Jim Crow and Minstrel Shows
An All-American Entertainment Embodies Derogatory Racial Stereotypes

Post Reprint: “Baseball, Apple Pie and Blackface”
Discussion Questions: Legacy and Practice
Post Reprint: “Virginia, birthplace of American slavery and segregation, still can’t escape that legacy”
Post Reprint: “The Jim Crow Car”
Closer Read and Discussion Questions: Riding With Jim Crow

NOTE The November 2012 Post curriculum guide provides background on Plessy v. Ferguson, the Reconstruction Era and Jim Crow.
Pejorative stereotypes. A troupe of stock characters — mammy, the old darky, pickaninny, black soldier and Jim Crow — in three acts. Wearing blackface. These are the elements of minstrel shows popularized in America.

Black mothers in the 1950s and 1960s — many of whom worked as riveters and were married to WWII veterans — worked for school desegregation. Then discovered the “music, poems, literature and plays to which their children were exposed were forms of amateur blackface minstrelsy,” according to cultural historian Rhae Lynn Barnes. They won the battle to change curriculum. Ironically, their success may have resulted in ignorance of blackface’s origins in minstrel shows and its relation to Jim Crow white supremacy.

In this resource guide teachers will find Post reprints from Outlook, Style and Sunday Magazine. These and the suggested activities and discussion questions provide an introduction to the noisome blackface origins and contemporary expressions.
Baseball, Apple Pie and Blackface

Minstrel shows were seen as all-American entertainment — more recently than you think

BY RAHE LYNN BARNES

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Both Gov. Ralph Northam (D) and Attorney General Mark R. Herring (D) of Virginia have admitted that they wore blackface as students in the 1980s in imitations of famous African Americans. News broke Thursday that the Virginia Senate majority leader, Tommy Norment (R), was an editor of a 1968 college yearbook filled with blackface photos.

Will yet more photos emerge of rowdy blackface frat parties and politicians’ youthful participation in amateur minstrel shows? The answer is almost certainly yes. More politicians probably took part than we will ever know.

Blackface is as American as the ruling class. Throughout the 20th century, all-male fraternal orders, schools, federal agencies and the U.S. military collectively institutionalized the practice. Watching blackface performances was a common pastime for U.S. presidents from both parties. “Blacking up” was seen as an expression of cultural heritage and patriotism throughout Jim Crow America — an era named after a famous blackface stock character — and up until the civil rights movement. Even now, one recent poll by YouGov found, only 58 percent of Americans oppose the practice.

As an expert in the history of amateur blackface minstrelsy, I was not surprised to see that a young Northam had a photo showing a man in blackface and someone dressed as a Klansman on his page in the 1984 Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook. I spent a decade poring over blackface composites from yearbooks and fraternal orders, watching cracked film footage, and cataloguing more than 10,000 blackface plays — collecting and preserving discarded programs, scrapbooks, photographs and blackface how-to guides from library sales, antique auctions and abandoned boxes outside foreclosed homes.

The reaction to the news out of Virginia shows how deeply the history of blackface has been buried, along with the practice. Once central to American popular
culture, minstrelsy became taboo after African American activists fought against it in the 1960s and 1970s. But the truth is that it’s hard to look anywhere without seeing its vestiges.

Blackface originated in Northern cities in the 1830s, but it quickly became popular in Virginia. Dan Emmett, the founder of the first globally famous minstrel troupe hailing from New York City, rebranded it as the Virginia Minstrels in 1843 in an attempt to claim a plantation pedigree for blackface music and dance. Virginia, which had imported enslaved Africans as early as 1619, embodied the complex relationship between blackface entertainment, slavery and American culture. The troupe did not just borrow Virginia’s brand but actively shaped it — its song “Dixie” became the unofficial Confederate anthem.

The state’s flagship university, the University of Virginia (where Herring’s performance took place), embraced blackface enthusiastically, especially once the Civil War meant that the school could no longer rely on income from hiring out enslaved people it owned to work on nearby plantations. Starting during Reconstruction, U-Va. made blackface a part of its fundraising strategy. In 1886 or 1887, the official University Minstrel Troupe donated the proceeds of its show to the construction of the university chapel, where couples continue to marry each year. The show, which included a “stump speech” — a stand-up comedy routine lampooning black politicians — also featured a “Berlesque of Mikado,” probably in yellowface.

For decades, the U-Va. minstrel troupe “sweetly” sang in “darky dialect,” as their programs put it, to raise funds. During World War I, a university-sponsored minstrel show took place on the steps of the Rotunda. The school’s yearbook is named “Corks and Curls,” minstrel slang for the burned cork used to blacken faces and the curly Afro wigs that were signature costume pieces (though the yearbook officially denies that’s where the name came from), and scores of old copies highlight the prominence of blackface on campus.

The practice was popular beyond the university, too. The Ku Klux Klan in Virginia used blackface...
in raids to confuse victims, and the Klan and the United Daughters of the Confederacy deployed it in comedy shows to recruit members. In 1924, as Charlottesville erected its infamous Robert E. Lee statue, the Charlottesville Elks ran ads promoting their minstrel show and ridiculing black American soldiers. The group’s shows featured fictionalized blackface slaves and their Klansman counterparts — a pairing on display in the Northam photo.

As late as 1974, the annual Charlottesville Lions Club minstrel show was still so popular, it was recommended in travel guidebooks. In November 2002, U-Va. made national headlines when three students arrived at a Halloween fraternity party in blackface.

Virginia’s enthusiastic embrace of minstrelsy is not unique. After the Civil War, amateur blackface spread quickly in the North and West. Everyday Americans bought commercially packaged “how-to” plays to perform racial stereotypes at home. By the turn of the 20th century, pro-Klan movies with blackface scenes such as “The Birth of a Nation” were standard consumer fare.

