



African Americans in the Great Depression

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Tough Times Turn Harder

Racism in the 1920s invaded every aspect of life in the United States. Many people outwardly expressed such feelings in public with few reservations. Given this longstanding social atmosphere, black Americans naturally suffered greatly when the economy declined in 1929. Those employed were often the first to be laid off when company fortunes fell. The slogan "Last Hired, First Fired" became well known. By 1932 black Americans had a 50 percent unemployment rate compared to 25 percent in the U.S. population in general. With unemployment escalating, jobs previously considered "Negro occupations" suddenly became attractive to the larger population. These jobs included domestic help, elevator operators, street cleaners, garbage collectors, waiters, and bellhops. Blacks were considered fit for only low paying dirty jobs no one else wanted. In Atlanta the slogan "No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job" became popular among whites. Those blacks able to keep their jobs sometimes had their wages cut in half.



Depression in the Rural South

In 1930 over two million males worked in agriculture. Of these over 835,000 black farmers and laborers faced particularly difficult times in the rural South. Less than 13 percent of black farmers owned their own land. The rest worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers on farms of large landowners. Approximately 40 percent of black workers in the nation in the 1930s were farm laborers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers. For those black sharecroppers still working, discrimination in pay was common. White sharecroppers received an average income of \$417 a year compared to \$295 for blacks. Not surprisingly with such low wages, living conditions were deplorable. Many black families lived in one-or two-bedroom shacks with no electricity, insulation from the winter cold, or running water. Relief through private organizations in the South was

rarely available to needy blacks. Sharecropper families would often drift from one farm to another every three years or so in search of better living conditions.

Some sharecropper unions formed to seek better conditions. But these groups often met harsh resistance from the large white landowners and local law authorities. The Croppers' and Farm Workers' Union and the Share Croppers' Union were formed in 1931. Both met with violence. In Alabama just before Christmas in 1931 a force of vigilantes and authorities attacked an entire black population in Reeltown, Alabama, to break up union activities. Hundreds were injured and two killed. The incident did bring increased public sympathy to the plight of black sharecroppers.

As the economy struggled through the 1930s, jobs grew even scarcer. Competition between whites and blacks brought added hostility. The number of lynchings of blacks by white mobs increased from eight in 1932 to 28 in 1933, 15 in 1934, and 20 in 1935. Lynching is a form of mob violence in which a mob, operating in the name of justice but without holding a trial, executes a person suspected of committing some offense. Usually the victim is tortured and their body mutilated in some way. Hanging was a common form of lynching, though some victims were burned alive. Almost all occurred in the South. The number of lynchings finally dropped to two in 1939 as economic conditions improved for whites. However, blatant racism, the most dominant factor contributing to these murders, still propelled lynchings in the South for the next several decades.



Hard Times in the Urban North

The Great Migration of southern rural blacks to northern industrial centers seeking employment decreased some during the Great Depression as job opportunities declined. At least if they stayed on the farm they could grow some food in the garden, even if they were not making money. Still, 400,000 blacks made the journey north during the 1930s. At least two benefits of living in the North inspired their continued migration. One benefit was to escape the racial violence of the South. Secondly, blacks experienced less discrimination by relief organizations in the North.

For those already living in the North, the steadily growing black population only meant greater hardships. More and more people were competing for fewer and fewer jobs. Black Americans organized cooperative groups such as the Colored Merchants Association in New York City to help each other. "Jobs for Negroes" organizations appeared in several cities. These groups bought food and other goods for black residents in large volume so they could get lower prices. Boycotts were also organized against stores that served mostly black customers but employed few black workers.

Blacks faced yet another obstacle during the Great Depression. With husbands unemployed or taking pay cuts, the incomes of their wives became that much more critical. But with hard times for everyone, many

white women began seeking jobs for the first time. They took jobs traditionally held by black women such as maids, housekeepers, and cooks.

With the increasing loss of jobs, blacks became disproportionately represented in breadlines at relief centers. Not all impacts were economic. As black unemployment rose, membership in clubs, churches, and other organizations declined. Black society was unraveling and many personal relationships were lost.



Little Relief From Hoover

As the Depression was hitting black American laborers hard, some new opportunities for other blacks were appearing. Black representation in the federal government workforce increased in President Herbert Hoover's (served 1929–1933) administration. Known as a humanitarian and a reformer, Hoover appointed more blacks to mid-level federal positions than his predecessors. He also began a program to fight the high illiteracy rate among blacks. Hoover argued for the equal opportunity of both black and white sharecroppers to own land. However, Hoover's economic policies did little to help most black Americans. In 1930 Hoover created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to turn the struggling economy around. But the RFC primarily gave loans to railroads, banks, and insurance companies with hope they would create new businesses and jobs. The effort to boost the economy did not trickle down to black workers as Hoover had envisioned.



The 1932 Presidential Election

Hoover's policies did little to economically help black Americans. He even refused to be photographed with blacks. Still, 66 percent of blacks who voted cast their ballots for Hoover over Democratic candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1932 presidential election.

