

Anti-Black Racism in America

How has racial inequity persisted in American life?

BY JOANNE POPE MELISH, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY, ASSOCIATE HISTORY PROFESSOR EMERITA, AUTHOR OF *DISOWNING SLAVERY: GRADUAL EMANCIPATION AND "RACE" IN NEW ENGLAND, 1789 - 1860*

Photo by Arthur Edelman on Unsplash

THE ROBBINS HOUSE
CONCORD'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Race and Racism: How have these terms evolved over time?

THE SHIFTING MEANING OF "RACE"

The meaning of "race" has changed over the centuries. Racial categories were created as a means of classifying humans into groups and relating those groups to systems of power. While the word "race" initially referred to speakers of a common language and followers of a particular religion or set of cultural practices, over time its meaning was broadened to include people affiliated with a particular tribe or nation-state, and to people with distinctive physical features.

In the Middle Ages, with increasing global exploration, Europeans began to reduce the varied peoples of the Americas and Africa into two racial groups - Indians and Africans. They saw both groups as subject to conquest and enslavement initially because neither group was Christian, and also because they judged African and indigenous cultural practices and technologies as inferior to their own. They also argued that the dark skin of Africans was a sign that they were descended from Ham, a Biblical figure whose father, Noah, cursed his descendants to be enslaved ("Ham" was associated with the Hebrew word "hum," meaning dark colored.) The so-called "curse of Ham" was used as a further justification for capture and enslavement of Africans.

The United States embarked on nationhood by restricting the privileges of citizenship to a single category of people. Under the **1790 Naturalization Act**, "free White persons" were the only people welcomed as immigrants and eligible for citizenship. Even though the concept of White as a racial group had been around for over a century, it was Swedish botanist and zoologist Carl Linnaeus who, in **1735**, first used color-coded races to classify the human world and ascribe stereotypical characteristics to its inhabitants: "Whites" were from Europe, "Blacks" originated in Africa, "Yellows" came from Asia, and "Reds" were indigenous to the Americas.

The laws and social practices in the newly formed United States thus set people of European ancestry apart from the Indigenous inhabitants of North America and peoples of the rest of the world, and endowed the relatively new category of White people with privileges denied to others. Self-identified "Anglo-Saxon" elites, as the most powerful group to settle in the North American colonies,

insisted on further distinctions to whiteness. Beginning in the **mid-1800s**, they subdivided the category "White" into sub-groups - Saxons, Celts, Teutons, Slavs, Southern Europeans, etc. - with the aim of limiting the naturalization of "White" immigrants to the more desirable Western Europeans.

In 1897, African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the first scholars to maintain that the ranking of humankind by physical traits has no basis in science. He asserted that a "race" is constituted by a common history, traditions, and other social and spiritual features, not by "blood" or biology. This argument made little headway in the **early 1900s**, as the popular writers on race continued refining racial categories, establishing a hierarchy that placed Europeans at the top, Africans at the bottom, and all other groups somewhere in-between, with devastating social, political, and economic consequences. By the **1940s**, popular and scientific thought had consolidated humankind into three or four groups identified principally by physical characteristics rooted in biology: "Caucasian" (White), "Mongolian" or "Mongoloid" (including Indigenous Americans), "Negroid," and sometimes "Australoid." Such notions were widely accepted by historians, scientists, and other academics, although they were not founded on fact.

In recent years, the Human Genome Project and advances in human genetics have proved conclusively that "race" is a scientifically invalid construct. Biologists estimate that all human beings share 99% of their DNA, the genetic blueprint of our species. In fact, there is so little genetic difference between "races," and so much variation within them, that two people of European descent may be more genetically similar to an African or Asian person than they are to each other. Important cultural differences separate groups with a common geographical origin, history, or traditions; these are differences to be respected and often celebrated, but they are not "racial" differences.

Yet the false notion that racial differences are "real" persists, and is deeply embedded in the systems of power and lived realities of people in the United States and globally. Tragically, it has been used to rationalize oppressive practices: the expulsion and near genocide of Indigenous peoples; the importation, enslavement, lynching, imprisonment, and forced labor of African-

descended peoples; and the violent and oppressive treatment of other people of color - all for the benefit of generations of Whites. That legacy of history affects all of us, an inheritance we must become aware of if we are to free the present and future from its inequities and injustice.