Perhaps the biggest single organization behind the spread of blackface was founded in 1868 in New York City: the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (the BPOE or the Elks Club), originally called the Jolly Corks and commonly referred to as “the burnt cork brotherhood” in homage to its minstrel founders. (These days, the Elks, like the U-Va. yearbook, say the name has nothing to do with blackface — though many of the men involved in the name’s ostensible origin story were famous blackface performers.) By the mid-20th century, the Elks Club was the largest fraternal group in the nation. It eventually became a segregated, all-male, anti-communist business and political network reliant on blackface fundraising to finance thousands of lodges that served as hubs for political organizing, patriotic social events and civic education.

By the 1960s, the Elks could count Presidents Warren G. Harding, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy among their brotherhood, not to mention numerous generals and senators. Other Elks included presidential candidate Barry Goldwater; House speakers Tip O’Neill, Carl Albert, John McCormack, Sam Rayburn and Tom Foley; Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren; and more than 60 state governors.

No politician who was a member could feign ignorance of the Elks’ strong connections to white supremacy, reinforced by their vote in 1970 to maintain their order as racially exclusive. Nor could they be unaware of the Elks’ use of blackface minstrelsy, since learning that history was part of the organization’s initiation process. And there is no evidence that any of these politicians spoke out against amateur blackface minstrel shows within their organizations.
President Woodrow Wilson celebrated his success at the Paris Peace Conference ending World War I by enjoying an amateur minstrel show aboard the USS George Washington, where a white crew member made up in blackface and drag as “Mammy” sat in Wilson’s lap and threw “her” arms around him while caressing his chin. When amateur minstrel George H. O’Connor died in 1946, his obituary in the New York Times called him the “Minstrel to Presidents.” O’Connor cherished a card slipped to him by a waiter after one of these events; Roosevelt had written, “Dear George, like old wine, you get better as the years roll on.” News footage from 1928 shows President-elect Herbert Hoover and his wife laughing, clapping and shaking the hands of U.S. Navy sailors dressed in blackface onboard the USS Maryland. And in the 1943 musical “This Is the Army,” a fresh-faced Ronald Reagan helps direct an all-Army minstrel number called “Mandy” while in his uniform, for a fictional Roosevelt seated in the audience.

One of clearest examples of the relationship between American politicians and amateur blackface is the annual Gridiron Dinner in Washington, which a century ago might as well have been called the annual White House minstrel show. At the Gridiron Club, Theodore Roosevelt beamed when Lew Dockstader, an Elks minstrel celebrity, shuffled onstage in blackface impersonating an African American from Tuskegee University. Newly inaugurated President William Howard Taft took his front-row seat in 1909 at what one newspaper hailed as America’s “national minstrel show” and an “all-star burnt-cork aggregation.” Perhaps the most disturbing show was in 1921, when President Warren G. Harding and the Cabinet got an “unexpected thrill when a Ku Klux Klan demonstration took place” during the dinner, as the Baltimore Sun reported it. A “group of clansmen in hooded garb, riding hobby horses, rushed upon the scene. Out went the lights, leaving only a spotlight to illuminate the ghostly visitation.” They impersonated a raid. They “seized and dragged the two shivering victims to the front” to mock interrogate them onstage.

During Jim Crow’s century-long reign, this strange, visible and highly pervasive world of blackface minstrelsy took hold in nearly every city and town in the United States. California hosted more amateur blackface shows per capita than any other state in the post-Civil War period. The shows and parades were so central to civic and campus life that it is difficult to find a university yearbook from the first half of the 20th century without a blackface image.

Amateur blackface minstrelsy served the U.S. government as something akin to an official culture. A child might be required to play a minstrel in school, where curriculums derived from state guides featured plays and music selected by the Works Progress Administration. As a young man, he might perform in and watch blackface while serving in the armed forces. The military was led by prominent Elks members, and it taught Americans to embody stereotypical blackness and transmitted racist proslavery antebellum culture in the form of Stephen Foster songs such as “Oh! Susanna,” “Camptown Races” and “Old Folks at Home.” Such government-sponsored racism persisted in some forms through the Nixon administration. When he returned home, he would enter a university — on the G.I. Bill — where blackface was again a ritualized cultural expectation of white manhood. Finally, as a businessman, he would join fraternal orders that perpetuated the cycle.

How did this monstrous, mass-commercialized empire of amateur blackface minstrelsy end? And why have you never heard about any of this before?

The answer has to do with a largely forgotten civil rights victory spearheaded by black mothers in the 1950s and 1960s. These women, typically black Rosie the Riveters married to veterans who believed in the “Double Victory” campaign — freedom at home and abroad — stood on the front lines of school desegregation. Once those walls had been breached, they were horrified to discover that the music, poems, literature and plays to which their children were exposed were forms of amateur blackface minstrelsy. They ran a national media campaign and
filed legal cases to ban blackface performance, dress-up, and texts from schools and government institutions.

Ironically, these courageous and determined mothers who envisioned a better world for their children were so successful at driving blackface out of the mainstream that schools now rarely (if ever) teach its history — which is why so many Americans are uninformed about how the practice persisted and why it is so offensive and hurtful to African Americans. It also might suggest why we now see blackface hip-hop parties on college campuses; younger generations do not understand the lineage they resurrect when donning blackface, because it is never discussed in their history classes.

The defiant return of repressed racism in Northam’s yearbook spread represents only a small shard of a dark, expansive and ever-present national story, one that shows how deeply intertwined the history of our country and our political leadership has been with amateur blackface minstrelsy. Long before the recent scandals, “blacking up” helped define for many leading Americans what it meant to be a man.

Rhae Lynn Barnes is an assistant professor of American cultural history at Princeton University and author of the forthcoming book Darkology: When the American Dream Wore Blackface.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Rhae Lynn Barnes, a cultural historian, indicated that she had found documentation of the use of blackface in many sources. Review the sources.
   a. Which did you find the most unexpected source? Explain why.
   b. Where might you search for examples of the use of blackface in your community?

2. Barnes writes about the University of Virginia’s connection to and “embrace” of blackface. With Reconstruction came minstrel shows.
   a. What source of income ended with the Civil War?
   b. What proof is there of the appeal and profitability of minstrel shows?
   c. What was a “stump speech” included in a minstrel show?

