

The official viewpoint of the federal government after the Civil War can be summed up in the overall short-lived and often-deemed unsuccessful period of Reconstruction, which intended to bring the South back to its feet. The 15th amendment was ratified in 1870, which made it unconstitutional to discriminate against a citizen's voting rights. And the Civil Rights Act of 1875 outlawed racial segregation in public accommodations and transportation, however it did not forbid segregation of schools. In response, many Southern states passed "Black Codes," laws that dictated anything and everything that people of color were allowed or not allowed to do. The codes discriminated against people of color and prolonged the institution of cheap labor and initiated convict labor systems. By 1877, the North and the federal government lost interest in reconstructing the South and all federal troops were withdrawn. Civil rights issues, equality, and segregation became more locally controlled issues.

North Alabama's isolated geography and culture ensured that the area experienced the events and changes of the 19th century somewhat differently from the rest of the state or the South. The Homestead acts had little impact on African American landownership in North Alabama. The overwhelming majority of people of color in the Middle Tennessee Valley did not take advantage of the acts. The communities of North Alabama are mostly comprised of people and families that were once enslaved in the area. The majority of people did not leave North Alabama, or even the county or town near where they were enslaved. Although the written records for communities of color in the 19th century are scarce, 20th century records indicate that people of color that eventually owned farms were from the area.

Legislation for civil rights passed during Reconstruction allowed for people of color to take up office in state and federal government. Several successful politicians were from or associated with North Alabama, such as William Hooper Councill (clerk in the Alabama legislature, 1873 and 1874), James T. Rapier (Republican in the House of Representatives, Alabama, 1873-1875), and Oscar Stanton De Priest (Republican in the House of Representatives, Illinois, 1929-1935). Unfortunately, by the turn-of-the-19th-century, Alabama as a whole rolled back many of the

strides made on behalf of people of color. Despite its divergent history, North Alabama still experienced widespread racism and discrimination. By the 1880s, Jim Crow laws were established and by the 1890s, the disenfranchisement of people of color began in earnest.

The 20th Century

The turn of the 20th century set the stage for race relations in the United States for decades to come. In the Supreme Court case of 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the renowned notion of "separate but equal" upheld the legal segregation of people of color and formally institutionalized the Jim Crow era. For the next six decades, all institutions and services from public transportation to education, from hospitals to prisons, and water fountains and restaurants would be separated by race. Segregation was often regulated by signage informing people of color where and what they were allowed to do or use and enforced by social norms if not local law enforcement or threats of vigilante violence. Of course, most facilities and services for people of color were not equal leading to civil unrest culminating in the mid-20th century.

At the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century there were two other kinds of segregation exemplified in North Alabama, which were attempts at more benevolent means of separating people of color from the society at large. One, would be the creation of communities explicitly for people of color, such as Cedar Lake, led by white people in conjunction with prominent people of color. The other, a kind of "self-segregation" where people of color came together on their own to organically form "settlements." Mrs. Ray, and presumably others like her, believed that communities of color could only contribute to society if they were self-sufficient, self-governed, and separated from the nuisance of attempting to integrate into white society. Some members of the white community thought that people of color should not have to compete with white people on an individual level but interact more like neighboring countries exchanging some goods and services while remaining separate.

On the other hand, there were numerous so-called settlements created for people of color by people of color throughout the South.

Prominent African Americans such as Booker T. Washington encouraged landownership and the creation of communities, particularly ones based on agriculture. In the several publications of *The Negro Year Book*, there is often a section which lists the towns and settlements created

(Below) A Cartoon of Racial Discrimination, Circa 1870s (Library of Congress)