Structured from the very beginning to privilege Whites and disadvantage Black and Brown people, American society and economy continue to do so in both blatant and hidden but powerful ways. Examples include legal and de facto segregation, exclusion from the full benefits of government programs (e.g. loans to military veterans), underfunded schools, discrimination in employment and housing, and arbitrary law enforcement, resulting in disproportionate rates of arrest and conviction, and in harsher sentences for similar crimes committed by Whites. Systemic racism also incites and supports daily, individual, person-to-person actions that denigrate people of color and reinforce White privilege.

THE EVOLVING VOCABULARY OF "RACISM"

"Racism" refers to beliefs and actions based on the notion that "race" is the primary, innate, and unalterable determinant of human traits and capacities, and that racial differences account for the inherent superiority of one race - usually the "White" race - over all others. The word "racism" did not exist until **1902**; before that, "prejudice" was the term used to describe these beliefs and actions.

Today, "prejudice," like "bias," is defined as the inclination to attribute inherent characteristics to other people and to treat them accordingly. One can be prejudiced in favor of tall women or biased against vegetables. But racial stereotypes are not individual quirks; they are the building blocks of the collective beliefs that have supported White dominance, denied equality in American life, and sustained the inequity that has limited the life chances of millions of citizens. If we are to achieve democracy for all, Americans must take active steps to dismantle the racism structured into every aspect of American society: to seek its history by visiting African American museums and historic sites; to educate themselves about its sources and role in today's society and economy; and to vote and advocate for public policies that support the rights and dignity of all people.

neighborhoods. This caused many African American families who otherwise could afford to move into better lodging to remain stuck in overcrowded, resource-deprived neighborhoods or take on predatory loans that often led to bankruptcy. The federal government created programs for soldiers returning from World War II, such as the GI Bill, to support further education and subsidize planned residential communities like Levittown in Long Island. This Bill was structured by southern legislators using Jim Crow laws, making it difficult for most Black veterans to benefit.

1954 - "SEGREGATION UNLAWFUL"

It would be more than half a century before an NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded 1909) lawsuit resulted in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. This 1954 Supreme Court decision overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* and declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. *Brown v. Board* paved the way for the dismantling of White supremacy in American law during the 1960s and 70s.

1960s - TODAY

Sadly, in the years following the successes of the 1960-70s Civil Rights Movement, a quiet movement began in the nation's legislatures, courts, schools, banks, and other institutions to dismantle the many gains African Americans had made and to whitewash or mute continued challenges in Black communities, placing new barriers in the way of social, political, and economic advancement. Today, the disproportionate imprisonment of young Black men, unpunished police shootings, persistence of gerrymandering and other forms of Black voter suppression, along with health, housing, career, pay, educational, and many other inequities, show that a great deal of work remains to eliminate racial disparities and establish equity and justice in American life. The televised coverage of George Floyd's choking death under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, followed by coverage of similar events, has generated a growing movement to end systemic racism.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, (New York, NY, Anchor Books, 2008)

Deneen L. Brown, "Remembering 'Red Summer,' when White mobs massacred Blacks from Tulsa to D.C.," *National Geographic*, June 19, 2020

California Newsreel, 2003 "Race-The Power of an Illusion"

Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014.

Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2010)

Lawrence Goldstone, *Inherently Unequal: The Betrayal of Equal Rights by the Supreme Court, 1865-1903*, (New York, NY, Walker & Company, 2011)

Nikole Hannah-Jones et al., "The 1619 Project," *The New York Times Magazine*, 2019

Travis Hartman, Sam Hart, Jonnelle Marte, and Howard Schneider, "Black White-The Race Gap: from birth to death, black people face systemic disadvantages in American life more than 150 years after slavery was abolished," Reuters Graphics

Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*, (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Meilan Solly, "158 Resources to Understand Racism in America," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2020

John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North 1730-1830*, (Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007)

CONTENT REVIEWERS

Robert Bellinger, Suffolk University, Black Studies Program Director

Robert Gross, University of Connecticut, History Professor Emeritus, author of *The Minutemen and Their World*