3. What connection does Barnes make between the KKK in Virginia and blackface?

4. Barnes states that the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks became the “biggest single organization behind the spread of blackface.”
   a. Explain how and why this happened?
   b. Barnes also connects the Elks Club to white supremacy. What is her evidence?

5. Another aspect of American culture expressed in its entertainment is the annual Gridiron Dinner.
   a. Who attended these dinners?
   b. What was a main form of entertainment?
   c. What is your personal reaction to the Gridiron programs of the past?
   d. Do research to learn about current Gridiron dinners attended by politicians, journalists and business leaders. In what way(s) have they changed since 1885?

6. Select one of these individuals to learn about his/her relation to the use of blackface, the history of blackface stereotypes, and/or the public’s attitude toward blackface.
   a. New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia
   b. Stephen Foster
   c. Al Jolson
   d. Shirley Temple
   e. Works Progress Administration plays and music
   f. Black mothers, in 1950s and 1960s, who sought changes in schools
Legacy and Practice

Read “Virginia, birthplace of American slavery and segregation, still can’t escape past” and review the timeline before responding to these questions on your own paper.

1. When and how did the ownership of enslaved people from Africa begin in Virginia?

2. From the initial group of 20, the enslaved population of Virginia increased to 32 in 1620 and to 210,000 by 1775. According to census data, by 1860 490,000 slaves lived in Virginia, more than in any other state.
   a. What do these numbers indicate about sources of income and the practice of owning slaves?
   b. What indications are there that owning other human beings was an accepted way of life in Virginia and other states?

3. Select one of the following individuals. Relate the relationship or impact of this person upon ownership of enslaved people from Africa.
   a. John Brown
   b. Thomas Jefferson
   c. Robert E. Lee
   d. Nat Turner

4. Miscegenation laws were passed by the Virginia General Assembly as early as 1705.
   a. What attitudes are reflected in these laws?
   b. What were the main provisions of the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924?
   c. What was the impact of the Supreme Court decision in Loving v. Virginia (1967)?

5. Abolitionists’ efforts, blackface in minstrel shows, segregated schools, monuments to Confederate War heroes, miscegenation laws and current actions could be considered examples of a legacy that began 400 years ago with the purchase in Point Comfort, Virginia, of 20 people who had been seized from a Portuguese ship.
   a. What connections do you see over the years between these events and actions?
   b. Would you categorize these in different groups? What factors determine how the above are viewed?
By Michael E. Ruane

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At the end of August 1619, a British privateer, the White Lion, arrived at Point Comfort, Va., with cargo it had seized in a battle with a Portuguese slave ship. The take wasn’t much, “not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes,” tobacco planter John Rolfe wrote.

But the ship needed “victuals.” The Virginia colony’s governor had them. And a deal was struck: the White Lion’s human merchandise for food, “at the best and easiest rates.”

Thus arrived in Virginia the first documented Africans on the mainland of English North America, according to historian James Horn.

Over the next 400 years, Virginia was to be the nursery and battleground of slavery, a land of segregation, lynchings and white supremacy, and home to unbending racial oppression and the myth of the Confederate “lost cause.”

As Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D) in recent days mulled resigning over a racist photograph in his medical school yearbook, and Attorney General Mark Herring (D) said he dressed in blackface during college, the modern state continues to struggle with its past as a champion of slavery and an opponent of equality.

Although slavery and then racism were eventually widespread across what became the United States, it was in Virginia where the so-called peculiar institution was born, where it was codified in law, and where the most famous slave-led rebellion in America, the Nat Turner uprising of 1831, occurred.

There, too, reverence for slavery’s defenders and monuments to its military heroes still haunt public spaces and dialogue, and memorialize a time when the country was ripped in two.

In 1860, more slaves lived in Virginia — 490,000 — than in any other state in the Union, according to census data. The year before, in what was then Harpers Ferry, Va., the white abolitionist, John Brown, headed the doomed slave insurrection that helped spark the Civil War.

And then in a bloody swath of Northern Virginia, roughly between Washington and Richmond, the final struggle that destroyed slavery was fought during the Civil War.

Here are some of slavery’s way points in Virginia history.

A composite displays scenes of Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion.
1619: The first enslaved Africans arrive in Virginia, launching the institution of slavery in what would become the United States. The Virginia slave population grew slowly at first. Thirty-two were recorded there in 1620, according to Horn. There were 300 by 1648, 3,000 by 1680, and 16,000 by 1700, according to Colonial Williamsburg.

1705: The Virginia General Assembly passes a law that made it a crime, punishable by imprisonment, for a white person to marry a black person — to prevent “that abominable mixture and spurious issue.” The law went on to state that if a slave happened to be killed while being punished, no crime would be attached, and the murder would be viewed “as if such incident had never happened.”

1775: The enslaved population of Virginia reaches 210,000.

1776: The Declaration of Independence, declaring that “all men are created equal,” is co-authored by Virginia slave holder and future president, Thomas Jefferson, who, when he wrote it, owned about 200 slaves.

1789: The nation inaugurates its first president, Virginian and slave holder George Washington, who at his death a decade later had about 300 slaves on his estate at Mount Vernon.

1812: Enslaved field hand and minister Nat Turner launches the bloodiest slave revolt in U.S. history, in Southampton County, Va. Scores of whites were killed, and over 100 blacks were slain in retaliation. Some blacks were beheaded and had their heads put on roadside stakes as a gruesome warning. Turner was captured and hanged on Nov. 11, 1831, in a town once known as Jerusalem, Va.

1859: The militant white abolitionist John Brown tries to spark an insurrection of slaves in Harpers Ferry, now in West Virginia, the site of a federal armory in Virginia. The uprising fails. Few slaves rally to his cause. Brown is captured by forces led by Virginian and U.S. Army Col. Robert E. Lee, the future Confederate general. As he went to the gallows, Brown left a note stating, “I ... am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.”

