

# History C175

## U.S. History Since 1876

### Lectures

#### The New South

In the aftermath of the Civil War the South struggled to redefine itself. To understand this process it's important to understand first the characteristics of the pre-Civil War South. The "Old" South had been defined by a social, economic, and political order which stemmed from the plantation system of agriculture. Economically, prior to the war the South had lagged far behind the North in terms of industrial development. A minority of farmers in the South were true "planters" who controlled considerable estates and owned gangs of slaves to work their lands. This elite had a disproportionate amount of power to control the government and the overall economic order. Most white farmers owned their own land, but largely practiced subsistence agriculture -- that is, their crops were primarily used to feed themselves. They might grow a bit on the side to raise cash to buy the goods they couldn't manufacture themselves. The social group with the least status and power were African-Americans, free or slave. Most African-Americans in the South were slaves, prior to the passage of the 13th Amendment at the end of the war. They had few legal rights, including the ability to marry, or obtain an education. Their masters could dispose of them as they wished, breaking apart families and selling them off at a whim. Even free African-Americans, who could own property, lacked basic civil rights such as the right to vote. In the caste system of the Old South, they were automatically considered to be socially inferior.

In the era of Reconstruction immediately following the war there was a concerted effort to restructure the South, supported by Northern opinion and the Federal government. New state governments in the South, primarily under control of the Republican party, pushed to modernize the economy. They subsidized transportation projects, such as railroads, and expanded the public school system to provide education not only for the newly freed African-Americans, but also for the poor whites in the South who had typically suffered from high levels of illiteracy.

At the same time key changes in the Constitution sought to alter the status of African-Americans. The 14th Amendment guaranteed that all Americans born in the United States had equal rights as citizens and the protection of the federal government, while the 15th Amendment guaranteed the voting rights of all citizens, regardless of their race or previous condition of servitude.

Congress also sought to protect the rights of the freedmen with a series of Civil Rights acts which forbade discrimination in public accommodations and which sought to suppress violent terrorist organizations such as the KKK who were trying to maintain the old social order. Almost all these efforts ultimately failed to really change the South. The efforts of Republican dominated state governments to modernize the Southern economy faltered under the weight of their 4

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own ambition and extravagant corruption. The South, economically ravaged by the war, simply could not sustain the level of taxation and spending which they proposed. By the mid 1870s Democrats, calling themselves "Redeemers" had largely forced these governments out of office, promising to dramatically reduce the size of government and to maintain the old social order of racial inequality. By this time the Northern public was increasingly weary of the struggle to change the South, and federal efforts to enforce civil rights faltered. An increasingly conservative federal judiciary also progressively limited the scope of actions available to Congress, overturning measures such as the KKK Act as a usurpation of local police powers. This conservative trend culminated in the Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896 which legalized racial segregation under the 14th Amendment under the doctrine of "separate but equal."

The attempt to modern the South, however, did not end so abruptly. During the Reconstruction era (1865-1877) much of the pressure for change had come from outside the South, but there was also strong internal pressure for change. Many Southerners realized the fundamental economic weakness of their region and wished to modernize and industrialize the economy - to shed the legacy of the agrarian past. This "New South" movement gained a particularly eloquent spokesman in the person of Henry Grady, a prominent Georgia journalist. Grady argued that "There was a South of slavery and secession - that South is dead. There is now a South of union and free - that South, thank God, is living, breathing, and growing every hour."

Efforts to change the Southern economy did bear some fruit. This era witnessed a significant expansion in iron and steel production in this region, particularly in Birmingham, Alabama. At the same time, there was a decided shift in the location of American textile factories as they moved from the North to the South to take advantage of close proximity to their primary raw material (cotton) and abundant supplies of cheap labor.

Yet, despite these changes, the region continued to lag far behind the North. In 1860 the South had approximately 8% of the nation's manufacturing capacity: in 1900, it still had only about 8%. The character of this development also limited its positive impact. While some manufacturing relocated to the South, it was often controlled by Northern financial interests, meaning that the profits flowed North rather than remaining in the South. The type of employment offered by industries such as textiles was also typically very low wage -- this was a key incentive for factories to locate there. This meant that it was often necessary for entire families to work in the mills -- men, women, and children -- to scrape out a living. Indeed, the rate of child labor in the Southern textile industry was staggeringly high. Most of these workers were white -- industrial work was generally banned to black workers. There was an abundant supply of poor white workers because the economic dislocations of the war and the post-war era had caused many of them to lose their lands and economic independence. Ironically, the new textile

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mills became almost like the plantations of the "Old" South, with workers (white in this case) enslaved in a cycle of poverty.

