



Pre-Visit Activity: Understanding Segregation

In understanding why the establishment of the first African American union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was so important to history, it is equally important to understand what many people believed about African Americans in early and middle 20th-Century, and consequently, how they were treated.

This lesson is best done when students have prior knowledge of how segregation and the enforcement of the Jim Crow laws were conducted in the United States during the 20th-Century. This lesson may also be performed in conjunction with other lessons related to the topic.

Grade Level: Elementary/ Middle School

Objectives:

- Students will learn about segregation and which groups of people were privileged during the early and middle 20th-Century.
- Students will gain a fuller understanding of the impact of segregation to the people who experienced it.

This program helps fulfill Wisconsin Model Academic Standards in Social Studies, including:

B. 4.4, E.4.8
C.8.1, E.8.3, E.8.6, E.8.7

Materials:

- Segregation activity cards and scissors for each student.
- African American and Caucasian cards. Print enough of each card so that one-half of the class may have an African American card, and one-half of the class may have a Caucasian card.

Time: About 45 minutes

Background:

After the elimination of slavery in the United States, the United States enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1875 which guaranteed equal rights for African Americans in public places and made illegal the exclusion of African Americans from jury duty. However, the Supreme Court declared this act invalid in 1883 because it protected social rather than political rights.

Shortly thereafter southern states began to enact segregation legislation that was generally termed “Jim Crow” legislation after the Jim Crow character that often found its way into American Minstrel shows and whose name was also used as a racial slur. These laws began in 1890 with Louisiana’s law that barred African Americans from riding in the same railcar and



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white Americans. They were given a car at the back of the train that was deemed “separate but equal” – a term used widely as additional segregation laws came into effect. Additional laws followed that restricted African American access to various public areas and conveniences such as water fountains, restrooms, waiting rooms, and entrances and exits at courthouses, libraries, theaters, and public buildings. Many businesses such as restaurants and hotels would not allow African Americans on their premises. Cities established curfews for African Americans only and some state laws did not allow African Americans to work in the same rooms as Caucasians in factories and other businesses. Voting or holding public office was often out of the question unless it was done under the “guidance” of a white person. The most visible reminder of the Jim Crow laws was the signs stating “colored” or “white” that told who may use a certain public space.

In all aspects of life African Americans were expected to be poor, uneducated, dependent on white Americans, and to have little influence in government or the cultural life of their community. For African Americans who chose not to follow the laws, they faced both fines and jail. For those who did not follow the cultural expectations, they faced possible violence. The Klu Klux Klan gained a large amount of political power by the 1920s and were known, along with other groups, to facilitate terrorism and lynching’s against African Americans. Their influence also allowed legal punishments for crimes in the south to include “chain gangs” of African American’s who were leased to contractors to do hard manual labor for planters, the railroad, levee contractors, and the timber industry. The death rate for those participating was eight to eighteen percent.

Thus in 1937 when the Pullman Company and the Federal Government accepted the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as the first African American union, it was a signal that the Jim Crow laws and segregation in the United States was beginning to reverse. The process which had started on the train car was also starting to diminish in the same place.

A good, in-depth review of the Jim Crow laws may be found at <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/creating2.htm> .

Procedure:

1. Review with the students the basics of segregation and the Jim Crow laws.
2. Inform the students that they will be recreating a town where segregation has occurred. Like any town there are numerous things to do and to services of which to take advantage.
3. Give each student a segregation activity sheet and a pair of scissors.



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4. Ask each student to select and cut out one card from the segregation activity sheet that they find appealing. This card will have a service or amusement found within the town.
5. Once each student has cut-out their card, randomly distribute the African American and Caucasian cards.
6. Have all of the students with African American cards stand on one side of the room, and all students with the Caucasian card stand on the other. Explain to the students that they are now living in the African American and Caucasian parts of their town. The students may not mix or stand near their friends if their friends have cards that are different. Roughly one half of the students should be on either side of the room.
7. Once the students have found a place, tell them that you are now going to read them a list of rules for the town. If their card violates one of the rules, they have to sit down. For example: If a student has an African American card and a “Sit in the front of the bus” card, and the rule for the town is that no African Americans can sit in the front of the bus, the student will be required to sit down.
8. Read the following nine rules to the students.
 - No African Americans may walk through the front entrance of a library.
 - No African Americans may sit in the front row of a movie theatre.
 - No Caucasian, or white person, may sit in the balcony of a movie theatre.
 - No African American may stay out late.
 - No African American may drink from a water fountain that has a sign stating “Whites Only”.
 - No African American may vote.
 - No African American may go to a restaurant.
 - No Caucasian may use a restroom with a sign that says “Colored Only” on it.
 - No African Americans may sit in the front passenger cars of a train.
9. Once the rules are read, most students with African American cards will be sitting while most students with Caucasian cards will still be standing. Ask the students to note whether it is the African Americans or the Caucasian members of the town who violated more of the rules.
10. Once the students make the observation, have them return to their seats or in a central part of the room to follow-up with discussion questions.



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Discussion Questions:

1. Which group violated more the rules in our town?
2. Did you think that the rules were fair? Why or why not?
3. Where the rules fair to only one group of people, or did all people have some rules that were not fair?
4. How did you feel if you violated a rule? How did you feel if someone else violated a rule?
5. Did the rules make it hard for you to do something that you wanted to do?
6. How do the rules in this town compare to the rules in their own town?

Extension/ Assessment:

Have each student write a short essay on one of the following topics.*

1. What were some of the rules found in the Jim Crow laws? Do you think the rules were a good idea?
2. Why did the Jim Crow laws hurt both African American and Caucasian people?
3. Explain what democracy's basic principles are and why or why not the Jim Crow laws followed those principles.



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*Different topics will meet the needs of various grade levels.