1861 to 1865: When Richmond becomes the capital of the Confederacy, some of the biggest and bloodiest battles of the Civil War are fought across the landscape of Northern Virginia, with the ebb and flow of the war devastating the countryside and its inhabitants.

1877 to 1950: An estimated 76 lynchings of African Americans take place in Virginia. This is far fewer than the 500-plus in both Georgia and Mississippi, according to Encyclopedia Virginia, but equally as brutal. In September 1893, a mob in Roanoke lynched a man named Thomas Smith. The next day, as a crowd gathered around his hanging body, a photographer snapped a picture. Copies were sold as souvenirs.

1883: After the black majority of Danville, Va., helped elect moderate whites and African Americans to political offices in May, rioting broke out in November on election eve, according to the Encyclopedia Virginia. Four black men were killed, four were wounded, and blacks resigned from their offices.

1912: Walter Ashby Plecker becomes head of Virginia’s Bureau of Vital Statistics and for the next 30 years worked to keep the races separate. His efforts led the Virginia legislature to pass the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, a law that again criminalized interracial marriage. The law was the “perfect expression of the white ideal,” he said, and argued that anyone with one drop of “Negro” blood could not be classified as white.

1959: Virginia’s Prince Edward County closes its school system rather than integrate. The county’s schools remained closed until forced by the Supreme Court to reopen in 1964. But many students had already been denied education for five years, and many never recovered from the loss.

1963: Danville is again the site of racial turbulence, as civil rights activists march and demonstrate and authorities respond with fire hoses, clubs and arrests. Three demonstrators are indicted for “conspiring to incite the colored population … to acts of violence and war against the white population” — a law enacted after Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid in 1859.

1966: The U.S. Supreme Court strikes down laws banning interracial marriage, in a landmark case brought by Richard and Mildred Loving of Caroline County. He was white. She was of African American and Native American descent. They had married in Washington in 1958 but had been arrested on their return to Virginia and forced to leave the state.

2018: Fields is convicted of first-degree murder in December and sentenced to life in prison.

2017: In Charlottesville that August, white supremacists bearing Confederate flags, torches and Nazi banners spark rioting in which neo-Nazi James Alex Fields Jr. rams his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing Heather D. Heyer and injuring 35 others.
The Jim Crow Car

The North, the South and the origins of racial separation

Story by Steve Luxemberg
Illustrated by Christina Chung

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On a late summer’s day in 1838, the Eastern Rail Road threw a celebration to announce itself to the world. At noon in East Boston, after an hour of hurrahs from several hundred investors, a swollen crowd jammed itself into three trains for the 13 1/2-mile ride to Salem, Mass. — where a festive dinner for 600 awaited at the railroad’s new depot. Separated by half a mile, the locomotives clattered along at a leisurely pace, allowing the passengers plenty of time to admire the many engineering marvels — overpasses, embankments, stone walls — that work crews had fashioned in the excavated cavities of rock and earth. Newspaper correspondents representing nearly every town along the route were on hand to chronicle the history-making moment.

The tail end of the opening-day procession trundled into Salem just ahead of an evening downpour. The disembarking passengers then joined a who's who of the state's business and political elites. Leading figures from the Whig and Democratic parties mingled with the presidents of the state's other railway companies, who had come to salute the latest member of their growing club.

To match the grand occasion, the Eastern's ruddy-cheeked president, George Peabody, had prepared a speech brimming with ambition. The railroad would not be merely a means of transportation, Peabody boldly predicted. It would be a force for social change. Steam locomotion would bind together the sprawling United States and help “subdue local prejudices.” A rail-connected nation, east to west, north to south, would send “a whole people moving onward together in a career of unexampled prosperity, bearing in their front the standard of Equal Rights.”

Peabody would have said all that, but as the Boston Courier reported, “from the extreme size of the building, the noise produced by the popping of Champagne corks, etc., he could only make himself heard by a few persons.” Chagrined, he turned to Boston Daily Advertiser publisher Nathan Hale and requested that Hale arrange to print the speech in full, so that the people of Massachusetts might read and digest it at their leisure. Hale nodded his assent.

The next day, though, when Peabody’s railroad officially threw open its doors to the paying public, the “standard of Equal Rights” was nowhere in sight. Instead, the Eastern’s white and black passengers found separate cars awaiting them.

SIX WEEKS LATER, ON OCTOBER 12, 1838, an item appeared in the Salem Gazette, telling the story of two drunken white sailors, Benjamin King and John Smith, charged with damaging the Eastern Rail Road's track in retaliation for their ejection from the 6 o'clock evening run to Salem. Soon after departure, before the conductor ordered their removal, the crew had halted the locomotive “and compelled Smith, who was the drunkest, to take his seat in the ‘refuse’ or ‘Jim Crow’ car, at the end of the train.”
In researching the story of separation — which was the 19th-century term, universally used in print and conversation — this was the earliest record I could find of the use of “Jim Crow” as a shorthand for discrimination in public accommodations. When it showed up in my digital digging, I was surprised. This was 1838, in the North, at the dawn of the railroad age. Not 1888, when Mississippi passed the first law in the South explicitly mandating “equal but separate accommodation for white and colored passengers” on trains operating within its borders, going beyond a Florida law enacted a year earlier. Not 1896, when the Supreme Court sanctioned Louisiana’s “equal but separate” railroad act in its infamous Plessy v. Ferguson ruling.

This mention of “Jim Crow” was not something I had come across in the notable works I had read on Northern racial prejudice during my early explorations. (Much later, in rechecking my research, I would come across a footnote in a new book citing the Gazette article.) I was fascinated by this 600-word report from the Salem police court.

The 1838 newspaper had used “Jim Crow” without explanation, as if the contemptuous label was already embedded in the train crew’s lexicon, as if its readers already understood. How could that be?

By 1838, the phrase was well in circulation — thanks in part to
the astounding popularity of Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a white entertainer who called himself the “Original Jim Crow.” Rice could not claim to be the first white man to sing in blackface when he bounded onto the stages of New England and elsewhere in the early 1830s. But he could soon claim to be the best known. He performed in a short-waisted blue coat, threadbare gold pants and mismatched shoes, singing, “Eb’ry time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.” Newspaper editors and letter writers picked up the phrase, routinely accusing politicians of “jumping Jim Crow” for giving up a principle too easily or abandoning their party’s cause.