Most Southerners, white or black, continued to work in agriculture. The old plantation system based upon slavery had been destroyed by the war, but this did not mean a fundamental redistribution of land: the wealthy planters of the Antebellum South largely held onto their estates. African-Americans might be legally free, but without land, they were still dependent upon the planter class for employment. Initially the plantation owners tried to farm their land with gangs of workers, as they had in the past, with the difference that these workers were paid wages. African-Americans, however, resisted this system: they preferred to work under a system which became known as "sharecropping". In this case the lands of the plantation were divided up into small individual farms which were then rented to families, who often paid the rent not with cash but with a share of whatever crop they produced. Since they were able to keep a portion of the crop for themselves and sell it, the ultimate hope for the renters was that they could accumulate enough money to buy their own land and achieve true economic independence. In some cases this happened, but more typically sharecroppers remained trapped in a cycle of debt peonage. Contracts heavily favored the land owner and usually contained provisions that required the tenants to only grow cash crops. This meant that to eat the tenants had to buy supplies from the local merchant, who was sometimes the planter himself. Since they rarely had cash, they used credit, hoping that they would make enough profit when the crops came in to cover this debt. Credit merchants often swindled their customers, charging them high prices and absurdly high interest rates. This, coupled with an unstable market for cash crops like cotton in the late 19th century, ensured that tenant farmers fell deeper and deeper in debt to these merchants, unable to accumulate any surplus to buy their own land. This system of sharecropping and debt peonage affected not only African-Americans, but also a growing number of poor white Southerners who had lost their lands in the war and its aftermath.

While the economic plight of African-Americans often paralleled the plight of poorer Southern whites, they suffered from unique disabilities in the social and political spheres.

Technically the 15th Amendment to the Constitution had guaranteed the right to vote to all American citizens, but it often did not work out this way in the South. Over time the political establishment found ways to strip away the political rights of African-Americans. One method was the imposition of a poll tax which required the payment of a fee to vote. Since African-Americans were typically the poorest element in Southern society, they often could not afford this, and thus were unable to vote. Many Southern states also imposed a literacy test, which similarly targeted African-Americans who had the least access to education. These measures impacted poorer whites as well, but a variety of measures were passed to lessen their effect upon this group. The "Grandfather Clause" was used by many states to stipulate that if one's grandfather was eligible to vote, then one could vote without paying the poll 6

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tax, while the "understanding clause" provided that illiterates could still vote if they could demonstrate a proper understanding of a passage of the state constitution. The official evaluating this "understanding" obviously could interpret this quite differently for white and black voters. As a result of these tactics, by the early 20th century only a fraction of the African-American population was actually able to vote, ensuring the continuing dominance of traditional white elites.

By the end of the 19th century legalized social segregation had also become deeply entrenched in the South. The 14th Amendment guaranteed the equal protection of the laws for all U.S. citizens, but under the system of "Jim Crow" segregation, African-Americans were relegated to separate facilities in almost every aspect of Southern life. In 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court heard the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson which challenged this system, but it upheld segregation under the principle of "separate but equal": that is, it was alright for states to have separate facilities if they were equal. In fact, the accommodations provided for blacks and whites were seldom even close to equal, but efforts to enforce the letter of this decision proved largely futile. Through these legal mechanisms African-Americans were relegated to inferior political and social status in the South, denied many of the opportunities available to whites.

There were also informal ways to enforce the social status quo. Organizations like the Ku Klux Klan were created specifically to terrorize the African-American population and keep them in a state of subordination. While not legal, the justice system in the South seldom made any effort to suppress their activities. The most extreme form of this domestic terrorist campaign to deny African-Americans their rights was lynching: the execution of individuals accused of crimes without trial. While both blacks and whites were subject to lynching, it was the former group which particularly suffered. It's estimated that by the turn of the 20th century over 100 people were being lynched in the United States, mostly in the South, and mostly African-Americans. These executions were often extraordinarily brutal with the victims being tortured, mutilated, and sometimes burned to death. Again, while technically illegal, the justice system in the South largely ignored these murders, and indeed they were often events widely attended by white citizens-- men, women, and children.

