

# Racism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## What Racism Wrought: The Social and Economic Conditions of Blacks

In 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois lamented that African Americans always measured themselves "by the tape of a [white] world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Whites forever measured the social and economic status of blacks, often mockingly, and their assessment deepened their racism and contempt and, in some cases, pity, for the black minority. After pressing African Americans down to the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder, whites attributed the lack of black social mobility to racial inferiority, which in turn gave whites more reason to push blacks further down and render them more separate and unequal.

It is important to remember that nearly 90 percent of African Americans lived in the Negrophobic South in 1900. By 1920, despite the increasing black migration to the North and West, about 85 percent of black Americans still resided in the South, typically defined as the eleven former Confederate states plus Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia (some studies include Missouri). Of the total American population of 76,094,000 in 1900, 11.5 percent or 8,833,000 were black. While blacks accounted for approximately one-third of the southern population, they comprised a majority of nearly 60 percent in Mississippi and South Carolina at the turn of the century. Moreover, in the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana, blacks made up more than 40 percent of the population. In this period blacks had a majority in 108 southern counties, some of them by ratios of 3 to 1 or more.

Most southern blacks labored on the land from sunup to sundown to eke out a living in a system stacked against them. In 1900, 50.4 percent of blacks worked in agriculture. In the so-called Black Belt of the Deep South states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, the number of blacks engaged in agriculture ranged from 53 to 69 percent. Entrapment in a backward plantation system meant that most blacks lived in deep poverty, and historians show that they had little chance of escaping the system. Many black tenant farmers and sharecroppers never turned a profit and simply fell deeper into debt each year, living off cash advances by the landlord or furnishing merchant and paying outrageous rates of interest from 20 to 35 percent. Droughts, floods, and the infestation of the boll weevil also devastated their crops, and rapacious landlords often cheated the ill-educated croppers out of some or all of their rightful profits. The oppressive system of agriculture made a mockery of the work ethic. In *Trouble in Mind* (1998), a study of the Age of Jim Crow, the historian Leon F. Litwack concluded, "A lifetime of hard work, honesty, diligence, frugality, and punctuality might, in fact, leave them [black farmers] worse off than when they began." Although one of the greatest desires of blacks was to purchase land, three-fourth of them owned not an acre. Although the number of black landowners increased from 1900

to 1910 (it actually peaked in that year), few blacks ever managed to amass enough capital to buy a sufficient amount of productive land on which to prosper. Although 24 percent of southern blacks owned land in 1910, only 13 percent of them had agricultural acreage in the plantation areas of the Deep South. In the heavily populated, rich-soil, Delta region of Mississippi, the ownership of land by blacks dropped from 7.3 percent in 1900 to 2.9 percent in 1920. Moreover, in 1910 the size of the average black farmer's spread was only 47.3 acres (down from 51.2 acres in 1900), while the average white farm was 141.3 acres. Blacks did somewhat better in the Upper South, with a rate of land ownership there hovering around 40 percent. Most blacks, however, lived in the Deep South.

Not only did the poverty produced by the sharecropping-tenant system militate against black land ownership but whites in the plantation South also conspired to keep blacks landless, poor, and deferential. A large but uncalculated amount of land was wrested from blacks by fraud and intimidation. Generally, African Americans had to pass the test of deference to whites before they could purchase good land from the ruling class. In addition, white farmers formed Klan-like organizations and tried to prevent other whites from selling good farmland to blacks. They also singled out for punishment black landowners who seemed too successful. In parts of the South, especially in Mississippi but also in Georgia and Kentucky, night-riders known as Whitecaps practically declared war on black farmers. In 1903 hundreds of disgruntled, economically depressed white farmers attacked black landowners and sharecroppers in Southwest Mississippi. In this case, bands of Whitecaps repeatedly terrorized black farmers, burning their houses and barns and looting, beating, and killing them. It is estimated that before the end of 1903, nearly one thousand blacks fled Amite County, Mississippi, in the wake of the Whitecaps' rides.

