The New South and the Problem of Race

A “New South” seemed an obvious need. The Confederacy’s failed insurrection wreaked havoc on the southern economy and crippled southern prestige. Property was destroyed. Lives were lost. Political power vanished. And four million enslaved Americans—representing the wealth and power of the white South—threw off their chains and walked proudly forward into freedom.

White southerners lashed out, not only in organized terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan but in political corruption, economic exploitation, and violent intimidation. White southerners took back control of state and local governments and used their reclaimed power to disenfranchise African Americans and pass “Jim Crow” laws segregating schools, transportation, employment, and various public and private facilities. The reestablishment of white supremacy after the “redemption” of the South from Reconstruction contradicted proclamations of a “New” South. Perhaps nothing harked so forcefully back to the barbaric southern past than the wave of lynchings. Whether for actual crimes, fabricated crimes or for no crimes at all, white mobs murdered roughly five thousand African Americans between the 1880s and the 1950s.

Victims were not simply hanged, they were mutilated, burned alive, and shot. Lynchings could become carnivals, public spectacles attended by thousands of eager spectators. Rail lines ran special cars to accommodate the rush of participants. Vendors sold goods and keepsakes. Perpetrators posed for photos and collected mementos.

At the barbaric height of southern lynching, in the last years of the nineteenth century, southerners lynched two to three African Americans every week. In general, lynchings were most frequent in the Cotton Belt of the Lower South, where southern Black people were most numerous and where the majority worked as tenant farmers and field hands on the cotton farms of white landowners. The states of Mississippi and Georgia had the greatest number of recorded lynchings: from 1880 to 1930, Mississippi lynch mobs killed over five hundred African Americans; Georgia mobs murdered more than four hundred.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of prominent southerners openly supported lynching. In the late 1890s, Georgia newspaper columnist and noted women’s rights activist Rebecca Latimer Felton—who would later become the first woman to serve in the U.S. Senate—endorsed such extrajudicial killings. She said, “If it takes lynching to protect women’s dearest possession from drunken, ravening beasts, then I say lynch a thousand a week.”[14](https://www.americanyawp.com/text/18-industrial-america/#footnote_13_99) When opponents argued that lynching violated victims’ constitutional rights, South Carolina governor Coleman Blease angrily responded, “Whenever the Constitution comes between me and the virtue of the white women of South Carolina, I say to hell with the Constitution.”[15](https://www.americanyawp.com/text/18-industrial-america/#footnote_14_99)

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Description automatically generated](https://www.americanyawp.com/text/wp-content/uploads/Lynching_of_Laura_Nelson_and_her_son_2.jpg)

*This photograph captures the lynching of Laura and Lawrence Nelson, a mother and son, on May 25, 1911, in Okemah, Oklahoma. In response to national attention, the local white newspaper in Okemah simply wrote, “While the general sentiment is adverse to the method, it is generally thought that the negroes got what would have been due them under due process of law.”*[*Wikimedia*](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lynching_of_Laura_Nelson_and_her_son_2.jpg)*.*

Black activists and white allies worked to outlaw lynching. Ida B. Wells, an African American woman born in the last years of slavery and a pioneering anti-lynching advocate, lost three friends to a lynch mob in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1892. That year, Wells published *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, a groundbreaking work that documented the South’s lynching culture and exposed the myth of the Black rapist.[16](https://www.americanyawp.com/text/18-industrial-america/#footnote_15_99) The Tuskegee Institute and the NAACP both compiled and publicized lists of every reported lynching in the United States. In 1918, Representative Leonidas Dyer of Missouri introduced federal anti-lynching legislation that would have made local counties where lynchings took place legally liable for such killings. Throughout the early 1920s, the Dyer Bill was the subject of heated political debate, but, fiercely opposed by southern congressmen and unable to win enough northern champions, the proposed bill was finally enacted in 2022.

Lynching was not only the form of racial violence that survived Reconstruction. White political violence continued to follow African American political participation and labor organization, however severely circumscribed. When the Populist insurgency created new opportunities for black political activism, white Democrats responded with terror. In North Carolina, Populists and Republicans “fused” together and won stunning electoral gains in 1896. Shocked White Democrats formed “Red Shirt” groups, paramilitary organizations dedicated to eradicating black political participation and restoring Democratic rule through violence and intimidation. Launching a self-described “white supremacy campaign” of violence, murder and intimidation against black voters and officeholders during the 1898 state elections, the Red Shirts effectively took back state government. But municipal elections were not held that year in Wilmington, where Fusionists controlled city government. After manning armed barricades blocking black voters from entering the town to vote in the state elections, the Red Shirts drafted a “White Declaration of Independence” which declared “that that we will no longer be ruled and will never again be ruled, by men of African origin.” 457 white Democrats signed the document. They also issued a twelve-hour ultimatum that editor of the city’s black daily paper flee the city. The editor left, but it wasn’t enough. Twelve hours later, hundreds of Red Shirts raided the city’s armory and ransacked the newspaper office anyway. The mob swelled and turned on the city’s black neighborhood, destroying homes and businesses and opening fire on any Black person they found. Dozens were killed and hundreds more fled the city. The mob then forced the mayor, the city’s aldermen, and the police chief, at gun point, to immediately resign. To ensure their gains, the Democrats rounded up prominent fusionists, placed them on railroad cars, and, under armed guard, sent them out of the state. The mob installed and swore in their own replacements. It was a full-blown coup.

