The Civil Rights Movement

Civil rights are something most Americans take for granted today. But millions of Americans were long denied fundamental democratic rights: voting, freedom of movement, due process, and equal protection under the law. At the end of the Civil War, the U.S. government began passing constitutional amendments and civil rights legislation on everything from voting rights to the right to own property and appear in court. The Civil Rights Movement in America really began as a newly freed African American population demanded rights.

Well-intentioned federal law was obscured by the failure of Reconstruction in the 1870s. Southern states passed a variety of "Jim Crow" laws enforcing racial segregation in education, housing, transportation, and public facilities. Marriage between blacks and whites was forbidden. For almost ninety years following Reconstruction, poll taxes and literacy tests made voting all but impossible for African Americans.

A forceful, nonviolent movement opposed Jim Crow. In 1909, W.E.B. Dubois cofounded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), leading the twentieth century civil rights struggle. With opposition from the Ku Klux Klan, the Civil Rights Movement struggled through the 1920s and 1930s, marred by race riots and lynchings. Between 1882 and 1968, some three hundred blacks were lynched in Alabama alone.

Slowly, the federal government and the courts endorsed the stance of the NAACP and other organizations. In 1954 the Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education,* ruled that "separate but equal" school facilities were unconstitutional, ordering integration in public schools. The next year Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, leading to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the decade that followed, under the spiritual and political leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., the movement for civil rights expanded, even if the path was hard and bloody. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the civil rights of all Americans were established by law.