Although the federal government had largely abandoned the struggle for civil rights, African-American activists continued to press for change. One such figure was Booker T. Washington. Following the end of slavery Washington began a campaign to improve educational levels among African-Americans. He created the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama: a school which specialized in teacher training and vocational skills. In 1895 Washington became a national figure when he spoke at the Atlanta Exposition. His speech, sometimes referred to as "the Atlanta Compromise", suggested that the races in the South were like the fingers of a hand: they were separate but they had to work together. He suggested that gaining political rights should not be the first priority of African-Americans, but that they should focus on economic advancement, and that once that had been achieved everything else would follow. His program did not seek to directly confront the social segregation or political disenfranchisement of 7

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African-Americans, although these were his long-term goals. His program focused on the grass-roots of, hoping to create a broad class of prosperous skilled workers who would ultimately help lift all African-Americans towards greater equality.

An alternative approach to civil rights was espoused by Dr. W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois, born in Massachusetts, became the first African-American to be awarded a doctorate from Harvard. Unlike Washington, who argued for a gradual approach to civil rights, DuBois suggested a more direct confrontation, using protest and the legal system to force change. He also differed in emphasizing the importance of creating a well educated class of African-Americans who would help lead the struggle for civil rights: what he called "the Talented Tenth". DuBois wrote extensively about the history and social problems facing African-Americans and became a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Neither approach was particularly successful. By the 1910s Washington was forced to admit that African-Americans were simply not getting the kinds of economic opportunities in the South that they needed to win true social advancement. Similarly, the intellectual and legal challenges that DuBois employed bore little fruit in this era: the system of segregation remained securely in place and Southern laws continued to discriminate against African-Americans in almost every aspect of their lives. It would be many decades before the system of social, political, and economic discrimination created in the South following the Civil War would begin to crumble. 8

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# The Last West

What is the West?

When today we talk about "the west", we're really talking about the American West of the late 19th century. There had been many frontiers before this, but this was the last one, the far west. Where is this place?

One definition is that it begins in the second tier of states west of the Mississippi. This is not just an artificial boundary -- it reflects both the later settlement of this region and the particular environmental conditions which set it apart from the rest of the United States. This is a place of tremendous mountains, open plains, and relatively little rainfall. It is a place we can physically describe.

But "the west" also describes a place in the American imagination. Consider that if you go to a library you do not have a special section devoted to the Southern novel, or the Northeastern novel, but there is an entire literary genre devoted to the "Western". Why did this place, at this time, so capture the American imagination? Perhaps because it precisely is the last west: it marked the end of the old frontier era where Americans moved west seeking new lands and opportunities. What loomed on the horizon was the new era of cities and factories - the industrial age. Even in the late 19th century, Americans looked back with nostalgia and more than a little regret at the rural life they were leaving behind. "The West" thus became a mythic embodiment of this older America of rugged individualism and limitless opportunity.

Americans love this image of the old West -- but what was the reality? Let's look at this idea by examining four frontiers.

Some of the earliest American settlements of this region involved mining. When we think of mining in the West, we often imagine the lone prospector: the sturdy individual setting out on his own to pan gold from the streams of California or Alaska. This did happen -- thousands of hopeful prospectors swarmed into the West looking for their individual fortunes, and some did indeed strike it rich. For most, however, the quest for riches proved elusive. The reality was that most mining in the west was done by companies and corporations, not individuals. These companies were looking not just for precious metals. They came looking for the metals that would feed the factories of the east. Indeed, after the era of gold and silver mining in the 1850s and 1860s, the most important mineral mined in the west was copper. States like Arizona, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah were dominated by giant copper mining corporations.

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Thus, most miners were not individualistic prospectors -- they were company workers. They worked in mines owned by corporations and quite often lived in "company towns" in homes also owned by the corporation. Conditions in the mines were typically harsh and dangerous with the threat of injury or death from cave-ins, floods, or explosions a constant reality. Miners responded by forming militant labor organizations. The labor history of the west in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was quite bloody, with both miners and mine owners freely resorting to armed conflict. From this environment sprang the Western Federation of Miners. A series of violent clashes in Colorado and Idaho between mine workers and mine owners helped to radicalize this union, and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it had embraced revolutionary goals of complete ownership of the economy by workers.

Even more than mining, the popular image of the West revolves around the figure of the cowboy. In film and literature the cowboy has become an iconic American figure representing rugged individualism and personal freedom. In part, this reflected a 19<sup>th</sup> century reaction to an increasingly industrialized and urbanized society. The cowboy was seen as the diametrical opposite of this increasingly regimented and corporate society – an emblem of a freer and more individualistic past.