Lynching and organized terror campaigns were only the violent worst of the South’s racial world. Discrimination in employment and housing and the legal segregation of public and private life also reflected the rise of a new Jim Crow South. So-called Jim Crow laws legalized what custom had long dictated. Southern states and municipalities enforced racial segregation in public places and in private lives. Separate coach laws were some of the first such laws to appear, beginning in Tennessee in the 1880s. Soon schools, stores, theaters, restaurants, bathrooms, and nearly every other part of public life were segregated. So too were social lives. The sin of racial mixing, critics said, had to be heavily guarded against. Marriage laws regulated against interracial couples, and white men, ever anxious of relationships between Black men and white women, passed miscegenation laws and justified lynching as an appropriate extralegal tool to police the racial divide.

Whites stuffed ballot boxes and intimidated Black voters with physical and economic threats. And then, from roughly 1890 to 1908, southern states “legal” disfranchisement. They passed laws requiring voters to pass literacy tests (which could be judged arbitrarily) and pay poll taxes (which hit poor white and poor Black Americans alike), effectively denying Black men the franchise that was supposed to have been guaranteed by the Fifteenth Amendment. Those responsible for such laws posed as reformers and justified voting restrictions as for the public good, a way to clean up politics by purging corrupt African Americans from the voting rolls.

A kind of civic religion known as the “Lost Cause” glorified the Confederacy and romanticized the Old South. White southerners looked forward while simultaneously harking back to a mythic imagined past inhabited by contented and loyal slaves, benevolent and generous masters, chivalric and honorable men, and pure and faithful southern belles. Secession, they said, had little to do with the institution of slavery, and soldiers fought only for home and honor, not the continued ownership of human beings. Lost Cause champions overtook the South. Women’s groups, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, joined with Confederate veterans to preserve a pro-Confederate past. They built Confederate monuments and celebrated Confederate veterans on Memorial Day. Across the South, towns erected statues of General Robert E. Lee and other Confederate figures. By the turn of the twentieth century, the idealized Lost Cause past was entrenched not only in the South but across the country. In 1905, for instance, North Carolinian Thomas F. Dixon published a novel, *The Clansman*, which depicted the Ku Klux Klan as heroic defenders of the South against the corruption of African American and northern “carpetbag” misrule during Reconstruction. In 1915, acclaimed film director David W. Griffith adapted Dixon’s novel into the groundbreaking blockbuster film, *Birth of a Nation*. (The film almost singlehandedly rejuvenated the Ku Klux Klan.) The romanticized version of the antebellum South and the distorted version of Reconstruction dominated popular imagination.[17](https://www.americanyawp.com/text/18-industrial-america/#footnote_16_99)

New South boosters continued to promote industrial growth. The region witnessed the rise of various manufacturing industries, predominantly textiles, tobacco, furniture, and steel. While agriculture—cotton in particular—remained the mainstay of the region’s economy, these new industries provided new wealth for owners, new investments for the region, and new opportunities for the exploding number of landless farmers to finally flee the land. Industries offered low-paying jobs but also opportunity for rural poor who could no longer sustain themselves through subsistence farming. Men, women, and children all moved into wage work. At the turn of the twentieth century, nearly one fourth of southern mill workers were children aged six to sixteen.

In most cases, as in most aspects of life in the New South, new factory jobs were racially segregated. Better-paying jobs were reserved for whites, while the most dangerous, labor-intensive, dirtiest, and lowest-paying positions were relegated to African Americans. African American women, shut out of most industries, found employment most often as domestic help for white families. As poor as white southern mill workers were, southern Black people were poorer. Some white mill workers could even afford to pay for domestic help in caring for young children, cleaning houses, doing laundry, and cooking meals. Mill villages that grew up alongside factories were whites-only, and African American families were pushed to the outer perimeter of the settlements.

Most southerners still toiled in agriculture and still lived in poverty. Industrial development and expanding infrastructure, rather than re-creating the South, coexisted easily with white supremacy and an impoverished agricultural economy. The trains came, factories were built, and capital was invested, but the region remained mired in poverty and racial apartheid. Much of the “New South,” then, was anything but new.