

The Origin of “Jim Crow”

We usually think of the term “Jim Crow”, referring to laws mandating racial segregation and the denial of many basic rights to black people, as coming from the Southern states. In recent history such laws were still in effect there until they were overturned by Civil Rights legislation.

But that was not where the term, or the discrimination itself, began. The phrase came from New England, coined by a white entertainer, popular in the 1830’s who performed in blackface, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who called himself “The Original Jim Crow”. The phrase, in today’s internet terms, “went viral”

By 1838, when a railroad had a separate car for black riders, it was called the “Jim Crow car”, and it was widely known what that meant.

The Eastern Railroad, which in 1838 inaugurated a route from Boston to Salem, Mass., had such a car and enforced segregation on the train. In a speech, the railroad’s president, George Peabody, proclaimed that steam trains would “subdue local prejudices.”, and unite the nation in “the standard of Equal Rights.”. He lied.

David Ruggles was a black abolitionist, born free in Connecticut. a man who had helped hundreds to escape slavery. Frederick Douglass admired his ability. Ruggles boarded a steamboat from New Bedford to Nantucket for an abolitionist meeting. It also had a “Jim Crow” seating section. Though Ruggles had paid the full \$2 fare, the captain refused to honor it. Ruggles was unable to make the meeting.

Three of the 8 railroads in Massachusetts had separate cars for blacks, and a few weeks later Ruggles needed to ride one of them. Again, he had paid full fare, which should have entitled him to sit where he chose. He refused to sit in the Jim Crow car; he was roughed up and ejected from the train. He filed a claim of assault against the railroad, but Judge Henry Crapo ruled against him.

The Liberator’s editor condemned that decision strongly in an editorial. Two weeks later, two white abolitionists, John Collins and George Foster, and Frederick Douglass rode the Eastern railroad and encountered the separation policy. They were outraged. Foster tried to join Douglass in the Jim Crow car, but was told he “wasn’t black enough”.

At the next meeting, stories were told, and a new issue was added to the abolitionist agenda. Besides ending slavery in the South, discrimination in Massachusetts and other free states needed to be opposed.

Black and white abolitionists traveling together began to challenge train-car segregation frequently, insisting on riding in the same car, and being refused. As the issue became widely known, many people petitioned the legislature with calls to ban the practice.

The matter was vigorously debated, and it was pointed out that, though private companies, the railroads had public charters, and were granted public loans and right-of-ways for their tracks. Still, the legislature had many prejudiced members who opposed the bill to ban segregation, and there was a struggle to get one passed.

Finally, a strategy was devised to inform the railroads that such a bill COULD be passed, with a suggestion that they voluntarily end the separate car policy. It worked. By the end of 1843, the Jim Crow cars were no more.

An 1849 lawsuit against school segregation lost in the Massachusetts Supreme Court, but in 6 years a law was passed prohibiting school discrimination for race, color, or religious opinion.

Not all forms of public discrimination were corrected at the time, or for many years afterward in the free states of the northeast. Clearly, bigotry was not limited to the slave states, and even those opposed to slavery were not free of it. Many Northerners profited from the products of slave labor, and were complicit in protecting it.

Both slavery and the racism that accompanied and enabled it were American problems, not merely regional ones. Long before the New World began to be enlightened with ideas of freedom, equality, and government by the people, it had been hosting opportunity for those who placed profit over humanity, and ruthless force over cooperation. The struggle to subdue them would be long and difficult.

--cosmicrat Feb 14, 2021