Rice’s racist caricature took on a life all its own. Figurines, touted as the “complete, original Jim Crow,” showed up on tables at annual spring fairs in Massachusetts. Boston merchants carried music boxes that played “Jim Crow, Zip Coon and other tunes.” A tour of England widened his reputation.

It was, apparently, just a short hop from there to christening the car for black passengers — and anyone else the railroad considered undesirable — as the “Jim Crow.” At first, there wasn’t much of an outcry, perhaps because people of color made up barely 1 percent of the Massachusetts population in 1840. But before long, the abolitionist movement had seized on the Eastern’s policy of separation, making it the centerpiece of a rancorous political struggle, one with enduring implications — about the deep roots of Northern racism, about the power of corporations, about the American legal system’s often intolerant response to the long line of resisters engaged in an unceasing fight for civil rights and racial justice.

IN JUNE 1841, NOT QUITE THREE YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH of the Jim Crow car, David Ruggles arrived in Massachusetts for a series of abolitionist strategy sessions. He did not come to pick a fight over transportation.

Only 31 years old but with failing eyesight — cataracts would leave him blind by the following year — Ruggles had been born free in Connecticut. As secretary of the New York Committee of Vigilance, he had helped hundreds of runaways from slavery. Frederick Douglass, who had stayed with Ruggles for a few weeks after fleeing slavery in Maryland, was inspired by this slightly built man of color and his ingenuity at devising escape routes for the many fugitives who flowed through his house. “Though watched and hemmed in on almost every side, he seemed to be more than a match for his enemies,” Douglass later marveled in his memoirs.
Now, on a pleasantly sunny Saturday morning, Ruggles boarded the steamboat Telegraph in New Bedford’s harbor, bound for Nantucket and a meeting of abolitionists there. Ruggles learned that there were two fares. For $2, passengers could roam the ship, free to go anywhere. For 50 cents less, they could confine themselves to the cheap seats on the forward deck. Ruggles opted for the higher fare. The captain refused to accept it. Words became shouts, and in the ensuing scuffle, Ruggles lost his hat and the papers he had brought with him. He never made it to the meeting in Nantucket.

Several weeks later, on the New Bedford & Taunton railway’s service to Boston, Ruggles entered the whites-only car, $2 ticket in hand. Among the eight passenger railways operating in the state, only three had chosen the custom of separate cars — and the New Bedford & Taunton was one of them. The conductor summoned reinforcements to eject Ruggles. He put up a fight, and had the bruises and torn clothes to show for it. His baggage went on to Boston. He went to New Bedford to file a formal claim of assault against the railroad company and the men who had manhandled him.

At a two-day trial before New Bedford police judge Henry H. Crapo, the railroad president testified that the company’s rule benefited everyone because it “separated the drunken, dirty, ragged and colored people from the others.” Ruggles told the judge that he saw no benefit in paying $2 to sit with the drunken, dirty and ragged. He had paid full price — the same price as white passengers — and that should give him the same privileges. But none of his arguments moved Crapo. The railroad was entitled, the judge said, to make and enforce whatever rules it deemed necessary. “The cars are the property of the stockholders, and as such are private property,” Crapo declared.

Crapo’s ruling brought a vehement denunciation from William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the abolitionist newspaper the Liberator. Garrison took to its pages to censure Crapo for “giving his legal sanction to the dastardly assault and battery.” In an accompanying article, Ruggles pronounced the trial “the greatest farce I ever witnessed.”

Less than two weeks later, with his railroad battle still a fresh wound, Ruggles was the guest of honor at a gala dinner celebrating his contributions to the abolitionist cause. “Action is everything,” he exhorted his admirers, a mixed gathering of whites and blacks. “With it, we are successful. Without it, all our enthusiasm is worse than nothing.”

ACTION CAME IN MANY FORMS. TWO WEEKS after the gala dinner, the conductor and crew on the
Eastern Rail Road found themselves face-to-face with resistance in the imposing form of Frederick Douglass and a white abolitionist named John Collins, the general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

The Eastern had extended its Salem line to Portsmouth, N.H., 16 miles north of the Massachusetts border. Grateful passengers included Collins, whose travel time to abolitionist chapters in southern New Hampshire had shrunk dramatically. On Sept. 8, 1841, Collins was heading there for an annual meeting, accompanied by Douglass, the Anti-Slavery Society’s newest employee and rising star. Less than a month before, Douglass had transfixed the abolitionists’ midsummer gathering with a spontaneous, eloquent description of his days in slavery. Almost instantly, he went from obscurity to symbol, a flesh-and-blood example of the wonders that abolition could bring.

The traveling duo were an unusual pair — the excitable, unimposing Collins, seven or eight years older, born in Vermont, known for his sarcastic pen and long face; the stern-eyed, broad-shouldered Douglass, not quite 24, new to anti-slavery politics. But the Eastern conductor had his eye on the only contrast that mattered: Collins was white, Douglass was not.

When the conductor ordered them to separate, Douglass stayed put. The conductor laid down the usual ultimatum: the Jim Crow car or ejection. Collins demanded to know the basis for the conductor’s directive. The conductor ripped down a posted placard from the car’s entrance and thrust it toward them. Collins treated the placard’s words as one more debating point, arguing that the rule violated the state constitution’s guarantee of equal rights. But he and Douglass proved no match for the half-dozen men who seized Douglass and dragged him out of the car.

Then, a complicating sequence of events for the exasperated conductor: Another abolitionist on the train, George Foster, announced his intention to join Douglass in his exile from the whites-only car. The conductor stood firm against this unexpected challenge, telling Foster that he “was not black enough to sit there.” Foster fumed, but retreated.

