

# 4. SEGREGATION AND DISCRIMINATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

## In the 19th Century

During the antebellum period, slavery served as the primary mechanism for segregation. The vast majority of people of color were enslaved in the Southern “slave states.” Slavery served as an effective barrier between the slaves in the fields and the landowners either in the manors or in the cities. The 300-some-year history of the institution of slavery bestowed a general philosophy of the inferiority of people of color, one that would persist into the 20th (arguably the 21st) century. These prejudices were upheld by local, state, and federal government decisions, such as the Dred Scott decision – the 1857 Supreme Court case, which determined that anyone of African descent was not a citizen and could not sue in American courts. Slaves were viewed as property, not human individuals, and therefore had no rights to due process. This decision also squarely placed the issue of slavery in the hands of the states and put off the federal government’s responsibility for slavery and the welfare of African Americans for a few more years.

During the Civil War, the decision was made to create the United States Colored Troops (USCT), which accepted people of color into the military, but ensuring they were in segregated units commanded by white officers. African Americans were not welcome in the Confederate Army, although some continued to served their masters on the battlefield. Despite acceptance within the nearly 200 regiments of USCT, how the men were treated depended greatly on the officers in charge and their personal prejudices. Following the Union's victory, the nation focused

on settling lands and encouraged all citizens to buy federal land under the 1862 Homestead Act. While this act explicitly included ex-slaves and freemen, due to widespread discrimination, the participation of African Americans was relatively low. While this act was intended to bring equality among landowners in the South by helping sharecroppers and tenant farmers to gain ownership. Unfortunately, this Jeffersonian ideal was never reached.

The end of the Civil War and the 13th amendment unfortunately did not bring to an end segregation, discrimination, or racism. Instead,

what followed was a century of debate based on several so-called “race problems.” Sometimes these viewpoints were truly altruistic, others condescending, others still were outright racist and segregationist. Most white communities came to agree that slavery was an abhorrent institution, but believed that white and black people were not meant to live together.

(Below) Plan of Evergreen Plantation, St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana. Historic American Buildings Survey, 1993 (Library of Congress)