Many debt-ridden black farmers sank into peonage or debt slavery. In 1907 A. J. Hoyt, a seasoned veteran of peonage investigations brought in by the federal government, estimated that as many as one-third of all black farmers in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi were being held on and forced to work land involuntarily. Most of the southern states had laws making it a crime for tenant farmers or sharecroppers to leave the land if they owed money to the landowner. Such scandalous cases of peonage came to light in the early twentieth century that in 1911 the Supreme Court struck down a section of an Alabama law that fostered the medieval practice. But peonage did not cease until after World War II. The legislatures of the southern states found ways around federal court rulings, all-white juries generally refused to indict member of their race for peonage, and governors often pardoned those who were convicted of the crime. In short, most white Southerners simply did not consider black peonage immoral or illegal.

And if blacks fared badly in agriculture, they did little better in other occupations. Working in a world of severely constricted economic options, more than 90 percent of blacks working outside agriculture did so as blue-collar laborers. In 1910 fewer than 3 percent of blacks in the nation held skilled jobs. Blacks actually lost ground in skilled jobs after the Civil War. Under slavery, planters trained blacks to work as blacksmiths, carpenters, bricklayers, coopers, and tailors, much to the resentment of their free white

competitors. In 1865 black skilled craftsmen in the South outnumbered whites by five to one. By the twentieth century, however, whites had begun to replace blacks in skilled jobs. And in new employment areas such as plumbing and electrical work, blacks barely got a foot in the door. As all-white state boards began to license tradesmen in the Progressive Era, less-educated blacks found it more difficult to get qualified for skilled jobs.

Barbering and railroad work provide examples of how black employment in skilled jobs declined. In the 1890s black barbers far outnumbered white ones; in Georgia the ratio was ten to one. By 1920, though, there were twice as many white barbers as black ones. In the postwar South many black barbers established lucrative businesses catering exclusively to affluent whites. With the rise of Jim Crow, however, all black barbers had to restrict their business to the less-affluent members of their own race. In 1910, 104,000 southern blacks worked for the railroads. But as technology made railroad jobs cleaner and safer, whites began to demand and get more of these jobs. For instance, in 1910, 1,000 black switchmen, brakemen, and firemen worked for the railroads in Mississippi; thirty years later fewer than 100 did.

And, regardless of occupation, no matter how skilled black workers were, they always received lower wages than their white counterparts. Indeed, whites warned that equal pay for blacks would unfairly elevate them above Caucasian workers. As a mill superintendent in South Carolina explained, in a stunning display of self interest:

The colored man does not expend for his living what the white man does. It costs the white laborer more to live. The result is that if the colored laborer received the same wages as the white man, he would have the advantage of the white man, even in his living.

With job discrimination firmly in place, blacks tended to find employment in the dirtiest and most arduously dangerous jobs, ones so forbidding that few whites cared to take them. And white employers were happy to have cheaper black workers in such southern industries as lumber, turpentine, fertilizer, and shipping. In 1910 blacks occupied 24,647 of the 28,647 jobs in the turpentine industry, considered the worst type of employment imaginable. Turpentine workers toiled in isolated camps for long hours in hot and humid weather near insect-infested swamps and could only spend their meager pay in company stores that charged outrageous prices.

Although southern blacks and whites worked together in steel mills, tobacco factories, coal mines, and southern ports, they seldom labored on equal terms. Blacks composed 39.1 percent of the steel-workers in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1907, but they held the unskilled jobs that paid the least and had the most risks for injury and death. Blacks made up about half the work force in tobacco plants but were assigned the heavy manual labor of hauling tobacco and stemming leaves by hand while whites ran and maintained the machines at higher rates of pay. African Americans received greater opportunities in mining due to interracial unionism and the loathsome and risky nature of the job. In 1900 black coal miners totaled 33.7 percent of all the miners in the South. But even in mining, black employment dropped to 23.3 percent in 1920 and would

continue downward to 16 percent in 1940. Moreover, black workers were virtually excluded from jobs in the new and rapidly expanding industries of oil and gas.