The next day at the meeting in New Hampshire, Collins and Douglass ignited the assembled with their account. Soon, the abolitionists had more than another outrage to discuss. Thanks to Ruggles and Douglass, they now had a rallying cry and a new cause: Ban the “dirt car,” as it was also known. Send Jim Crow, they demanded, to the “receptacle of forgotten barbarisms.”

Traveling white and black abolitionists now demanded to sit together, in one car or the other. The tactic of “bearing witness” introduced a new level of danger into every encounter.
THE FALL OF 1841 BROUGHT MORE CLASHES on the Eastern and New Bedford railways. Traveling white and black abolitionists now demanded to sit together, in one car or the other. The tactic of “bearing witness,” either by protesting an eviction or by trying to join the ejected traveler in the other car, introduced a new level of danger into every encounter.

On Sept. 28, Collins met Douglass and two white abolitionists — a female friend of Collins’s, and James N. Buffum, secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society’s chapter in Lynn — at the Lynn station for a trip to Newburyport, near the Massachusetts-New Hampshire line. The foursome planted themselves in the whites-only car, known as “the long car.” Douglass regarded the Eastern long cars as “one of the best railroad carriages” then in operation, with “luxuriant and beautiful” seats. The enraged conductor ordered Douglass out. When Buffum described his intention to go with Douglass, the conductor set down his marker: “I’d as soon haul you out of his car, as I’d haul him from this.”

Douglass refused to budge. Six men were needed to oust him. “They clutched me, head, neck, and shoulders,” Douglass wrote later. “But, in anticipation of the stretching to which I was about to be subjected, I had interwoven myself among the seats. In dragging me out, on this occasion, it must have cost the company twenty-five or thirty dollars, for I tore up seats and all.” At the next stop, his white companions were forced to leave the train as well.

Buffum complained to the Eastern superintendent, Stephen Chase, whose name appeared on the train’s placard of rules. Buffum and Chase belonged to the same Quaker meeting house, and their relationship was already strained. In the pages of the *Liberator*, Chase had been attacked as a hypocrite, a Quaker who believed in the inhumane treatment of his passengers.

Buffum confronted Chase with a Quaker-flavored accusation, as recounted in a 1922 history of the Eastern Railroad: “Stephen, I don’t think thee does right to utilize a Jim Crow car on thy train.” Chase fired back with his own charge of hypocrisy: “Well, James, I’ll tell thee, when thee abolishes the colored pews in the meeting house, then I’ll abolish the Jim Crow car.”

By the following week, the uproar had bloomed into a full-flowered controversy. A hastily organized town meeting in Lynn ended with resolutions denouncing the railroad and Chase, as well as a call for a boycott unless the railroad changed its policy. Chase, claiming he was trying to avoid trouble, came up with a bold idea: He
ordered the trains not to stop at the Lynn station, where Douglass frequently climbed aboard.

The plan backfired. Irate Lynn passengers, their travel arrangements disrupted, turned on the railroad. The editor of the Lynn Record dismissed Chase’s fear of “mob violence” as a pretense designed to “enlist the sympathies of the people, and to turn their indignation from themselves.” Chase quickly rescinded his order.

The abolitionists celebrated the turn of events. “I am convinced that the agitation growing out of these incidents will do much good,” Buffum wrote to the *Liberator*, now filled every week with a running chronicle of fresh indignities on the Eastern and New Bedford lines. “Indeed, everywhere I go, I hear men and women talking of these shameful transgressions.”

After three years of relative obscurity, the issue of separate railroad cars had vaulted to the top of the abolitionist agenda, reaching parity with the other issues then consuming the movement: petitioning Congress to outlaw slavery in the District of Columbia; protesting the return of fugitives to their Southern masters; ending Massachusetts’s ban on intermarriage.

Dozens of petitions went to the legislature, calling for a law that would forbid separate cars. The most prominent one, signed by Garrison, Collins and Douglass, minced no words. Legislation was needed so that railroads “may no longer claim the right” of assigning seats “on the sole ground of a difference in color,” and to stop railroad

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employees from “insulting, assaulting and ejecting white passengers” who objected.

That drew several counter-petitions from groups of white passengers, including one arguing that their “comfort and convenience” would be seriously diminished if they had to share “the company of blacks.” On an early November evening in 1841, Douglass challenged a rapt audience from the Anti-Slavery Society’s Plymouth chapter to see the insidiousness of Northern-style prejudice: “People in general will say they like colored men as well as any other, but in their proper place. Who is to decide what is their proper place?”

The outcome of the looming legislative battle was not at all certain. Most legislators stood against slavery, but opposing the South’s “peculiar institution” did not translate to a belief that freedom meant the right to mix freely with whites in the North. There were plenty of legislators who viewed anyone of color as inferior, who felt no law could undo what God and nature had created.

THE SCENE THAT UNFOLDED IN THE MASSACHUSETTS House of Representatives on Feb. 10, 1842, came with no precedent. A special joint committee, chaired by an abolitionist senator from Plymouth, had granted a full hearing to the petitioners seeking a ban on separate cars. Word had gotten out: A man of color would be testifying.

Curious spectators, including legislators, crowded into the cavernous hall. Few in the crowd needed an introduction to the first witness. Wendell Phillips was the son of a former Boston mayor and at 30 years old already among the most prominent of New England abolitionists. Like Garrison and Collins, he had shown his support for black passengers by attempting to ride with them in the separate car. His protest had led the National Anti-Slavery Standard to exclaim that separation on railroads would end if only 10 other “patricians” would join Phillips in the Jim Crow coaches.

His rousing oratories had mesmerized even the most lukewarm slavery opponents. He drew on those skills in delivering an impassioned 90-minute plea against separation. “There are those who consider this a trifling matter,” Phillips told the white men arrayed before him. “To the colored citizen, sir, it is not so.” A white passenger could not begin to understand “the inconvenience, the wrong, the disgrace, the insult and suffering of these unconstitutional bylaws of corporations.”

