Black people and "[i]n the decades following Emancipation, scholars, policymakers, and social welfare reformers had analyzed the disparate rates of black incarceration as empirical 'proof' of the 'criminal nature' of African Americans."³¹ This further justified the mass incarceration of Black people, specifically Black men, and allowed American society and the government to "refuse to accept criminal justice racism as fact."³² This rationale has persisted to the present day and is a leading factor in the significant overrepresentation of African Americans in U.S. prisons and jails. Additionally, Black people "were forced to live nearest the contaminated areas" of cities during Reconstruction, leading to more health issues and a higher mortality rate for their community than for white people, which is still the case today.³³ The American healthcare system has also historically

25 Jeffries, Hasan Kwame. *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*. NYU Press, 2009, 16.

26 Tnsosfiles. Accessed December 3, 2025. <https://sharetn.gov/tnsosfiles.com/tsla/exhibits/blackhistory/pdfs/chapter130.pdf>.

27 Martinez, Gracie. "Facts about the U.S. Black Population." Pew Research Center, January 23, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/fact-sheet/facts-about-the-us-black-population/#:~:text=The%20Black%20population%20of%20the,14.4%25%20of%20the%20country's%20population.>

28 "Federal Bureau of Prisons." BOP Statistics: Inmate Race. Accessed December 7, 2025. https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_race.jsp.

29 "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." NAACP, November 4, 2022. <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>.

30 Deathpenaltyinfo. Accessed December 8, 2025. <https://files.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/pdf/FactSheet.pdf?dm=1760620253>.

31 Hinton, Elizabeth. "INTRODUCTION: Origins of Mass Incarceration." Essay. In *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*, 1–26. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017.

32 Hinton, Elizabeth. "9: From the War on Crime to the War on Drugs." Essay. In *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*, 307–332. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017.

33 Luo, Juhua, Michael Hendryx, and Fengge Wang. "Mortality Disparities between Black and White Americans Mediated by Income and Health Behaviors." *SSM - population health*, December 29, 2021. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8752946/>.

neglected the needs of low-income people, of whom a majority are Black, while not protecting them from the “prejudices and biases of state providers,”³⁴ contributing to African Americans’ higher mortality rate in hospitals. The Black activism community that became established during Reconstruction in response to persistent white supremacist values infringing on Black rights and freedoms has continued to thrive after Reconstruction, into the Civil Rights Movement, and is still going strong in the 21st century. After the Civil Rights Movement, numerous activist organizations like the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO),³⁵ the Organization for Black Struggle (OBS),³⁶ and the Black Radical Congress (BRC)³⁷ continued to be made to fight racism in the 1970s-1990s. In the 21st century, the massive Black Lives Matter (BLM)³⁸ movement was created during the Ferguson uprising in response to the murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, by police officer Darren Wilson, who left his body in the street. Like the police beating of Rodney King in the 1990s, “what seemed really impossible to most persons”³⁹ happened: Darren Wilson was found not guilty. Black Lives Matter was “a counternarrative to the barrage of messages that insist the lives of the Black urban poor do *not* matter.”⁴⁰ It grew into a formal movement and organization, receiving a resurgence in 2020 due to the violent police killing of George Floyd. Into the 2020s, campaigns have been launched by established Black activist groups, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)⁴¹ and the National Urban League (NUL),⁴² to prevent the erasure of Black history, encourage civic engagement and Black equity, and counter the dismantling of voting rights and the installation of Project 2025⁴³ (both of which would reverse Black progress). The Reconstruction period’s contribution to the establishment of the Black activist community and racially motivated discriminatory practices has led to modern iterations of both that continue to affect the Black community in the present day. Understanding this connection leads to a more complete understanding of U.S. history and the African American struggle for equality by showing that Black activism and injustices against Black people have never been confined to a singular historical moment.

Reconstruction connects emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement by revealing the long continuity of the Black struggle for equality. The institutions and practices established during this period have persisted into the modern day, demonstrating that the struggle for racial equality remains unfinished. Recognizing Reconstruction as the foundational link between slavery and the Civil Rights Movement reframes American history as an ongoing struggle rather than a series of separate crises.

34 Nelson, Jennifer. “2 ‘An Act of Valor for a Woman Need Not Take Place inside of Her’ Black Women, Feminism, and Reproductive Rights.” De Gruyter Brill, October 1, 2003. <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.18574/nyu/9780814759158.003.0006/pdf>.

35 “National Black Feminist Organization.” Wikipedia, August 5, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Black_Feminist_Organization.

36 Organization for Black Struggle. Accessed December 8, 2025. <https://obs-stl.org/>.

37 “Black Radical Congress.” Wikipedia, October 19, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Radical_Congress.

38 “Black Lives Matter.” Wikipedia, December 1, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Lives_Matter.

39 Stevenson, Brenda E. “Chapter 7: Whose Fire This Time?” Essay. In *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins : Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

40 Ransby, Barbara. “The Ferguson Uprising and Its Reverberations.” Essay. In *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018.

41 “NAACP.” Wikipedia, November 27, 2025. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NAACP>.

42 “National Urban League.” Wikipedia, March 30, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Urban_League.

43 “Project 2025.” Wikipedia, November 7, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_2025.