The Nadir of the Negro is the era from 1890 to the 1930s. In these years, African Americans lost many of the rights they had won during Reconstruction. In the South, whites forced blacks back into noncitizenship, no longer allowed to vote or serve on juries, and cut funding for black schools by as much as two-thirds. In the North, organizations ranging from restaurants to organized baseball to the dormitories of Harvard University that had previously admitted African Americans now rejected them.

Historian Rayford Logan, who earned his doctorate from Harvard in 1936 and chaired Howard University’s history department in the 1940s and 1950s, established the term in his 1954 book, The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir. The same year, C. Vann Woodward gave a series of lectures, reprinted later as The Strange Career of Jim Crow, telling how African Americans lost citizenship and social rights in the South not right after Reconstruction, but after 1890. Since then, the idea that race relations grew worse around 1890 has become well accepted in American history.

Three events in 1890 signaled the new era. Mississippi passed a new constitution, stripping voting rights from African Americans, and although the new law clearly violated the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the federal government did nothing. The U.S. Senate failed to pass the Federal Elections Bill, which would have helped African Americans (and white Republicans) to vote freely across the South. Worse, after the defeat, when tagged as usual by Democrats as “nigger-lovers,” Republicans this time denied the charge and largely abandoned the cause of civil rights. Since the Democrats already labeled themselves “the white man’s party,” African Americans now found themselves with no political allies. Finally, the Massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, ended the last vestige of Native sovereignty, sending American Indians into their nadir period as well.
What caused the Nadir? The antislavery idealism spawned by the Civil War faded as memories of the war dimmed. By 1890, only one American in three was old enough to have been alive when it ended. Fewer still were old enough to have any memory of the war. Among older Americans, millions had immigrated to the United States long after the war’s end and had played no role in it.

Three developments having nothing directly to do with black rights further eroded the position of African Americans. The first was the Indian wars. Although the federal government had guaranteed their land to the Plains Indians “forever,” after whites discovered gold in Colorado, Dakota Territory, and elsewhere, they took it anyway. If it was all right to take Indians’ land because they were not white, was not it all right to deny rights to African Americans, who were not white either?

Second, immigrants from Europe persisted in voting Democratic, partly because they saw that it was in their interest to differentiate themselves from blacks, still at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Also, Republicans were moving toward Prohibition, hardly a preferred position among Italian, Greek, and Russian newcomers among others. Frustrated politically by the new arrivals from southern and eastern Europe, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge helped found the Immigration Restriction League to keep out “inferior” racial strains. This further sapped Republican commitment to the idea “that all men are created equal.”

Third, the ideology of imperialism washed over the United States from Europe. Imperialism both depended upon and in turn reinforced the ideology of white supremacy. The growing clamor to annex Hawai’i included the claim that Americans could govern those brown people better than they could govern themselves. After winning the Spanish-American War, the administration of President William McKinley used the same rationale to defend making war upon our allies, the Filipinos. William Howard Taft, who was made U.S. commissioner over the Philippines in 1900, called the Filipinos “our little brown brothers” and said they would need “fifty or one hundred years” of close supervision “to develop anything resembling Anglo-Saxon political principles and skills.” Democrats drew the obvious parallel, “What about our little black brothers in the South?” and Republicans could make no cogent reply.

Seeing that the United States did nothing to stop Mississippi’s usurpation of black rights, whites in other Southern states and states as distant as Oklahoma followed suit by 1907. In 1894, Democrats in Congress repealed the remaining federal election statutes, leaving the Fifteenth Amendment lifeless, with no extant laws to enforce it. In 1896, in Plessy v. Ferguson, the U.S. Supreme Court declared de jure racial segregation legal. Schools were segregated statewide in Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and Arizona, as well as much of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, New Mexico, and California. The South already had segregated schools, of course.
The new Mississippi constitution required prospective voters to “be able to read any section of the constitution of this State . . . or he shall be able to understand the same when read to him, or give a reasonable interpretation thereof.” Other states incorporated similar measures in their new laws. In practice, black would-be voters were required to be able to read a section and interpret it. Local folklore has it that a professor at Tuskegee Institute with a doctorate in political science could not interpret the constitution to the satisfaction of the Macon County, Alabama, registrar, who was a high school dropout. Certainly even jurisdictions like Macon County—84 percent black, and home to two important black institutions, Tuskegee Institute and a large VA hospital—had white voting majorities until the Civil Rights Movement.

Not only did these clauses remove African Americans from voting, and hence from juries, they also linked literacy and education as the mechanism. In their wake, every Southern state cut back on black schooling. Their new constitutions commanded racially segregated schools de jure, so it was easy to set up shorter sessions for black schools, require lower qualifications of black teachers, and pay them a fraction of white salaries.

