

AP United States History
Unit 6: The Nation Expands
Topic- The New South

The New South

Explain how various factors contributed to continuity and change in the “New South” from 1877 to 1898.

Despite the industrialization of some segments of the Southern economy—a change promoted by Southern leaders who called for a “New South”—agriculture based on sharecropping and tenant farming continued to be the primary economic activity in the South.

In 1889, the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution Journal*, one of the largest newspapers in the South, declared that there was in fact, a New South. His name was Henry Grady. He declared that the New South was one of industrial development and a place that was rapidly modernizing. Grady tried to emphasize the idea that the Civil War was a distant memory. He also tried to woo Northern investors to pour their money into rebuilding the region into a place of industry and commerce. In fact, some areas in the South did industrialize in the years following the Civil War, but this was not the case for the region, as a whole.

The limited industrialization of the South occurred in pockets of the region during the period from 1865-1900. For example, in Durham, North Carolina, James Duke, made use of a new innovation— a cigarette rolling machine to create cigarettes on a mass scale for his company, the American Tobacco Company. In Birmingham, Alabama, the city grew thanks to iron and steel manufacturing and garnered the nickname, “The Pittsburgh of the South.” Mining and furniture manufacturing were also major industries in a few Southern states. However, the greatest industrial boom during the period came in textile manufacturing. Throughout the period, textile mills developed in states such as Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina thanks to northern investors. But, while northern investment played a part in the process of southern industrialization, there was a dark side to the process from the beginning. Many of the workers were young, white southern girls— some were children. These workers were paid much less than their northern counterparts for doing the same work. With their wages depressed and child labor playing a role in the process, it slowed economic development, as the wages of the workforce always remained low. Quite simply, workers in this system never made enough money to invest into the economy. This led working-class families in the South to stay in a cycle of poverty— as many of the mills were located in economically depressed regions of Appalachia.

Despite the efforts at industrialization, the South would remain an agricultural region, until the development of the New Deal (to combat the Great Depression) when the federal government began to heavily invest in the economic development of the region. The investments made by the federal government accelerated during the Second World War, and helped shape the modern Southern economy which came of age during the period of the Cold War. But, from 1865-1900, it was sharecropping that became the most prominent feature of the southern economy.

While sharecropping was not a new feature in Southern economic life, it did incorporate a large number of impoverished African-American families. The system created a cycle of poverty that helped to reinforce the steadily growing system of segregation that by the 1890s had come to dominate the lives of African-Americans in the South. In sharecropping, or tenant farming, African-American families worked for a large landowner. The system functioned as such— an African-American family would farm a plot of land, the landowner would rent the

tools, seed, and equipment, while the family furnished the labor (planting, maintaining, and harvesting it) to produce a crop. Once the crop had been harvested, a portion of the profit went to the landowner, while the balance of the money went to the family to pay off their debts— mostly, of course, back to the landowner. Each season, the cycle of debt repeated itself with the landowner making a profit and the sharecroppers continuing to work in the never-ending cycle of debt. As African-American families stayed in a constant cycle of poverty, reinforcing the development of segregation was made that much easier.

The Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson that upheld racial segregation (known as Jim Crow) helped to mark the end of most of the political gains African Americans made during Reconstruction. Facing increased violence, discrimination, and scientific theories of race, African American reformers continued to fight for political and social equality.

As we have already studied, segregation was an outgrowth of the conclusion of the Civil War and the process of Reconstruction. It started as soon as the Black Codes were issued in 1865 at the end of the Civil War, which restricted the movements of African-Americans. The intention of the process of Congressional Reconstruction had been to bring equal rights to the newly freed African-Americans and their families. But, as ex-Confederate officials began to take over the southern states during the midterm elections in 1874, segregation throughout the South in its public schools, places of accommodation, and public transportation facilities— even private businesses— developed. By the close of Reconstruction in 1877, segregation had become a way of life in the South. It is important to note that Supreme Court cases also took the role of enforcing civil rights issues out of the hands of the federal government and placed it in the hands of the states and cities throughout the South— which were all, by 1880, in the hands of ex-Confederates. By the time the Supreme Court handed down the verdict that made separate but equal the law of the land and introduced the Jim Crow Era (the name Jim Crow came from a pre-Civil War minstrel show), with the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson, segregation had long been a reality for most of the African-American families living in the South. (It is also important to note that it was during this period that African-Americans also began to lose their ability to vote through such practices as poll taxes, literacy tests, and the Grandfather clause.) Throughout the process of Reconstruction, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups had spread terror throughout the South— helping to bring Reconstruction to an end, to enforce segregation, and to intimidate African-American families. But, by the 1880s, Southern white supremacist groups and their allies had a new and even more brutal method for keeping African-American families from crossing the color line of Jim Crow. It was the heinous practice of lynching.

From the end of Reconstruction until the mid-1950s, more than 3,500 African-Americans were lynched— executed by mob violence, at times in full view of a cheering public. Lynchings were gruesome spectacles. Victims were often falsely accused, and most were either tortured or beaten before being either burned alive or hanged. While not every lynching was a complete public spectacle, many of them were. Postcards were often sold to commemorate these heinous and brutal murders, and some spectators made them into community events. The Ku Klux Klan was responsible for a number of these brutal and heinous spectacles, but mobs of white men were often the perpetrators. The period from 1890-1920 saw the greatest number of brutal lynchings in America. During that time, what we think of as the modern civil rights movement was born. In 1892, Ida B. Wells first made a name for herself by reporting and documenting cases of lynching throughout the South in her newspaper which was published in Memphis, Tennessee. While some African-American leaders such as Booker T. Washington urged African-Americans to quietly accept their lot in life and to work hard to earn the respect of white southerners, both W.E.B. Dubois and Ida B. Wells would take a different approach. In 1909, the two would become founding members of a new organization dedicated to furthering the Niagara Movement and to fight for civil rights, by using the courts to meet segregation head-on. In the early 1950s, it would be this approach by the NAACP that would begin the process of breaking down the barriers that had for so long been put into place for African-Americans through the policy of segregation that had created a system of racial apartheid in the South.

The movement and the development of the NAACP came at a time when America was Americanizing both the Native Americans and immigrants who were coming into major cities such as New York City and Chicago in the

largest wave ever seen in the nation's history. And, it came during the period in which certain groups of immigrants— principally, the Chinese would come to be banned from the United States. It also came at a time when the powers of Europe were conquering indigenous peoples in both Africa and Asia and taking their lands to fuel a Second Industrial Revolution in their countries. And, it was also the period in global history when eugenics appeared— a movement which began in the United Kingdom, but spread into the United States and across Europe. It was even more sinister. (Eugenics was also tied to Darwin's new theory of evolution when it first appeared, as well.) Eugenacists advocated for the selective breeding of people, to rid human-kind of those which society deemed undesirable. It would serve as the precursor to and the guiding philosophy behind the Holocaust in Nazi Germany during the Second World War, as the Nazis sought to rid their population of people that they deemed undesirable in the effort to create a master race.

Though there were a few breakthroughs, such as the creation of the NAACP and the emergence of young and talented leaders such as Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington— sharecropping, segregation, and lynching meant that for African-Americans living in the ex-Confederate states there was no such thing as a New South.