Elon Cook Lee, Public Historian and Director of Education and Interpretation, National Trust for Historic Preservation





EARLY 1800s – NORTHERN “FREEDOM”

When Robbins House resident **Jack Garrison** emancipated himself from slavery by heading north from New Jersey to Concord, Massachusetts in about 1810, he was fleeing a state where slave laws were still in force. By living free in Concord, he found refuge in a state where slavery was nearly extinct. But New England was no promised land. As slavery gradually disappeared from the region and the area became a haven for individuals escaping bondage further south, the population of free people of color steadily rose, and their reception was decidedly mixed. While some Whites welcomed their new neighbors, the dominant reaction, in law and in society, was to denigrate and restrict freedom for African Americans, often in systematic ways that differed from town to town and state to state.

Jack Garrison was never able to vote in Concord. Slavery left him too poor to meet the property-holding requirement. Nonetheless, Jack was subject to the poll tax, a tax required of every voter since the colonial era. Within one generation Jack’s son **John** met the tax requirement and cast ballots, as did Robbins House resident **Peter Hutchinson**. Even so, before the Civil War, men of African descent were barred from full citizenship. They could not serve on juries or participate in militia trainings.

By the 1820s and 1830s the **Garrison children** attended the Concord public schools with White children, which had become the norm in most small Northern school districts with relatively few Black children. In Boston, which boasted multiple Black enclaves, education was segregated until the 1850s. After that time, protests,

lawsuits, and petitions by African Americans, including **Ellen Garrison**, ultimately led the Massachusetts legislature to forbid assigning students to separate schools by race. Elsewhere in New England, some attempts to integrate schools met with violence.

Laws violated the civil rights of northern people of color in many ways. In the early 1800s, when northern states began to eliminate property requirements for voting to enable “universal manhood suffrage,” most of them explicitly limited suffrage to White men. Massachusetts was one of the few states that still allowed African American men to vote. “Universal manhood suffrage” was, in most states, for Whites only; in most of the country “democracy” was only for White men.

Public transportation was segregated, despite the protests and petitions of African Americans, including **Ellen Garrison**. White passengers and proprietors used force to bar people of color from public conveyances (i.e. stagecoaches, steamships, etc). The new railroads assigned Black travelers to filthy “Jim Crow” cars. Marriage between Blacks and Whites was illegal in Massachusetts until 1843 and in Rhode Island and Maine until the 1880s. Black neighborhoods in Boston, Providence, and Hartford all suffered multiple deadly attacks by White mobs. These events led to the loss of Black-owned businesses, homes, and in some cases whole neighborhoods and the lives of women, children, and men.

1857 – DRED SCOTT CASE: “NO RIGHTS”

Racist social conventions, laws, and judicial decisions hardened throughout the antebellum period. These culminated in the Dred Scott decision of 1857, when the

U.S. Supreme Court ruled that people of African descent were not citizens and “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Dred Scott’s enslavers moved from Missouri to the free areas of Illinois and Wisconsin, then back to Missouri – at which point Scott sued for his freedom. The resulting U.S. Supreme Court decision denied Blacks citizenship.

As Hosea Easton, a Massachusetts man of African American and indigenous descent, argued passionately in a pamphlet published in 1837, *“It is a remarkable fact, that the minute the colored people show signs of life... an unrelenting hatred arises in the mind which is inhabited by that foul fiend, prejudice [racism].”* The failure to acknowledge, and reluctance to patent and reward, the many critically important contributions of Blacks, from agricultural innovations to mechanical inventions, demonstrates the truth of Easton’s insight.

1865-1877 – RECONSTRUCTION ERA

Between 1865 and 1870, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery. The Constitution subsequently guaranteed all people “independent of race, color, or previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude,” birthright citizenship and due process of law, and voting rights for all Black men. During the brief postwar Reconstruction era, 2,000 Black men were elected to public office, including two senators and fourteen congressmen. In 1866 the first African American men, Edward G. Walker and Charles L. Mitchell, were elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. By 1870, over 30 institutions of higher education were established for African Americans (now known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs).