Roosevelt's campaign had offered little to blacks. Despite pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Democratic Party refused to adopt a position prohibiting racial discrimination. In fact a stark level of racism was openly displayed in the Democratic Party. For this reason it was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's best interest during his 1932 presidential bid to not express any anti-discrimination feelings. Being a northern Democrat, Roosevelt was careful not to say anything that would upset southern party leaders and lose their support. Roosevelt's campaign staff had no blacks. He even issued a public statement earlier in 1929 denying he had eaten lunch with blacks. Earlier yet he had quietly stood by as President Woodrow Wilson (served 1913–1921) instituted a racial segregation system in the Navy during World War I (1914–1918).



No Relief from the First New Deal

Despite the black vote overwhelmingly going to Hoover, Roosevelt readily won the presidency. Once in office President Roosevelt continued an effort to not disturb southern Democrats. Early New Deal programs did not address the plight of black America directly. Any efforts by him to improve race relations, Roosevelt believed, would significantly undercut support for his main economic recovery measures. Southern support in Congress would be lost. If the critical economic legislation did not pass, both white and black Americans would be hurt. Therefore, President Roosevelt resolutely refused to make civil rights and racial equality a priority for the New Deal.

With no New Deal legislation addressing racial discrimination, discriminatory practices were widespread in the new programs. For example, many of the National Recovery Administration's (NRA) programs establishing standard wage rates did less to help blacks than whites. Many black jobs were still in the South where regional wage rates were established lower than other regions of the country. In fact the program did not even cover many black occupations such as farm labor and domestic helpers. Consequently, the NRA programs in effect perpetuated racial pay discrimination. Even in situations where blacks might receive equal pay as whites, it often meant unemployed whites would replace the blacks. Or, businesses simply ignored the NRA guidelines and paid the white workers more than blacks for the same jobs. They argued that the lower standard of living of blacks meant they could live on less.

Most black Americans did not own the land they farmed. This made them even more vulnerable to the AAA's crop production control measures. So they could qualify for the AAA benefit checks, often the white landowner would pull the acreage they had leased to tenants. They would frequently keep the benefits for themselves and not share it with the tenant farmers as required by the act. The number of sharecroppers declined from over 390,000 in 1930 to less than 300,000 in just a few years.

Black farmers had little means to correct the problems. To gain farmer support for the early New Deal programs, the programs relied on local administration. This effort to encourage grassroots support meant those traditionally in power—the white landowners and business leaders—would control how federal benefits were distributed. County committees set up to run the AAA programs banned black participation. As a result the AAA continued the poor condition of rural black Americans in the nation. In 1934 the average income of black cotton farmers was less than \$200 a year.



Why Not Promote Civil Rights?

Despite the activism of the New Deal President Roosevelt consistently rejected appeals by the black community to correct some of the social injustices imbedded in American society. White supremacy still ruled American politics, and President Roosevelt rightly figured that anyone who promoted civil rights issues would quickly lose political support to accomplish much of anything.

By 1937 and 1938, however, Roosevelt's support on the New Deal was waning. Despite his choice not to actively seek to improve the situation for blacks, he lost support from the conservative element of the Democratic Party, partly over racial equality issues.



"Don't Buy Where You Can't Work"

Black Americans used many tactics during the Great Depression to try to expand jobs for blacks. One approach in the northern cities was the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign. The strategy targeted those white merchants who primarily served a black community but refused to hire black employees or only hired them for low-paying positions. Blacks would boycott targeted stores. In New York City, the Reverend John H. Johnson formed Citizens League for Fair Play. They would establish picket lines outside the targeted store then take photographs of blacks that crossed the picket lines. The local black newspaper would publish them.

This strategy greatly discouraged potential shoppers from crossing picket lines and being revealed to their friends and neighbors. The amount of business was considerably reduced. When this tactic was applied to Blumstein's Department Store, the store finally relented after six weeks of boycotts and hired black clerks and professional staff. This campaign constituted the nation's first affirmative action hiring program, giving hiring preferences to minority groups previously excluded. The strategy brought economic gains to the black communities. In 1938 the New York Uptown Chamber of Commerce agreed to hire blacks in one-third of all executive, clerical, and sales jobs in retail businesses.



The New Deal Reaches Out

By early 1935 President Roosevelt began to take more direct action in black issues. In May 1935 he issued Executive Order 7046 prohibiting discrimination in the newly created Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Within a few short years after President Roosevelt's order between 15 and 20 percent of WPA workers, or about 230,000, were black. Their inclusion enabled many blacks to economically survive the Depression. Reflecting the low economic status of black Americans, the minimum wage of WPA—set at \$12 a week—was twice the amount many had previously earned. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) proved less responsive, largely due to its greater reliance on local implementation. Only about 250,000 black American men (7 percent) served in the CCC through the decade. Some areas would not select blacks for CCC work positions at all. In Georgia where 36 percent of the population was black, less than 2 percent of the CCC enrollment was black.

Sensitive to the criticism that his farm policies were harmful to the small farmer, Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration (RA) in 1935. Roosevelt named Will Alexander, who had focused on black poverty issues throughout his career, to lead the agency. For the rural poor, the agency sought to end sharecropping, tenant farming, and migratory labor, and to promote land ownership. One of the RA's initial goals was to resettle 500,000 farm families onto their own productive lands. The program attracted considerable opposition from existing white landowners who relied on such cheap labor. As a result the agency fell short with only 4,441 families eventually relocated. The RA also sought to relocate the poor from urban slums into planned towns in the suburbs. This program met the strong resistance of real estate developers. Though the initial goal was the creation of 25 towns, only three were actually constructed and settled.

