

The Impact of Racial Discrimination on Black American Lives in the Jim Crow Era (1944 – 1960)

Center for Legislative Archives

Background Information on Station 1 Documents:

1. This item is a September 17, 1944 letter from an African American soldier in Rome, Italy to his wife expressing strong discontent over the segregation policies of the American Red Cross as well as the Army. The soldier's letter was forwarded as an attachment to a letter from Jesse O. Thomas, Assistant to the Administrator of the American Red Cross, to Truman K. Gibson, Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army, suggesting a discussion of discriminatory practices experienced by African American soldiers. 10/5/1944
[\[NAID 6922054\]](#)
2. In this letter, Grant Reynolds and A. Philip Randolph, as national officers of the Committee Against JimCrow in Military Service and Training, urge President Truman to push for strong civil rights legislation in the upcoming special session of Congress. They also call upon him to issue an executive order abolishing segregation in the U.S. military (Truman issued an executive order aimed at achieving this on July 26, 1948).
[\[NAID 201129\]](#)
3. On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed this executive order establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, committing the government to integrating the previously segregated military.
[\[NAID 300009\]](#)

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Background Information on Station 2 Documents:

4. This letter from former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to President Harry S. Truman refers to racial segregation in public swimming pools in St. Louis, MO and Washington, DC. Mrs. Roosevelt was a leading voice against segregation. The practice of racial segregation in swimming pools was a hotly debated political topic in Washington, DC throughout 1950. This debate was a local instance of a long-running national debate. A historic overview of swimming pool segregation was broadcast on the National Public Radio program, *Marketplace* in 2018. (Note that some details about pool segregation in St. Louis as reported in the radio story do not seem consistent with Mrs. Roosevelt's letter. Evaluating conflicting sources is a challenge historians face when reading primary documents about historic events.) "In the 1920s and 1930s, there was a pool-building spree in the United States. And there were thousands, literally thousands and thousands of pools that were opened up in the 1920s and 1930s, and many of them were large, leisure-resort pools. They were - some of them - larger than football fields. They were surrounded by grassy lawns, and concrete sundecks, and they attracted literally millions and millions of swimmers. And yet, it was at that point in time that cities began to racially segregate pools throughout the north, and it then extended, obviously, all throughout the United States. And black Americans were typically relegated, if a pool was provided at all, to a small indoor pool that wasn't nearly as appealing as the large, outdoor resort pools that were provided for whites. And so, take the city of St. Louis. In St. Louis, black Americans represented 15 percent of the population in the mid-1930s. But they only took one-and-a-half percent of the number of swims because they were only allocated one small indoor pool, whereas white residents of St. Louis had access to nine pools. Two of them were the large resort pools that I've been describing." (Source: "A History of Racial Disparity in American Public Swimming Pools." Mejia, Carlos. *Marketplace*. NPR, 6/6/2018 <https://www.wnpr.org/post/history-racial-disparity-american-public-swimming-pools> accessed on 2/10/2021) [\[NAID 4708716\]](#)
5. James F. Byrnes served as the Governor of South Carolina (1951-1955). Earlier, he had served as a U.S. Representative (1911 – 1925) and a U.S. Senator (1930-1941) from South Carolina. He was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1941 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He resigned his seat on October 3, 1942, to head the wartime Office of Economic Stabilization until May 1943. He then served as director of the Office of War Mobilization until the end of the war in April 1945. Byrnes served as Secretary of State in the Cabinet of President Harry Truman 1945-1947. Few individuals in U.S. history held

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office on so many levels of government. (Source:

<https://bioguideretro.congress.gov/Home/MemberDetails?memIndex=b001215>

[NAID 12171148]

6. Byron de La Beckwith was born in California in 1920, and grew up in Mississippi. He was a segregationist and a member of the Ku Klux Klan. A few years after writing this letter, he shot and killed NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers on June 12, 1963. He was arrested for the crime on the basis of evidence found at the crime scene, but two all-white juries could not reach a verdict in 1964. Beckwith was finally convicted of the murder in 1994. He remained in prison until his death in 2001 at age 80. (Source:

<https://www.biography.com/crime-figure/byron-de-la-beckwith>)

[NAID 6092867]

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Background Information on Station 3 Documents:

7. This newspaper article describes the attempt to maintain segregation by rearranging the city limits of Tuskegee to exclude African-American families. The article includes a map showing the redrawn city limits which are compared to the outline of a sea dragon.
[\[NAID 279196\]](#)
8. This item is an excerpt from a press release issued by the Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. on the Proposed Civil Rights Legislation before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Senate Judiciary Committee, 2/14/1957. Brownell describes legal obstacles by which southern states kept African Americans from registering to vote, and he discusses the need for federal action to remove them. In 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent Congress a proposal for civil rights legislation. The result was the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction.
[\[NAID 12167080\]](#)
9. Four days before this cartoon appeared, a major civil rights bill passed in the U.S. House of Representatives despite strong Southern opposition. The bill next had to win the approval of the U.S. Senate. Supporters of the bill feared that the Senate Judiciary Committee, charged with evaluating the bill, would avoid taking action on it. So a pair of senators adopted the unusual strategy of bypassing the committee's review altogether and taking the bill directly to the Senate floor for debate. Cartoonist Jim Berryman depicted the bill's escape from certain legislative death in committee by alluding to a daring escape in Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (Simon Legree, mentioned in the cartoon's caption, was a cruel overseer who endangered enslaved people in the book.) (Source:
<https://www.archives.gov/files/legislative/resources/ebooks/a-visual-history-1940-1963.pdf>)
[\[NAID 5743243\]](#)

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Background Information on Station 4 Documents:

10. This item was a personal plea from baseball great Jackie Robinson to President Dwight D. Eisenhower for a demonstration of his support for the equality of Black Americans. In addition to being the first African American to play in Major League Baseball, Robinson was also a leading advocate for Civil Rights. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said of him, "Jackie Robinson made my success possible. Without him, I would never have been able to do what I did." (Source: <https://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/robinson-jackie>) In 1957 Jackie Robinson became Vice President of Personnel at the Choc full o'Nuts coffee company.
[\[NAID 186627\]](#)
11. In this item, Former President Harry S. Truman replied to the president and executive secretary of the Detroit NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) regarding a statement he made about student protests against racial segregation. During his presidential administration (1945 – 1953) Truman had desegregated the Armed Forces by Executive Order in 1948. Ironically, in this letter he expresses his opposition to lunch counter sit-ins targeting segregated lunch counters.
[\[NAID 40020096\]](#)
12. This item is an excerpt from a legal suit seeking to end racial segregation at the University of Georgia. The plaintiffs' preliminary statement charges the University of Georgia with a "tacit policy of limiting admissions to the University of Georgia to white persons" despite federal court decisions declaring segregated educational institutions to be a violation of the 14th Amendment.
[\[NAID 641653\]](#)

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