The same was true of the textile industry. Proponents of the New South believed that cotton mills would provide work for poor whites and rescue them from degradation and the possibility of sinking below blacks. Blacks therefore had to be excluded from the number-one industry in the South. Though ridiculed as poor white trash and "lintheads," mill families made considerably more money than the ordinary dirt farmer. In *The Politics of Whiteness* (2001), the historian Michelle Brattain revealed that three members of a white family working in a cotton mill—the mills hired women and children for lower wages—could earn about \$900 a year, significantly more than a white family of tenants or sharecroppers. During a time when 90 percent of rural inhabitants did not have electricity, telephones, and running water, the paternalistic mill owners provided their employees all of these modern amenities plus indoor plumbing, iceboxes, movie theaters, baseball teams, and laundry service. The "politics of whiteness" helped create a southern working class that allowed a higher living standard for marginal whites and raised them well above most African Americans. Blue-collar whites understood well that their economic trump card lay in color identity and racial solidarity, not in forging interracial, class coalitions.

Black women faced even more limited job options than men, and those who did find employment were subject to sexual exploitation. Roughly 80 to 90 percent of black working women served as cooks, maids, and laundresses and labored ten to fourteen hours a day, six days a week. Excluded from the traditional female-dominated jobs such as clerical work, black women cleaned, cooked, and washed for white people for \$2 to \$3 a week. In large northern cities, black women, though but a tiny fraction of the population, made up almost 30 percent of the servants by 1920. At the turn of the century, almost 85 percent of black women in Philadelphia were servants. Although Progressive Era society stigmatized all married women who worked outside the home, in 1910 four-fifths of all the female workers in Mississippi were black, and more than one-third of married black women in New York City held jobs, as compared to 4.2 percent of their white counterparts.

The black maid or Mammy was a prized vestige of Old South culture. Whites coveted good, loyal maids and often grew personally attached to them. Black maids not only managed the households of the white middle and upper classes, they practically raised their employers' children, often to the neglect of their own. Black servants relieved white women of household tasks and freed them up to become southern ladies with time to engage in charitable work or become activists for Prohibition, women's suffrage, or better schools and health. As the historian Grace Elizabeth Hale said of southern ladies during the period, "White womanhood was as much a racial construction as a gendered one."

Since black domestics were always in high demand, they were not always as compliant and docile as whites desired. Sometimes the "colored help" could be cantankerous and sullen, even nasty. Aunt Delia of South Carolina recalled, "How many times I spit in the biscuits and peed in the coffee just to get back at them mean white folks." Delia stressed the tendency of men in a white household to abuse black maids sexually. In 1912 a

southern live-in maid complained in the *Independent* not only about the long hours and low pay but also the sexual improprieties of her employers. "I believe," the servant protested, "nearly all whites take, and expect to take, undue liberties with their colored female servants—not only the fathers, but in many cases the sons also."

In the main, northern blacks faced even more economic discrimination than did southern blacks. In 1907 Oswald Garrison Villard, an influential New York publisher, confessed, "It is our northern disgrace that a negro finds it harder to get work here than in the South." In the North, the vast majority of blacks worked as dishwashers, busboys, and ditch diggers. More than 60 percent of black men and more than 80 percent of black women worked in menial jobs in northern cities. In these places the highest position most blacks could aspire to was a steward on a steamship, a headwaiter in a restaurant, or a sleeping-car porter on a train. Until the manpower shortage in World War I opened up factory jobs to blacks, the industrial revolution in the North essentially bypassed African Americans. In the industrial centers blacks lost out to European immigrants, even the most recent arrivals. In 1910, 33 percent of new immigrants held skilled industrial jobs while only 8 percent of blacks did. In Pittsburgh, Irish, Poles, Italians, and Slavs manned the blast furnaces. After 1900 blacks even began to lose custodial and service jobs to immigrants. In 1906 the swank Plankinton House in Milwaukee hired Greek waiters to replace its African Americans servers. And across the North the rich began to replace their black cooks with French chefs and their dark-complexioned butlers with English ones. Thus, in the relatively prosperous Progressive Era, northern blacks as a group experienced little or no upward social mobility.