Prior to the settlement of the far west cattle had typically been raised in enclosures, tended to by herdsmen known disparagingly as "cow boys". In the far west, however, American cattle ranchers adopted the open range techniques pioneered by earlier Hispanic settlers which utilized vaqueros on horseback, driving their herds across the broad plains of the west. Ironically, while the cowboy and open range cattle raising became emblematic of an alternative to the industrial society, it only arose because of the industrial society. As this map makes clear, the cattle drives of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had one dominant goal: to supply the slaughterhouses of Chicago, which in turn fed the teeming masses of the country's growing urban/industrial landscape.

There were some opportunities for individual cowboys to advance themselves and create small family ranches. Over time, however, more and more ranches were corporate operations, many of them financed by wealthy eastern or European investors. Most cowboys were employees of these companies. As in mining, working conditions were harsh and dangerous, and the pay was even worse. Most cowboys were young – in their late teens or early twenties. They were drawn to the industry by the undoubted romance of life on the open range, but most ultimately recognized that there was little opportunity for them to better themselves, and left the industry. Many cowboys were also racial or ethnic minorities who persisted in the cattle industry because they were denied employment in more lucrative professions.

The open range cattle industry, moreover, only lasted a very brief time. By the 1890s it was pretty much over, replaced by more sedentary methods of cattle rearing using enclosures. A number of factors contributed to this change. First, the eagerness of investors to reap quick profits led to the over 10

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expansion of ranching operations which in turn created falling prices for meat and the devastation of the fragile grasslands of the west. Even more important was growing competition from farmers. Much of the early success of open-range cattle ranching was based on the ready availability of "free" grazing land. Ranchers enjoyed unfettered access to public lands that were unclaimed for other purposes. As more and more settlers entered the west, however, the government deeded them this land under the terms of the Homestead Act. This would lead to epic, violent clashes between ranchers and farmers, competing for the same resource. Finally, for all the romance of open range cattle raising, it was not terribly efficient. More sedentary operations in places like the Midwest enjoyed not only closer access to the markets of the east, but also produced better tasting meat from the corn-fed cattle they raised.

The final element of American settlement of the far West were the farmers. The Trans-Mississippi West offered some unique challenges. Settlers from the East were used to abundant rainfall and the presence of resources like trees. Some parts of the far West, such as along the coast, did resemble this environment; but vast reaches were treeless, semi-arid plains. Initially settlers were reluctant to move into what had been called "The Great American Desert", but several factors worked to change their minds.

First, they were tempted by the promise of cheap land. During the Civil War the U.S. government had passed the Homestead Act which granted 160 acres of federal land with the claimant only having to file a small filing fee and residence for five years. There were later additions to this act which allowed settlers to claim even larger homesteads in arid or semi-arid regions.

Second, the expansion of railroad systems into the West made it easier for farmers to settle this region by enabling them to move their crops to eastern markets. This was also a process encouraged by the federal government. In 1862 the Pacific Railroad Act had granted generous land grants and loans to build the first transcontinental railroad. Subsequent acts provided subsidies for additional railroad development, particularly in the West. Once the railroads arrived, they often acted as promoters for western settlement. They advertised the region throughout the U.S. and in Europe, trying to attract settlers who would buy the land they had been granted by the government and to provide the freight and passenger traffic they needed to survive.

Once they arrived in the west, farmers faced a host of problems, particularly in the semi-arid Plains region. The open grasslands had few trees, meaning that there was little wood available for construction. Settlers typically solved this problem by constructing their initial housing out of "sod" -- blocks of turf cut out of the grasslands and used as bricks. Lack of wood also made it hard for farmers to create the wooden fences they were used to in the east, but with the invention of barbed wire they were able to overcome this problem. 11

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The lack of water was an even greater issue. Farmers were able to extract some water from subterranean sources through the use of windmills, but usually not enough to irrigate crops. Instead, they focused on crops that could be grown with limited moisture, such as wheat. Since this was a low value crop and yields per acre were small, they had to farm a large amount of acreage to make a profit. To work these larger farms, they increasingly relied upon machinery, such as mechanical reapers.

