

African-American History Summary

Source: www.wikipedia.com accessed August 24, 2008

The first recorded Africans in British North America (the future United States) arrived in 1619 as indentured servants who settled in Jamestown, Virginia. They for many years were similar in legal position to poor English indenturees, who traded several years labor in exchange for passage to America. Africans could legally raise crops and cattle to purchase their freedom. They raised families, marrying other Africans and sometimes intermarrying with Native Americans or English settlers. By the 1640s and 1650s, several African families owned farms around Jamestown and some became wealthy by colonial standards. The popular conception of a race-based slave system did not fully develop until the 1700s. During the 1770s Africans, both enslaved and free, helped rebellious English colonists secure American Independence by defeating the British in the American Revolution. By 1860, there were 3.5 million enslaved Africans in the United States due to the Atlantic slave trade, and another 500,000 Africans lived free across the country. In 1863, during the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The proclamation declared all slaves in states that had seceded from the Union were free. Advancing Union troops enforced the proclamation with Texas being the last state to be emancipated in 1865. While the post-war reconstruction era was initially a time of progress for African Americans, in the late 1890s, Southern states enacted Jim Crow laws to enforce racial segregation and disenfranchisement. Most African Americans followed the Jim Crow laws and assumed a posture of humility and servility to prevent becoming victims of racially motivated violence. To maintain self-esteem and dignity, middle-class African Americans created their own schools, churches, banks, social clubs, and other businesses.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, racially discriminatory laws and racial violence aimed at African Americans began to mushroom in the United States. These discriminatory acts included racial segregation – upheld by the United States Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 - which was legally mandated by southern states and nationwide at the local level of government, voter suppression or disenfranchisement in the southern states, denial of economic opportunity or resources nationwide, and private acts of violence and mass racial violence aimed at African Americans unhindered or encouraged by government authorities. The desperate conditions of African Americans in the South that sparked the Great Migration of the early 20th century, combined with a growing African-American intellectual and cultural elite in the Northern United States, led to a movement to fight violence and discrimination against African Americans that, like abolitionism before it, crossed racial lines. The Civil Rights Movement aimed at abolishing public and private acts of racial discrimination against African Americans between 1954 to 1968, particularly in the southern United States. By 1966, the emergence of the Black Power movement, which lasted from 1966 to 1975, expanded upon the aims of the Civil Rights Movement to include racial dignity, economic and political self-sufficiency, and freedom from white authority. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and the conditions which brought it into being, many led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., are credited with putting pressure on President John F. Kennedy and then Lyndon B. Johnson that culminated in the passage the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that banned discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and labor unions.

The gains made by African Americans in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements not only obtained certain rights for African Americans, but changed American society in far-reaching and fundamentally important ways. Prior to the 1950s, Black Americans in the South were subject to de jure discrimination, or Jim Crow. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., African Americans and their supporters challenged the nation to "rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed that all men are created equal...."

The Civil Rights Movement marked a sea-change in American social, political, economic and civic life. It brought with it boycotts, sit-ins, demonstrations, court battles, bombings and other violence; prompted worldwide media coverage and intense public debate; forged enduring civic, economic and religious alliances; disrupted and realigned the nation's two major political parties. Over time, it has changed in fundamental ways the manner in which blacks and whites interact with and relate to one another. The movement resulted in the removal of codified, *de jure* racial segregation and discrimination from American life and law, and heavily influenced other groups and movements in struggles for civil rights and social equality within American society, including the Free Speech Movement, the disabled, women, Native Americans, migrant workers and immigrants.

African Americans have improved their social economic standing significantly since the Civil Rights Movement and recent decades have witnessed the expansion of a robust, African-American middle class across the United States. Unprecedented access to higher education and employment has been gained by African Americans in the post-civil rights era. Nevertheless, due in part to the legacy of slavery, racism and discrimination, African Americans as a group remain at a pronounced economic, educational and social disadvantage in many areas relative to European Americans. Persistent social, economic and political issues for many African Americans include inadequate health care access and delivery; institutional racism and discrimination in housing, education, policing, criminal justice and employment; crime, poverty and substance abuse. One of the most serious and long standing issues within African-American communities is poverty. Poverty itself is a hardship as it is related to marital stress and dissolution, health problems, low educational attainment, deficits in psychological functioning, and crime. In 2004, 24.7% of African-American families lived below the poverty level.

In 2008, a monumental historical achievement is realized for all African-Americans as the first African-American, Senator Barack Obama, became the Democratic candidate for the president of the United States of America.