African American workers also had to contend with the hostility of white-controlled labor unions. Although Samuel Gompers, the perennial president of the powerful American Federation of Labor, spoke out against the exclusion of blacks from unions in the 1890s, he soon acquiesced in barring them altogether or accepting segregated locals. Adding to the anti-black hostility of unions was the use by callous employers of job-hungry blacks as strikebreakers. To be sure, the liberal use of "nigger scabs" by industrialists incited racial violence and weakened the labor movement.

Railroad unions were among the worst discriminators. All four primary railroad unions restricted membership to whites only, and white railroad workers did everything conceivable to force railroad companies to replace black workers with higher paid white ones. In 1899 a spokesman for the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen in Little Rock pleaded with the managers of the Arkansas and Choctaw Railroad, "We ask nothing out of reason and as citizens and taxpayers, as contributors to the general welfare, we think we are right in asking that we be preferred over cheaper negro labor." When the railroads did not comply with the wishes of white workers, they often went on strike and attacked black workers. In 1911 white railroad men killed ten black firemen who refused to stop working for the Cincinnati, New Orleans, and Texas Pacific Railroad. During a 1909 railroad strike in Georgia, an arbitration board recommended equal pay for blacks, not out of a sense of equity but because they knew that the railroads would not hire blacks if compensation for both races were identical.

Despite the ingrained **racism** of most unions, a few accepted African Americans into their ranks and made attempts to forge class solidarity across the color line, most

notably the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the Longshoremen's Association. More than half of all black unionists were UMW members, and one-third of all southern miners were black. But interracial unionism proved extremely hard to sustain with the onset of Jim Crow. The UMW constantly had to deny that it was promoting social equality, which it definitely was not. Coal towns were just as segregated as any other southern locales, for the races were separated in schools, churches, saloons, lodges, bands, and athletic teams. White unionist newspapers even played the race card by accusing mining companies of fostering integration and social equality. Of the seven leadership positions in the Alabama locals, four automatically went to whites, despite the fact that 54 percent of miners in the state were black. Nationally, blacks held but a few token offices in the UMW hierarchy. What was true for the UMW largely applied to the Longshoremen's Association, which was about one-third black.

The poor economic opportunities for blacks as a group translated into widespread poverty accompanied by dilapidated housing, poor health, family instability, a high rate of crime, and other forms of social pathology. In the southern countryside, large black families lived in crude, one-room log huts that had no glass or screens in the windows and only dirt for floors. The living space of a typical sharecropper's house was perhaps 200 square feet—about the same as that of a living room in a modest suburban home **today**. Black farm families lived primarily on a monotonous diet of fatback (pork), corn bread, and molasses that left children deficient in protein and vitamins and therefore subject to chronic anemia and vitamin-deficiency diseases.

The quality of housing urban blacks enjoyed was often no better than it was on the farm, and sometimes it was far worse. By 1900, 27.4 percent of all African Americans lived in cities, and fully one-third of the urban population in the South was African American. Almost every town or city in the South with a sizeable black population had a section the whites called "Bucktown," "Niggertown," "Black Bottom," "Coon Town," "Smoke Town," "Hog Alley," or some such insulting reference. Not surprisingly the black sections of towns typically lacked paved streets, water and sewage systems, streets lights, and other city services. A 1909 report on Louisville found that 53 percent of blacks lived in dilapidated housing, as opposed to 15 percent of foreign-born whites. A northern minister visiting the South exclaimed that "the wretchedness is pathetic and the poverty colossal." The conditions in which urban blacks lived was a testament to the power of **racism** and the lack of power by African Americans.

