

Frederick Douglass on Jim Crow, 1887

Introduction

Frederick Douglass tirelessly labored to end slavery but true equality remained out of reach. Despite the successful passage of several Constitutional amendments and federal laws after the Civil War, unwritten rules and Jim Crow laws continued to curtail the rights and freedoms of African Americans. Douglass concisely summarized the reality of Jim Crow in an 1887 letter that claimed the South's "wrongs are not much now written in laws which all may see – but the hidden practices of people who have not yet, abandoned the idea of Mastery and dominion over their fellow man." Racism, violence, and vigilantism were the tools of this "Mastery," which permitted whites to produce a social order characterized by inequality.

Having lived in Washington, DC, since 1872, Douglass had ample opportunity to witness discrimination in nearby Maryland and Virginia and was keenly aware of the struggle for quality schooling and judicial access during the post-Reconstruction years. Douglass's writing reflected the belief shared amongst the black community that the best places to combat the "hidden practices" of Jim Crow were the schoolhouse and the court room. "[F]rom all I can learn colored lawyers are admitted to practice in Southern Courts and I am very glad to admit the fact – for it implies a wonderful revolution in the public sentiment of the Southern States. I have not yet learned what are the inequalities between the races as to school privileges at the south – In some of the states the time allotted to colored schools is less than that allowed to whites. And I have heard and believe that in none of the states are the teachers of colored Schools as well paid as the teachers of White Schools." By the 1880s, the separation of the races became increasingly apparent with school segregation mandated by law in nearly every Southern state. Despite this adversity, Douglass made it clear that inequalities could be corrected by challenging them.

Unfortunately the situation became worse before it improved. Formal legal segregation in the South became a reality with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in 1896, which stated that segregation did not constitute discrimination, thus establishing the "separate but equal" doctrine. It would take nearly seventy years before the civil rights revolution that Douglass envisioned to take hold and provide for federally mandated equal conditions for all citizens.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

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1. In 1887 some contemporaries of Douglass might have disputed his claim of “hidden practices.” By that year, how obvious was anti-black sentiment, especially in the southern states?
2. List and explain three problems mentioned by Douglass related to the education of African Americans.
3. From the tone of this letter, was Frederick Douglass closer to the ideals expressed by Booker T. Washington or W. E. B. Du Bois? Explain.

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Image

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 answer to your letter made
 compare enquiring necessary. From
 all I can learn colored lawyers are
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 fact - for it implies a wonderful
 revolution in the public sentiment of
 the Southern States. I have not yet
 learned what are the inequalities
 between the races as to school privileges
 at the South. In some of the States
 the time allotted to colored schools
 is less than that allowed to whites.
 And I have heard and believe that
 in none of the States are the teachers
 of colored schools as well paid as
 the teachers of white schools. My
 own observation has been that
 white teachers of colored schools
 in the Southern States, show but
 little interest in their pupils.
 This is not strange, since they

Frederick Douglass to unknown recipient, November 23, 1887 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC08992)

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have been selected as teachers
more because of their necessities,
than from any intentions they have
shown in the progress and elevation
of the colored race. As I say
this not of all, but of those
in Virginia for instance who
have come under my observation.

In Kentucky I believe
so far as the law is concerned
equal advantages are extended
to colored children for Education,
and the same may be
true of other States. I think
the Bureau of Education
will give you all the
information you may
require on this branch

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of the subject of your enquiries.
Our wrongs are not so much
now in written laws which
all may see - but the hidden
practices of a people who have
not yet abandoned the idea
of mastery and dominion over
their fellow men.

With great Respect
Yours truly
F. Douglass

Cedar Hill Annapolis D.C.

Nov. 23. 1887

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Transcript

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My dear sir:

Pardon delay - answer to your letter made careful enquiry necessary. From all I can learn colored Lawyers are admitted to practice in Southern Courts, and I am very glad to admit the fact - for it implies a wonderful revolution in the public sentiment of the Southern States. I have not yet learned what are the inequalities between the races as to school privileges at the south - In some of the states the time allotted to colored schools is less than that allowed to whites. And I have heard and believe that in none of the states are the teachers of colored Schools as well paid as the teachers of White Schools. My own observation has been that white teachers of Colored schools in the southern states, show but little interest in their pupils. This is not strange, since they [2] have been selected as teachers more because of their necessities, than from any interests they have shown in the progress and elevation of the colored race. [struck: bu] I say this not of all, but of those in Virginia for instance who have come under my observation.

In Kentucky I believe so far as the law is concerned equal advantages are extended to colored children for Education, and the Same may be true of other states. I think the Bureau of Education will give you all the information you may require on this branch [3] of the subject of your enquiries, our wrongs are not so much now in written laws which al may see - but the hidden practices of a people who have not yet abandoned the idea of Mastery and dominion over their fellow man.

With great Respect

Yours truly

Fredk Douglass

Cedar Hill Anacostia D.C.

Nov: 23. 1887