Phillips took direct aim at Judge Crapo’s ruling against Ruggles: Yes, the railroads might be privately owned, as Crapo had noted, but they were public in every way that mattered. They operated with a public charter. They laid their tracks with public loans from the state treasury, on public rights of way. They are, Phillips told the committee, “creatures of your own enactment.”

As Phillips sat down, to murmurs of approval, the crowd craned for a good look at the next witness: Charles Lenox Remond, who had come to offer a firsthand account of one black citizen’s travels on the Eastern Rail Road. A year older than Phillips, Remond was no stranger to the abolitionists in the hall. He had just returned from a 19-month lecture tour of Britain and Ireland that had brought him acclaim and a place of honor at the Anti-Slavery Society’s annual meeting two weeks earlier.

But to most in the crowd, Remond was an unknown. A spectator muttered contemptuously to a correspondent for a New York abolitionist newspaper, “He will have to ask his master what to say.” After Remond had finished, the correspondent asked the spectator what he thought now. “Why, I think,” said the spectator, “the colored man is the ablest man of the two.”

Remond’s travels abroad gave him an unusual perspective, and he shrewdly made the most of it. On trains and steamboats in Europe, in hotels and on the street, he said, “in no instance was I insulted, or treated in any way distinct or dissimilar from other passengers or travelers.” Yet on his return to Boston, just before Christmas 1841, he was immediately reminded of his inferior status in the land of his birth. Buying a one-price-fits-all ticket to Salem, where his parents lived, he was ushered to a dismal, dirty car. Europe suddenly seemed very far away. “I took my seat peaceably,” he told the committee, “unwilling to descend so low as to bandy words with the superintendents or contest my rights with conductors.”

A few days later, Remond continued, he ran into Eastern superintendent Stephen Chase. The two men knew each other from growing up in Salem. Chase asked Remond
if he was glad to be home after such a lengthy absence and was taken aback by Remond’s tart answer: “I never felt to loathe my American name so much as since my arrival.” Remond asked Chase how separation would make him feel — if, for example, passengers with red hair, like Chase, had to ride separately. Chase “could make no reply.”

Remond then drove his point home to the committee. He had no control over his skin color, just as Chase had none over the color of his hair. “Complexion,” Remond said, “can in no sense be construed into crime, much less be rightfully made the criterion of rights.”

The newspaper reports reflected the usual split in public opinion. One Boston correspondent called Remond’s delivery “graceful and pointed” and surmised that “equal justice” would prevail. The Liberator, with its usual enthusiasm, published verbatim accounts of the testimony. The correspondent for the Hampshire Gazette, meanwhile, complained sourly about these “petty” petitions of “trifling importance” taking up the legislature’s time. Several newspapers carried nothing at all.

Yes, the railroads might be privately owned, but they were public in every way that mattered.

ANOTHER FAMOUS SON OF BOSTON, CHARLES Francis Adams, watched the Phillips and Remond testimony with keen interest. In only his second year as a member of the Massachusetts House, Adams had decidedly mixed feelings about what to do about separate railroad cars. He deplored the practice but had grave misgivings about the precedent that would be set if the legislature intervened in the affairs of corporations. After listening to Phillips and Remond, Adams wrote in his diary, “I was disappointed at the general character of the argument and my mind was in greater doubt than ever.”

Doubt was a place where Adams often dwelled. Other members of Boston’s elite families had donned the abolitionist label in recent years and were wearing it with pride. Not Adams. He was staunchly anti-slavery and would later lead a wing of the Whig Party into a national anti-slavery role. But he rejected immediate abolition as a solution.

Until he had bowed to the Whig Party’s entreaties to join its ticket, Adams had spent a good portion of his first 33 years looking for an escape from his presumed destiny. The Adams clan was as close to aristocracy as any in the young republic, and Charles felt every ounce of that weight. He revered his grandfather, John Adams, the nation’s second president, and loved and respected his father, the nation’s sixth. Charles wrote often in his diary of his ambition to leave his own mark in the world. But he claimed to detest the profession that had made his family so influential — not just the practice of it, but everything about it.

Adams valued independence more than any cause. He was generally an abolitionist ally, but hardly a reliable one. After hearing out yet another abolitionist appeal for help, he scribbled in his diary, “I am willing to advance their principles as far as I can approve them but I will not consent to make myself their slave.”

THREE WEEKS AFTER THE PHILLIPS-REMOND TESTIMONY, the special legislative committee on separate railroad cars issued its much-anticipated report. It could not have been more favorable if the abolitionists had drafted it themselves.

It did not matter, the report said, that some passengers preferred separation. The Massachusetts Constitution had decreed equal rights — at least for its male citizens — and that meant no discrimination by color, descent or religious sect. The committee recommended a bill making railroads liable for criminal penalties if they discriminated. The proposal brought a howl of protest from
one state senator, who warned that “this foolish mixing” would spread to theaters, hotels and other public places.

A final vote on repealing the intermarriage ban came up first. It passed the state Senate by a comfortable margin but failed in the House by four votes. Adams, who had spoken out in favor of the repeal, wasn’t surprised. He had felt the House’s mood shifting after the Boston Advertiser had come out for keeping the ban. “So hard it is in a community to do away with a deep rooted prejudice,” he wrote in his diary.

The Senate, meanwhile, saved Adams from having to decide on the separate car bill. Opponents, sensing they now had the votes to put the issue on hold, moved for an indefinite postponement. They won, 18 to 13.

Garrison wrote bitterly of the dual defeat: “Humanity and Liberty have yet a mighty work to accomplish in Massachusetts.” A month later, he debuted a new tactic in the Liberator: a “traveller’s directory.” Modeled after the train timetables, the directory informed passengers of how they could expect to be treated on each of the state’s railways.

On the Boston and Lowell: “humanity respected.”
On the Western: “equality of privileges.”
On the Eastern: “an odious distinction on account of color, and a bullying propensity to carry it out.”