1877 – “BLACK CODES”

But Whites in the former Confederate states fiercely resisted these changes. Reconstruction was brought to a sudden end with the Compromise of 1877 and the removal of Federal troops from the South. Black congressmen and senators were swept, often violently, out of office and all-White legislatures across the South passed new “Black codes” nearly identical to the regulations that had oppressed the lives of enslaved people. Because the 13th Amendment forbade servitude or enslavement “except as a punishment for crime,” courts prosecuted Black men for “crimes” such as speaking loudly in the presence of a White woman and walking beside a railroad track. Too poor to pay fines for these “crimes,” Black men were incarcerated and then leased to plantation and mine owners to serve long sentences of forced labor – a practice that has been called “slavery by another name.”

On several occasions White citizens voted to purge their counties of Black leaders and ordinary citizens alike. Even in majority Black districts, White citizens would arm themselves, join forces with the local police or militia, and threaten Black residents with loss of jobs, businesses, and their lives. According to newspaper accounts, towns voted to “hunt down and kill every Negro” through mob attacks such as the Clinton Massacre of 1875 (Mississippi) and the Colfax Massacre in 1873 (Louisiana). No Whites were charged for these violent crimes. School lessons on local history ignored these events, and communities were terrified into silence. Corruption in President Grant’s administration led to the destruction of the Freedman’s Savings Bank, financially devastating the newly freed African Americans who had entrusted their life’s savings to the institution. Congress recommended indictments of the responsible officials, but no action was taken.

The Ku Klux Klan (founded 1865), often with the approval or actual participation of local White officials, waged a terrorist war on African American men daring to vote. In spite of the 1866 Civil Rights Act, people of color, including **Ellen Garrison** in Maryland, continued to be refused service in public facilities. Almost 3,500 African Americans were lynched between 1882 and 1968 for “offenses” such as drinking from a “Whites only” water fountain, sitting in “Whites only” spaces, being seen in the company of a White woman, attempting to vote or register others for voting, or demanding justice for another lynching victim.

By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, southern states had created a racist regime of Jim Crow. “Jim Crow” laws, named for a racist minstrel show character played by a White actor in blackface, segregated public institutions and private accommodations. Discriminatory voting regulations effectively barred African Americans from the polls.

Lynchings, mob attacks on Black communities, and other race-based violence drove many African Americans to seek freedom elsewhere, with some, such as **Ellen Garrison**, joining the late 1870s-1880s “exodus” to Kansas. On the Great Plains they founded safer Black communities – on lands from which Native Americans had been violently removed to reservations barely a decade before. At the same time, job and housing discrimination, along with other political and social conventions, effectively segregated northern schools, cities, and towns.

1896 – “SEPARATE BUT EQUAL”

Throughout the post-Civil-War years, African Americans resisted all of these forms of racism and discrimination. But by the time **Ellen Garrison** left Kansas in 1890 for

Pasadena, California, there was no refuge anywhere from the pervasive institutional racism that poisoned American life. In 1896, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation in public transportation, a case that legitimized segregation in public facilities of all kinds, including schools, under a doctrine that came to be known as “separate but equal.” Even though Black citizens paid equal and in some cases more in taxes than their White neighbors, local tax-supported resources like textbooks, science lab equipment, money for building repairs, and teacher salaries that were allocated to African American schools were usually fewer and of poorer quality than what was provided to White schools.

EARLY 1900s – SYSTEMIC RACISM GROWS

Legal support for segregation also seemed to foster new rounds of anti-Black practices, including outright mob violence. The Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the wealthiest Black community in the U.S., often called “Black Wall Street,” was attacked by Whites in 1921, resulting in 300 deaths and the destruction of 35 blocks. Nearly 100 years after the massacre many Tulsa natives are just now learning of this history. In 1923, the largely Black town of Rosewood, Florida was destroyed, with several of its residents killed and the rest driven out. No Whites were convicted of these crimes and the survivors were forced into silence or escaped to northern cities with larger Black populations that might protect them.

Federal, state, and local governments with the help of banks “redlined” Black neighborhoods, refusing mortgages to people seeking to purchase homes there and to Black residents looking to move into White

*NOTE: names in bold are associated with the Robbins House