Between 1890 and 1910 some 200,000 blacks, tired of waiting for a better life in the South, migrated to the North and the West. In 1900 Washington, D.C., had the largest black population of any northern city with 86,000; Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City followed close behind with more than 50,000 each. By 1920 all of these cities, plus Chicago, had more than 100,000 black residents. As southern migration to northern cities accelerated after 1900, large black ghettos formed. Before 1900 most blacks in northern urban centers lived widely scattered about in predominantly white wards or census tracts. But between 1900 and 1920 residential segregation intensified as a flood of mostly uneducated and rural southern blacks streamed into northern cities. By 1920 blacks were largely concentrated in one or two areas of a given city. For example, two-thirds of all blacks in New York City resided in Harlem by this time.

Urban blacks sank quickly into poverty because of low wages and relatively high rents—the black poet Langston Hughes sarcastically noted that the black ghetto was a place

"where a nickel costs a dime." Slum landlords charged higher rent to blacks than whites because housing for African Americans was in short supply and great demand. And since blacks had little choice in housing, landlords had little incentive to maintain rental property. Housing also deteriorated as poor blacks took in boarders (frequently young, single, transient males) to help pay the rent. Only slightly more than one-fifth of African Americans owned homes in 1910, as compared to about one-half of all whites. Even new immigrants in northern cities had a higher percentage of home ownership than did blacks.

And whether in shanty towns, big city slums, or rude and isolated huts in the countryside, blacks generally suffered from poor health. Poverty, poor and often inadequate diets, the lack of social services and medical care, the psychological pressure of being a member of a detested race, and the thoroughly racist justice system gave the average black male a life expectancy of 32.5 years at the turn of the century, 16 years fewer than his white counterpart. In South Carolina, 16 percent of black babies died before reaching the age of one, as compared to 8.6 percent for whites. In Boston and Washington, D.C., 32 percent of black babies never saw their first birthday. In 1915 in Cleveland, the rate of death among blacks from pneumonia was more than double that of whites and more than four times as many blacks died of tuberculosis. Tens of thousands of Southerners of both races fell victim to pellagra and rickets, both of which are caused by the lack of proper nutrition. An equally large number of Southerners fell victim to the debilitating parasite known as hookworm. The black rate of syphilis, a crippling and deadly disease before the use of penicillin, was eight times that of whites. And the paucity of black physicians and nurses made a bad situation worse. Overall, the death rate for blacks nationally was double that of whites.

The dismal social and economic conditions blacks faced inevitably affected family life. Statistics for the Progressive Era show that black families were less stable than white ones or even those of economically depressed and culturally shocked immigrants just off the boat. The high death rate of black males meant that about one-fifth of black women between the ages of 33 and 45 were widows. Single females headed 19.4 percent of black households in Chicago, 23.9 percent in New York City, and 33.7 percent in urban Georgia. With more than 80 percent of all urban black women working outside the home, black children often received little supervision, which resulted in higher rates (as compared to whites) of juvenile delinquency. And the number of black children born out of wedlock was 12.6 percent as opposed to the native white rate of 1.7 percent and an immigrant rate of 5.2 percent. Although the rate of black illegitimacy seems low compared to current rates—or even the 25 percent cited by the urbanologist (and later senator from New York) Daniel Moynihan in his controversial book, *The Negro Family* (1965)—the "black multiple" was the key statistic. In 1910 the number of black births outside wedlock was 7.41 higher than that of native whites and 2.42 higher than that of recent immigrants.

Contemporary black social scientists did not deny the precariousness of the black family. In *Shadow of the Plantation* (1930), the noted sociologist Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University found that no stigma attached to premarital pregnancy in the rural black communities of the Deep South. "There is, in a sense," he said, "no such thing as