In 1898, Democrats rioted in Wilmington, North Carolina, driving out all Republican officeholders and killing at least 12 African Americans. Astonishingly, the McKinley administration allowed this coup d’état to stand. Congress became resegregated in 1901 when Congressman George H. White of North Carolina could not win reelection owing to the disfranchisement of black voters. No African American served in Congress again until 1929, and none from the South until 1973. The so-called Progressive Movement was for whites only. In many Northern cities, its “reforms” removed the last local black leaders from city councils in favor of commissioners elected citywide.

Coinciding with the Nadir and helping to justify it was the ideology of social Darwinism—the notion that the fittest rise to the top in society. It provided a potent rationale not only for white supremacy but also for America’s increasing class hierarchy. Its “scientific” handmaidens, eugenics and psychometrics, flourished. Madison Grant, author of the 1916 eugenics tract *The Passing of the Great Race*, helped write the 1924 law that drastically cut immigration to the United States from Asia and southern and eastern Europe. Carl Brigham, concerned that “American intelligence is declining . . . as the racial admixture becomes more and more extensive,” developed the Scholastic Aptitude Test in 1926 to select the brightest students for elite colleges. Popular culture also justified the Nadir. In this era, minstrel shows came to dominate our popular culture. They had begun before the Civil War but flourished after 1890 minstrel shows both caused and reflected the increased racism of the period. As author, politician, and activist James Weldon Johnson put it, minstrel shows “fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible,
happy-go-lucky, wide-grinning, loud-laughing, shuffling, banjo-playing, singing, dancing sort of being.” In small towns across the North, where few blacks existed to correct this impression, these stereotypes provided the bulk of white “knowledge” about what African Americans were like. The first epic motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*, glorified the Ku Klux Klan as the savior of white Southern civilization from the menace of black upstarts during Reconstruction. In 1936, near the end of the Nadir, the Margaret Mitchell novel *Gone with the Wind* sold a million hardbound books in its first month. The book and the resulting film, the highest-grossing movie of all time, further convinced whites that noncitizenship was appropriate for African Americans.

During the Nadir, lynchings rose to their height, and not just in the South, although the main “national” database has never included Northern lynchings. Segregation swept through public accommodations, North as well as South. In 1908, touring the North for an article, “The Color Line in the North,” Ray Stannard Baker noted the deterioration even in Boston, the old citadel of abolitionism: “A few years ago no hotel or restaurant in Boston refused Negro guests. [N]ow several hotels, restaurants, and especially confectionery stores, will not serve Negroes, even the best of them.” Writing of the day-to-day interactions of whites and blacks in the Midwest, Frank Quillen observed in 1913 that race prejudice “is increasing steadily, especially during the last twenty years.” In the 1920s, Harvard barred an African American student from the very dormitory where his father had lived decades earlier when attending the university. Whites ousted African Americans from occupations ranging from major league baseball player and Kentucky Derby jockey to postal carrier, mason, firefighter, and carpenter. Even jobs like department store salesclerk and factory worker were closed to African Americans, and not just in Dixie.

Across the North and throughout the Appalachian South and the Ozarks, whites forced African Americans to make a Great Retreat from hundreds of communities. These then became all-white sundown towns for decades. Communities that had voted Democratic in the 1860s were especially likely to bar African Americans decades later, during the Nadir. Even some previously interracial Republican towns, like Hermann, Missouri, where African Americans had celebrated Emancipation Day in the 1870s, went sundown after 1890.

African Americans thrashed about, trying to cope with their increasingly desperate situation. Early in the Nadir, some left the Deep South for new homes in Kansas and Oklahoma (the Exodus), but Oklahoma entered the Union in 1907 with a constitution modeled after Mississippi’s, while Kansas lost its abolitionist edge and developed many sundown towns. Booker T. Washington suggested blacks relinquish claims to social equality, concentrating on hard work and education, but this proved difficult because hostile Southern whites often targeted successful black farmers and businessmen.
W.E.B. Du Bois disputed with Washington, but his refusal to condone loss of black rights proved no more workable. Forming black towns like Boley, Oklahoma, and Mound Bayou, Mississippi, gave no relief, because these communities were ultimately under the white thumbs of county and state governments. The Back to Africa movements organized by Chief Sam and Marcus Garvey also provided no solution.

In this context, the Great Migration provided African Americans with environments in which they could vote freely, and hence could bargain for at least some municipal services and other basic rights. However, cities North and South became much more residentially segregated during the Nadir, and many suburbs formed on an all-white basis. Still, African Americans were able to establish small majority-black settlements on Long Island, New York, west of Detroit, south of Chicago, and on the outskirts of other Northern cities.

