

Timeline of Black Citizenship

1865: 13th Amendment

The Thirteenth Amendment granted enslaved people legal freedom. Even though many men and women had already secured their freedom during the Civil War by joining Union forces, the thirteenth amendment granted them constitutional protection to live with family, marry, and move freely. This came with a big caveat.

Although the thirteenth amendment granted enslaved people legal freedom, it did not take away slavery completely. In the Amendment, it says that slavery can be used as a punishment for someone who commits a crime. This would lead to a convict leasing system where convicts (people found guilty of committing a crime) could be sold to farmers to do forced labor.

1868: 14th Amendment

The Fourteenth Amendment claimed to grant all people born in the U.S. equal citizenship and protection under the law. With citizenship, formerly enslaved men and women were eligible to run for office, sue using the court system, create and join civic organizations, and apply for land grants that the 1862 Homestead Act offered in the American West. Though this was a landmark moment for Black Americans' legal freedoms, it didn't always reflect their lived reality. Oppressive state laws and racist social norms continued to plague Black Americans' lives with structural limitations and everyday violence.

1870: 15th Amendment

The Fifteenth Amendment granted all male citizens the right to vote. This meant that Black men were legally allowed to make their voices heard at the ballot box! Like other events in the Black Citizenship timeline, however, this stride forward didn't come without complications. Black men faced voter suppression—legal and illegal tactics that keep eligible citizens from voting.

States passed laws requiring new voters to pay fees, pass rigged tests, and complete other unfair or impossible tasks in order to cast their ballot. White citizens who disagreed with the Fifteenth Amendment used physical violence to scare Black men away from polling locations or to forcibly remove them. On top of all this, Black women would not be able to legally vote for another 50 years.

1890: Second Morrill Act, HBCUs

The Morrill Land Grant Acts were a series of acts that gave states free land to sell, raising funds with the specific purpose of establishing colleges and universities. The second of these acts focused on Confederate states, requiring them to create institutions of higher learning for Black citizens. This established many of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) that are still in existence today, including Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (Florida A&M or FAMU) and Alcorn State University. These

institutions gave Black students access to higher education that they didn't otherwise have in 1890. Today, HBCU's are some of the most prestigious and high achieving educational institutions in America.

1909: NAACP

Black activists and white allies created the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Their founding mission was to champion equal rights and work to eliminate prejudice. The NAACP is responsible for many legal victories that changed the lives of Black Americans—from eliminating methods of voter suppression, to school integration, to championing major civil rights legislation. Some Black activists that believe in direct action (community-centered programs, demonstrations, etc.) have criticized the NAACP for seeking change solely through the United States judicial system, rather than on the community level. The NAACP, however, continues their charge for legal freedoms to this day, remaining one of the most recognizable American justice organizations.

1954: Brown vs. Board of Education

The Supreme Court ruled that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. This victory was won by a team of NAACP attorneys, led by attorney Thurgood Marshall. The ruling stated that institutions separated by race cannot be viewed as equal. Prior to this ruling, the Supreme Court had previously ruled that segregation was constitutional, so long as the two separate sides had equal resources. Brown vs. Board was a landmark ruling as it reversed this earlier decision, laying the groundwork for legal integration not just in schools but in institutions across the nation.

The Brown vs. Board ruling began the long, slow process of school integration in America. Many of the first Black students to integrate white schools faced violence from their fellow white students and community members. Schools in intensely pro-segregation white communities took years to integrate; the last public school to desegregate was legally ordered to do so in 2016.

1964: Civil Rights Act

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. The Act outlawed discrimination in public institutions and through federally funded programs. It also strengthened the enforcement of voting rights and the desegregation of schools.

This act legally ended segregation, however, much of the damage done by enslavement and the 90 years of legal oppression that followed it continues to this day. It was, however, still a major victory for Black citizens who now had the legal right to fair treatment and the ability to prosecute those who refused to give them fair treatment.

1969 to Present: The Modern Civil Rights Movement

There are many examples of contemporary activism from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's through today! Civil rights organizations have done extraordinary work to uplift Black communities, fight for legal change, and end the unlawful oppression of Black Americans. We cannot capture all of the modern movements on a single timeline, but here are a few major players in the continued fight for Black Americans' freedom.

1969-1980: The Black Panther's Free Breakfast Program

The Black Panthers were a group of Black radicals committed to ending police brutality and empowering Black citizens. They believed in achieving change through direct action, working hands-on to care for and defend their communities. One of their most notable programs is their Free Breakfast Program, through which they prepared breakfast for hundreds of students who lacked adequate food access. Teachers were amazed at how much their students' performance improved, and the Black Panthers' program was so popular it drove the federal government to increase free breakfast programs at public schools.

1989 to Present: Equal Justice Initiative

Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) is a nonprofit organization that provides free legal representation to people who have been illegally convicted, unfairly sentenced, or abused in state jails and prisons. They work for criminal justice reform, advocating for poor people, Black people, and all others who are disproportionately targeted by the American justice system. They produce reports to document the current and past state of American injustice, as well as memorials, museums, and other cultural projects.

2013 to Present: Black Lives Matter Movement

Black Lives Matter is a movement founded by a group of Black women in response to police brutality against Black people and the lack of justice for that brutality. Black Lives Matter is an organization with many local chapters that operate independently, organizing marches, demonstrations, voting drives, and other events. The demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter movement have resulted in many legal victories for Black Americans, widespread education on issues facing Black communities, and a national call to action for change. Individual chapters of BLM have organized fundraising efforts to help members of their communities facing financial struggle in the wake of COVID-19 and created other community-centered programs. BLM counters acts of violence in order to create space for Black imagination and joy.