illegitimacy in this community." In *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), Du Bois revealed a high rate of promiscuity and illegitimacy among the working class in the Seventh Ward of Philadelphia. "The lax moral habits of the slave regime still show themselves in a large amount of cohabitation without marriage," Du Bois observed. "The great weakness of the Negro family," he continued, "is still the lack of respect for the marriage bond, inconsiderate entrance into it, and bad household economy and family government. Sexual looseness then arises as a secondary consequence, bringing adultery and prostitution in its train." He added that the "unhealthy tone" of social life among proletarian blacks was also disturbingly evident in the black middle class. In conclusion Du Bois attributed family instability and moral laxity to an especially oppressive history and a current bad environment. But for white scholars of the day, these negative findings simply provided more evidence to back their theories of innate black inferiority. Another aspect of black life universally deplored and feared by whites, and not a few blacks, was crime. White newspapers and magazines concentrated their scanty coverage of African Americans on highly sensationalized stories about black crime, and southern demagogues ranted endlessly about the rising rate of criminality among African Americans. Since the criminal justice system blatantly discriminated against blacks, statistics about black crime in the Progressive Era must be viewed skeptically. Still, whites did not just imagine black crime, nor did they fabricate murder rates for blacks. The homicide rate for blacks in 1920 was about seven times that of whites. As with the subjects of family stability and morality, African American scholars and leaders did not deny the growing problem of black crime. A massive statistical report on the "Negro Population" compiled by three black employees of the Department of Commerce in 1915 revealed that the 2 percent of the northern population that was black committed 26.1 of all the "grave homicides" and that the 33.3 percent of the southern population that was black committed 74.4 percent of the murders.

Du Bois and other African American leaders feared that the high incidence of crime in their communities would retard their efforts to spur black advance in American society. Du Bois denounced the high rates of robbery, burglary, gambling, prostitution, drug use, and violence among city blacks, concluding that the signs of "dissoluteness and crime are more conspicuous than those of poverty." As with the black family, Du Bois attributed the high black crime rate to historical and sociological factors, among them the heritage of slavery, white **racism**, the pathological surroundings of the slums, the lack of job opportunities, resentment and hopelessness among black communities, and disorganized social life. Other scholars have stressed that blacks had so little respect for the law precisely because the criminal justice system treated them so unfairly. They have explained black-on-black violence as African Americans taking out their bitter anger against whites and society on their own kind. Another factor cited as a cause of black vice and crime was the ubiquitous Red Light district, which was usually located either within or near the boundaries of the black section of town. The overwhelming majority of whites paid no attention to such explanations of black crime and continued to believe that African Americans were inherently violent and criminal. Some blacks managed to avoid the poverty and squalor that was the lot of most African Americans, but the black middle class was pathetically small. And the black upper class, if measured by wealth, hardly existed. In 1910 no more than 2 to 3 percent of African Americans held white-collar jobs, and most of those positions had resulted from



segregation. That is, black teachers and black ministers owed their employment to the creation and maintenance of all-black schools and churches. There were, however, pitifully few black physicians, dentists, lawyers, and other professionals. The only white-collar job in which blacks were proportionately over-represented was the ministry. In 1910 the nation had one black doctor for every 3,194 African Americans, while the figure for whites was one for every 553 people. Eighty-eight counties in Georgia had no black doctors. Moreover, black physicians outnumbered black dentists six to one.

To be certain, the shortage of black lawyers in the nation further lessened the chances of African Americans in securing equal justice. In 1910 there were only 795 black lawyers in the United States, or 0.8 percent of the total number. **Racism** and segregation made it difficult for black lawyers to practice in the South, and many blacks considered it prudent to have a white lawyer when appearing in a southern court. The percentage of southern black lawyers actually declined between 1910 and 1940. In 1900 there were twenty-four black lawyers in Mississippi, but only five in 1935. In general, black professionals maintained marginal practices because of their economically strapped clientele. As with white doctors and dentists, blacks often assumed that white lawyers had better training and tended to seek them out.

One advantage of segregation was that it created opportunities for black businesspeople. Those entrepreneurs who fulfilled the economic needs of the segregated black community could and did prosper. In her comprehensive, richly researched work, *The History of Black Business* (1998), Judith E. K. Walker argued that the rise of black corporate America in the period between 1900 and the Great Depression represented "a lost page in the African American experience" and in fact constituted "the golden age of black business activity." Despite the extreme **racism** of the time, some black businesses made substantial progress during this era. The most important advances came from corporate entities that sold stock to raise capital, such as those in insurance, banking, and real estate.