The ingenuity of American farmers enabled them to successfully work Western lands, but in many cases they still did not prosper. Even with free or cheap land being provided by the federal government, they faced heavy costs, particularly because of their need for machinery. Their relationship with the railroads was also contentious. Compared to the East, there were relatively few railroads in the West, which meant that these companies had few competitors. Railroads, themselves often struggling to survive, often used their monopolies to gouge farmers, charging them high rates to move their crops to market. They also typically favored larger growers, giving them special bulk discounts which put small family farms at a disadvantage.

Western farmers also suffered, paradoxically, because they WERE producing so much wheat. Because wheat was a crop which could be shipped long distances without spoiling, settlers on the Great Plains were competing in a global marketplace. This era saw the introduction of large scale wheat farming not just in the U.S., but in Canada, Latin America, and parts of Eastern Europe. This flood of production in the U.S. and elsewhere led to a sharp drop in crop prices, which was good for consumers, but bad for farmers.

Finally, the many ingenious improvements introduced by farmers on the Great Plains, they were still subject to the whims of the environment. In the 1880s this region experienced unusually heavy rainfall, encouraging farmers to settle the region. Thereafter, however, it was plunged into drought, creating a huge crisis in the 1890s.

By the 1890s, many western farmers suffered from heavy debts and the problems caused by the vagaries of the marketplace, the environment, and the railroads. It's estimated that approximately two out of every three homesteaded farms in the late 19th century failed.

Americans had flocked to the West in the late 19th century hoping to realize the traditional American Dream of the independent yeoman farmer. They hoped to carve out individual homesteads that would enable them to prosper. Small family farms did do well in some parts of this region, but by and large, the peculiar conditions of this region proved daunting. The type of agriculture which emerged was much more corporate dominated: large scale farms that were worked with machinery and seasonal labor. 12

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The West was sometimes a disappointing experience for Americans, but for the people already in the region it was even worse. American movement into the far west to mine, ranch, or farm caused fundamental conflicts with the Native peoples of this region. Native-American tribes had their own forms of government and their economies were typically more communal and less based upon individual landownership. The American ideal of the small family farm made little sense to these peoples who had survived and prospered in the west for thousands of years. Some tribes sought to preserve their way of life by militarily resisting American expansion but, aside from a few victories such as the defeat of Custer's forces at Little Big Horn, their cause was hopeless. With scarce populations and limited technology, they could not hope to match the resources of the U.S. army. By the 1880s large-scale military conflicts had largely ceased. Since the Native peoples were not citizens of the United States, the government was unsure of how to deal with them. Prior to the 1850s the usual solution had been to push native tribes West, into unoccupied territories, but by the late 19th century this was no longer possible. Instead, the tribes were given reservation lands where they would be, theoretically, isolated from the western stream of American settlers.

Life on these reservations was often quite hard, particularly for those tribes which had not traditionally practiced agriculture. The land they were allotted was frequently too small to allow them to maintain their old economies, such as the hunting of buffalo on the Great Plains. Many were forced to rely upon the meager generosity of the American government, which supplied them with food. Rampant corruption in the Bureau of Indian Affairs ensured that this system never worked very well, and the forced dependency was psychologically disabling to the natives. By the 1880s there was increasing pressure to end the reservation system. The government began pursuing a new policy of trying to force the natives to give up their tribal identities and assimilate into American society as individuals. Part of the inspiration for this movement came from reformers who were sympathetic to the plight of the natives. They believed that assimilation would be their only salvation.

To encourage this conversion they tried to persuade, and in some cases coerce, Native parents to send their children to schools where they could be trained in American ways and stripped of their Native culture. The Bureau of Indian Affairs put pressure on them as well by forbidding the practice of native religions.

The ultimate effort to force assimilation came through the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887. Rather than allotting reservation lands to tribal groups, it distributed it to individual native families in 160 acre lots. The goal was to destroy the old native economy and culture and replace it with American style family farms.

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farms and individualism. The commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1889 wrote that he expected the reservation system to vanish: "tribal relations should be broken up, socialism destroyed and the family and the autonomy of the individual substituted." Theodore Roosevelt called the bill "a might pulverizing engine to break up the tribal mass."

They were wrong. The policy of assimilation never really worked for a variety of reasons. Most natives lacked the basic agricultural skills necessary to become successful farmers, particularly in regions like the semi-arid Great Plains where farming difficult even for American settlers. Culturally, native peoples also resisted efforts to strip them of their heritage. The prospect of joining a society that still regarded native peoples as racially inferior certainly made any idea of assimilation quite