During the Woodrow Wilson administration, the Nadir intensified. Wilson segregated the navy, which had not been segregated before. He also replaced blacks who held appointed offices with whites. Responding to his leadership, whites rioted against black communities in Chicago, East St. Louis, Omaha, Washington, and other cities in what James Weldon Johnson called the Red Summer of 1919. The release of *The Birth of a Nation* led to a rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, this time as a national organization that displayed astonishing if short-lived clout in Georgia, Indiana, Oklahoma, Oregon, and other states during the 1920s. The Klan prompted the expulsion of African Americans from additional Northern towns and counties. The Great Depression of the next decade spurred whites to drive African Americans from additional jobs like elevator operator and railroad fireman.

Anti-Semitism increased as well in the Nadir. Early in the Civil War, people of various religions—including Jews—had founded the Union League Club to combat the pro-secession sentiment that dominated New York City. When white segregationists removed the widow of an African American soldier from a streetcar, the Union League Club came to her defense. Joseph Seligman, a Jew, leading banker, and friend of Ulysses S. Grant, had been a founder of the club. His son Jesse became a member in 1868. Then, during the 1890s, members refused to admit Jews, as well as Italians, Catholics, and others of “incorrect background.” In 1893, after 25 years of membership, 14 of them as a vice president, Jesse Seligman had to resign. Members blackballed his own son Theodore because he was a Jew. During World War I, the U.S. Army for the first time considered Jews “a special problem whose loyalty to the U.S. was open to question.” Along with other government agencies (and the KKK), the Military Intelligence Department mounted a campaign against Jewish immigrants that helped convince Congress to pass a restrictive immigration bill in 1924.

The Nadir manifested itself in many ways, including treatment of African Americans in Iowa newspapers. During the 1870s, they covered the activities and
individual happenings within the African American population. By the 1890s, however, most stories about blacks appeared on the crime page. Even the appointment of an Iowan as ambassador to Liberia, one of the highest posts available to African Americans during the Nadir, drew no notice in the Iowa press.

African American intellectuals despaired of the Nadir. In 1900, African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote “Robert Gould Shaw,” a bitter ode to the white colonel who led the black 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment in its charge at Fort Wagner during the Civil War. The poem ended by suggesting that Shaw’s “cold endurance of the final pain” had been pointless. Only with the rise of the CIO unions and some important symbolic gestures by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt did the Nadir begin to crack. The Great Migration itself helped end it. Coupled with the Great Retreat, it concentrated African Americans into a few large cities. This enabled blacks to win seats in Northern state legislatures and the U.S. House of Representatives, which in turn prompted white political leaders to moderate their racist rhetoric so as not to alienate urban black voters and political leaders. A second crack in the wall of white supremacy came from the crumbling of imperialism. In a Cold War context, America could not afford to offend the nonwhite leaders of newly independent nations in Asia and Africa. Most important of all was the role played by World War II. Germany gave white supremacy a bad name. It is always in victors’ interests to demonize the vanquished, but Nazism made this task easy. Americans saw in the German death camps the logical result of eugenics and segregation, and it appalled them. As they sought to differentiate themselves from Hitler’s discredited racial policies, the overt racism of the Nadir now made them uneasy. Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal called this conflict our “American dilemma” and predicted in 1944, “Equality is slowly winning.”

Although the Nadir reached its lowest point before 1940, it has left the United States with two progeny: sundown towns and warped history. Near the end of the period, in 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois lamented the distorted account of Reconstruction to which it gave rise: “We have got to the place where we cannot use our experiences during and after the Civil War for the uplift and enlightenment of mankind.”

James W. Loewen

See also: Atlanta Compromise, The; Jim Crow; Lynching.

Further Reading


In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), one of the first all-black political organizations, was created at one of the lowest points—the “nadir”—of African American history in response to the birth of Jim Crow. It was incorporated as the national affiliate for hundreds of clubs dedicated to the social reform activities of its members. The “race women” who participated in this national club movement were committed to “uplifting the race” or improving socioeconomic conditions for African Americans. By the late nineteenth century, critiques of the nation’s “Negro Problem” weighed heavily on the status of African American women, especially as the burden bearers of the race. They were often considered both the source and the solution to the many problems African Americans encountered after slavery. Black disfranchisement, lynch law/mob rule, “peonage slavery,” and discriminatory laws and social customs nullified the civil rights and privileges African Americans had gained during Reconstruction. Consequently, the 1890s was a decade plagued by racial prejudice and violence that severely affected African Americans. The 1896 landmark Plessy v. Ferguson U.S. Supreme Court case, in particular, stipulated the “separate but equal” laws of segregation that would lay firmly the foundation for white supremacy until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In light of the decree for de jure segregation, African