Since white insurance companies either charged African American clients more than their white ones or refused to issue them policies at all, black-owned insurance companies were among the most numerous and successful enterprises. Among the richest black men in America was John Merrick, a former slave, brick mason, and barber who founded the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company in 1899, the largest concern in this sector of the black economy. At his death in 1927, Merrick was worth \$500,000. Second to North Carolina Mutual was the Atlanta Life Insurance, founded by Alonzo Franklin Herndon, who, like Merrick, had been born a slave.

Several national business organizations came into being early in the twentieth century, including the National Bankers Association, the National Association of Negro Insurance Companies, and the National Association of Funeral Directors. In 1912 there were sixty-four black-owned banks in America. Several African Americans gained fortunes in real estate and employed substantial numbers of their race. Founded in 1900, the Metropolitan Mercantile and Realty Company was valued at \$400,000 in 1904, and it employed three hundred people. The Memphis businessman Robert Church, the father of the crusading civil rights advocate Mary Church Terrill, accrued a fortune in real estate. Having no competition from whites and providing a necessary service, black morticians usually stood among the economic elite of the black

community. Those who catered to the grooming needs of blacks could also prosper. After discovering a hair straightening process around 1905, Madame C. J. Walker, a poor washerwoman who migrated from her birthplace in Louisiana to St. Louis, Missouri, set up shop in Indianapolis and became a near millionaire and perhaps the richest black person in America at her death in 1919.

The National Negro Business League, founded by Booker T. Washington in 1900, encouraged and celebrated black entrepreneurship. Furthermore, Du Bois constantly stressed a strong "racial economy" and exhorted blacks to patronize businesses in their own neighborhood. Both men celebrated commercial development in Atlanta, which in 1911 had two thousand black-owned businesses, including one bank, three insurance companies, twelve drugstores, eighty-three barbershops, and eighty-five groceries. Certain cities provided models of inspired business activity. The business sections of both Durham, North Carolina, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, were proudly known as "the Negro Wall Street."

In the main, though, most businesses owned and run by African Americans were shaky enterprises and notoriously undercapitalized. Du Bois estimated that 78 percent of all black concerns were capitalized at less than \$500. Mostly small, mom-and-pop grocery stores and restaurants, 80 percent of black businesses had no paid employees in the Progressive Era. Many black banks were small and wobbly in good times and faltered or folded in bad ones. Even many of the largest and seemingly most secure concerns did not survive a financial panic like that of 1907, or even a short depression such as the one that occurred shortly after World War I. The Great Depression was, of course, devastating for black businesses. As to industrial magnates, no black Carnegies, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts existed.

While any economic progress blacks made in the face of relentless white **racism** was remarkable, the economic lot of African Americans was not an abstract matter of the glass being half-full or half-empty. In truth, there was, relatively speaking, hardly a trickle in the black glass in the early twentieth century, all the way up to World War II. Had politically powerless, economically destitute, and ill-educated African Americans been staunchly unified in purpose, they might have been able to increase their limited chances for upward social mobility. Studies of cities, states, and regions, however, show serious class and color divisions among African Americans. The small black middle class was ambivalent about political activity and segregation, and African American professionals seldom supported black unionists. Established northern blacks railed against the southern "riff-raff" that flooded into northern cities, charging that their crude and criminal behavior only increased **racism**. T. Thomas Fortune groused in the *New York Age*, "Many of the worthless people of the race are making their way northward."

In addition, color prejudice was rife among African Americans. The black elite, consisting primarily of light-skinned mulattoes, formed exclusive clubs and societies that excluded those with dark skin. Even the church, the most cohesive thread in the black community, divided along class, color, and denominational lines. African Americans could not even agree on what they should be called. Should they be known as *colored*, *black*, *Afro-American*, or *Negro*? Du Bois favored the term *Negro* (generally

not capitalized during the Progressive Era except by a few racial liberals), but he became a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (see Chapter Five).

As anyone can see from the preceding, those who would move African Americans forward in the Progressive Era faced a herculean task. This was particularly true in the South, even though the southern states experienced a genuine Progressive Movement like the rest of the nation.

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