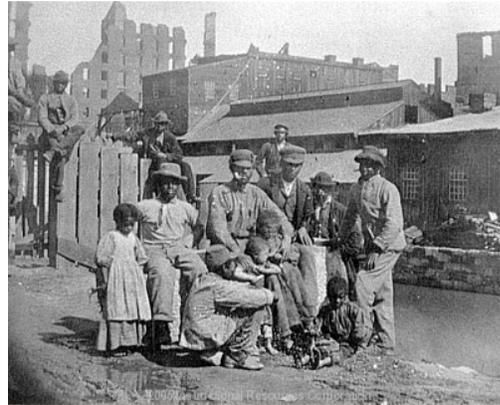


Mending a Broken Union

The Fourteenth Amendment has been the foundation of the civil rights movement. Passed by Congress in June 1866, it was one of three amendments adopted shortly after the Civil War. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship to those once enslaved. The Fifteenth Amendment, which would come two years later, guaranteed black men the right to vote. These three amendments are often called the Reconstruction Amendments.



Photograph of “freedmen” in Richmond, Virginia, 1865. The Fourteenth Amendment was passed to guarantee their rights as citizens.

The Fourteenth Amendment, however, has the broadest reach of the three and has been cited in countless legal cases. Section 1 of the amendment granted citizenship and provided equal protection under the law to newly freed enslaved laborers. This amendment declares that states cannot “abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” The Fourteenth Amendment helped create other victories during the civil rights movement.

The Reconstruction Amendments were an attempt to mend the broken Union and guarantee rights to newly freed enslaved laborers. For African Americans, however, the amendments were not enforced immediately or consistently. At first, the Southern states rejected the Fourteenth Amendment. It passed only because the former Confederate states were *required* to ratify the new amendments to be readmitted to the Union. The Fourteenth Amendment was ratified by states in 1868.

Once Reconstruction ended in 1877, Union troops left the South, and their supporters were forced out of power. Southern state lawmakers immediately began to take away African Americans' rights. African Americans were denied the right to vote through poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and intimidation by groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The Federal government backed away from enforcing the Reconstruction Amendments. Discrimination spread throughout the North as well as the South.

Legalized Segregation

Throughout the South, and in some Northern and Western states, laws began to require racial segregation. They also denied African Americans certain rights. These were called Jim Crow laws. These laws required separate public facilities, schools, train cars, cemeteries, restaurants, and hotels. There were also laws that prohibited African Americans and whites from marrying. From a 21st-century perspective, many of the laws seem silly. For instance, in Georgia, it was illegal for a black barber to cut a white woman's hair. In North Carolina, a law prohibited the same textbooks from being used interchangeably at black and white schools. In Alabama, it was illegal for a white person and a black person to play a game of pool together.

In 1896, Jim Crow laws were challenged in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case. The case was filed on behalf of an African American Louisiana man arrested for sitting in a “white” train car. His lawyers stated that his Fourteenth Amendment rights were violated. They argued that Mr. Plessy was deprived of the liberty to purchase a train ticket and sit where he wanted. Being arrested simply because of his skin color, this man was denied equal protection under the law. The Supreme Court, however, ruled that the Equal Protection Clause of the amendment was not violated if there were separate but equal facilities provided for people of color.

“Separate but equal” became the law of the land, but in reality this equality was not achieved. Black facilities were *always* inferior, or of lesser quality, to white facilities. African American schools, for example, received fewer teachers and fewer textbooks. Their teachers earned lower wages. Schools for African American children were generally run-down and lacked science labs and other facilities common in schools for white children. States consistently spent less to educate African American students. The *Plessy* decision established segregation for the next five decades.

A Landmark Legal Case

After years of legal battles, in 1954, the Supreme Court decided to end legalized segregation. *Brown v. the Board of Education* combined several school segregation cases. In this landmark decision, the Court ruled that segregated public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment. The justices decided that



A political cartoon depicts the “Solid South” trampling on the rights of African Americans.

“in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place.” The court then declared *Brown v. the Board of Education* unconstitutional. The ruling led to the desegregation of public schools.

Integration was not easily achieved, however. Many Southern governors refused to enforce the new law. The governor of Arkansas used the state’s National Guard to block African American students from entering a white school. There were violent riots and upheaval across the South. The *Brown* decision is considered a catalyst, or cause, that launched the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The courageous people who participated in bus boycotts, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and marches demanded equal protection under the law that the Fourteenth Amendment promised.

The Fourteenth Amendment Today

Even though many people consider the civil rights movement as a part of the 1960s, the movement can be traced back to the days of African American enslavement. The Reconstruction Amendments were the first step in ensuring equal rights for African Americans. It was a long fight, however, to see those rights become reality. Over the course of 100 years, many people and organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) worked tirelessly to win rights for African Americans. The civil rights movement made great advancements throughout the 1960s. Dr. Martin Luther King was a pivotal leader who helped bring about the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The law made segregated public buildings illegal. It also prohibited racial discrimination when hiring employees. The following year, the National Voting Rights Act was passed. It finally put an end to poll taxes and other measures that kept many African Americans from voting.

It took nearly 100 years for the Reconstruction Amendments to be enforced. The Reconstruction Amendments continue to be cited as the basis for court cases fighting against discrimination today.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Why was the Fourteenth Amendment added to the Constitution?
 - A. to abolish slavery
 - B. to give newly freed enslaved laborers the right to vote
 - C. to give all men and women the right to vote
 - D. to guarantee citizenship and equal protection under the law

2. What were Jim Crow laws designed to do?
 - A. force newly freed enslaved laborers to become sharecroppers
 - B. guarantee the citizenship of African Americans
 - C. prohibit African Americans from going to school
 - D. segregate and limit the rights of African Americans

3. What role did the Fourteenth Amendment play in *Brown v. Board of Education*?
 - A. The Court threw out the case because it did not relate to the Fourteenth Amendment.
 - B. The Court left it up to states to decide whether Fourteenth Amendment rights were being violated.
 - C. The Court declared segregated schools were not equal and violated Fourteenth Amendment rights.
 - D. The Court ruled that segregated schools were “separate but equal” and did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment.

4. Why do you think it took nearly 100 years for the promises of the Fourteenth Amendment to be fulfilled? Use details from the passage and your own prior knowledge to support your answer.