

THE ORIGIN OF "JIM CROW"

Jim Crow laws were named for an ante-bellum minstrel show character. The minstrel show is one of the first forms of American entertainment. The tradition began in February 1843 when a group of four white men from Virginia, who called themselves, the "Virginia Minstrels," smeared black cork on their faces and then put on a song-and-dance act in a small hall in New York City. Their performance was such a hit that the group was invited to tour to other cities. Before long, many other entertainers were imitating that style. They all gained success around the country imitating how African-Americans sang and danced.

One performer, who became the most famous, was called Daddy Rice. He was a white actor, who was inspired by an elderly African American man from Louisville, Kentucky, who sang and danced to a song that ended with the same chorus:

"Wheel about and turn about and do just so,
Ev'ry time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow."

Rice's imitation of the African-American song and dance routine took him from Louisville to Cincinnati to Pittsburgh to Philadelphia and finally to New York City in 1832.

Jim Crow laws, named for the minstrel show character, were passed in the late 1800s by the legislatures of the Southern states that discriminated against African Americans in the south. After the Civil War, many former slaves left the rural areas to live in towns and cities. During Reconstruction, blacks and whites often rode together in the same railway cars, ate in the same restaurants, and used the same public facilities but didn't hang out with each other socially. However, some white southerners thought that the large urban black communities, which provided labor for factories, created a threat. The white southerners couldn't control these new communities the same way they had been able to control the blacks in a more rural setting, where they were dependent on the whites for work. In the city, blacks and whites competed for jobs, and some felt there was a danger of social mixing. The whites felt a need to gain more control over the blacks in the city. New laws, called Jim Crow, were passed restricting the freedoms of African Americans.

In 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. The Court also ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment kept state governments from discriminating against people because of race but did not keep private organizations or individuals from doing so. This allowed railroads, hotels, theaters, and other businesses to legally practice segregation. By 1914 every southern state had passed laws that created two separate societies: one black, the other white. Blacks and whites could not ride together in the same railroad cars, sit in the same waiting rooms, use the same washrooms, eat in the same restaurants, or sit in the same theaters. Blacks were denied access to parks, beaches, and picnic areas; they were barred from many hospitals.

Beginning in 1915, the Supreme Court began to intervene and Jim Crow laws were challenged. One of the most important court decisions occurred in 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled in a case called *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregated public schools were unconstitutional.

This began what is known as the "Civil Rights Movement" in the 1960s, which finally ended the Jim Crow laws.