ANOTHER YEAR OF CONFRONTATIONS DID NOT ELIMINATE Adams’s doubts about the railroad bill. As the 1843 session got underway, his attention was elsewhere, primarily on the George Latimer fugitive case. A Virginia slaveholder, claiming ownership of Latimer, had asked Massachusetts to hold Latimer and return him, no questions asked. This was a matter that went directly to the heart of the country’s great national divide: Could a Northern state be forced, against the principles of its own constitution, to comply with a slave owner’s request? Adams, who was heading the legislative committee investigating the Latimer case, had no misgivings on this issue. He favored enactment of a “personal liberty” law that would prohibit the use of any Massachusetts property or official in a Southerner’s hunt for a runaway slave.

The Latimer case stirred public opinion like none other. At the end of January 1843, two men, using a stretcher resting on their shoulders, carried petitions into the State House bearing an astounding 64,000 signatures, more than 10 percent of the state’s adult population. The abolitionists who orchestrated the event asked Adams to make the formal presentation to the House. “This is perhaps the most memorable event of my life,” Adams wrote that night. “I feel some degree of pride in the fact that I was selected for such a purpose.”

He felt nothing of the sort about the railroad bill, and wished the legislation would disappear. But like a conductor enforcing the separate car rules, he found confrontation hard to avoid. The climactic moment came on Feb. 6, 1843, a cloudy Monday, one week after his Latimer triumph. The House took up the railroad bill for a final debate. After a divisive discussion that pitted Whig against Whig, Democrat against Democrat, Adams reluctantly rose to his feet. He had made up his mind to vote against the bill. But he was eager to avoid saying so publicly, given the “strong undercurrent of prejudice” in the opposition’s speeches. Desperate to find an alternate path, he fell back on a direct appeal to the railroads themselves.

There was no question in his mind, Adams told his House colleagues, that the legislature “had the right” to pass a bill. But “it would be a kind of entering wedge to a general interference with the charters of all corporations,” and he did not think that approach was wise. With a dramatic air, he turned to the legislative reporters and instructed them to write down his words precisely. Perhaps the offending railroads, he said, “would take the advice of a humble member of the House” and voluntarily rescind their bylaws allowing separate cars. That would “save the necessity of a resort to legislation.”

Swiftly, the House seized on Adams’s artful dodge, postponing any action by an overwhelming margin, 171 to 61. The railroads, saved from state interference, took Adams’s hint: By the end of 1843, the Jim Crow cars were gone from the state’s railways.
WITHOUT QUESTION, THE ABOLITIONISTS HAD WON a victory. Still, it was a small blow against the entrenched view among many Northern whites that separation was best for all concerned. Over the next few decades, action came often, in new forms, from new resisters. Their legal challenges met with hostility and ended mostly in rejection, but they kept coming, even in the face of violence.

In 1849, the Massachusetts Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit protesting separate schools, prompting a campaign that ended six years later with a landmark state law prohibiting the use of “race, color or religious opinions” in admitting students to public schools. In 1858, the Michigan Supreme Court upheld a steamboat company’s refusal to sell a cabin berth to black abolitionist William Howard Day. In 1867, as the states were ratifying a new constitutional amendment with an equal protection clause, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court handed a bitter defeat to teacher Mary Miles, who was ejected from a West Chester and Philadelphia Railroad train for refusing to leave the whites-only car. All cases from the North, all later cited by the U.S. Supreme Court in its infamous 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson ruling, written by a New England-born justice for a 7-1 majority dominated by Northerners.

George Peabody’s rosy prediction had no chance of coming true. It takes more than a national network of railroad lines to “subdue local prejudices.” It takes — today as in 1838 — laws, people, action, resistance, perseverance. In the case of the U.S. courts, it requires a willingness to revisit rulings, overturn mistakes and look with fresh eyes at the fear, anger and prejudice that persists from the nation’s legacy of racial separation and prolonged injustice.

*Steve Luxenberg is a Washington Post associate editor. This article is adapted from his new book, “Separate: The Story of Plessy v. Ferguson, and America’s Journey From Slavery to Segregation,” published this month by W.W. Norton.*
Riding With Jim Crow


1. To what does the term “Jim Crow” refer:
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 
   d. EXTRA: To what does “jumping Jim Crow” refer?

2. During research writer Steve Luxenberg found the use of “Jim Crow” in 1838 in the Salem (Mass.) Gazette.
   a. Why was this date surprising?
   b. What did its use in a Massachusetts publication reveal?

3. Matching.
   Pair the name with the description of the individual.
   _____ 1. Charles Francis Adams a. President, Eastern Rail Road
   _____ 2. Frederick Douglass b. Editor, Liberator, the abolitionist newspaper
   _____ 4. George Peabody d. Secretary, New York Committee of Vigilance; helper of runaways
   _____ 5. David Ruggles e. Abolitionist, speaker and writer, former slave

4. Select one of the above individuals. What role did he have in the story of Jim Crow cars in Massachusetts?

5. TRUE or FALSE?
   Indicate on the line before the statement whether the statement is true or false.
   _____ 1. All eight of the passenger railways operating in Massachusetts had separate cars.
   _____ 2. Termination of service at the Lynn, Mass., passenger train station was a successful move against abolitionists’ pleas.
   _____ 3. “Bearing witness” referred to abolitionists trying to join ejected travelers in the back car.
   _____ 4. Petitioning Congress to end slavery in D.C. and ending the Massachusetts ban on intermarriage were abolitionist causes.
   _____ 5. The “personal liberty” law allowed the use of any Massachusetts property or official in a Southerner’s hunt for a runaway slave.

6. Abolitionists took up the cause: “Ban the ‘dirt car’ and “Send Jim Crow to the ‘receptacle of forgotten barbarism.’” Give an example of what they were fighting against.

7. What was the Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)?

8-9. Explain the following statement from the article. What was the legislation they faced and what does it reveal about Northern perspectives?
   Most legislators stood against slavery, but opposing the South’s “peculiar institution” did not translate to a belief that freedom meant the right to mix freely with whites in the North. There were plenty of legislators who viewed anyone of color as inferior, who felt no law could undo what God and nature had created.

10. Does this attitude (see above quotation) continue into today’s America? Give example(s).