

# Example of term paper on survival and subversion: african- american resistance to ...

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



## **SURVIVAL AND SUBVERSION**

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the Federal government enacted the 13th Amendment freeing the slaves and the 14th Amendment, which granted African Americans citizenship. In 1870, the 15th Amendment was passed, which gave black males the right to vote. In a few short years after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, African-American enfranchisement was the law of the land. And yet, in a vast region that had been conquered in a long and bloody war, social change was superficial. In practical terms, there was little difference between slavery and the world in which former slaves lived. Segregation was an absolute fact of life for further generations of blacks, who either could not leave the region or sought to make new lives in the only homes they had ever known. When in 1896 the U. S. Supreme Court legalized the doctrine of "separate but equal" in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the insidious system of institutionalized subjugation known as Jim Crow was assured and African-Americans were locked in a pattern of servility and powerlessness for at least another 60 years. The men and women who risked their lives undermining this oppression found themselves, despite the Constitutional guarantee of citizenship, subversives in their own country. It was a strange paradox. Blacks who worked to bring down Jim Crow were seen as criminals and agitators in their own communities while, in a much larger sense, their disobedience amounted to heroic patriotism. That blacks had to take the initiative in combating Jim Crow is a testament to how firmly ensconced racist ideology was in late-19th and early-20th-century America. The Federal government adopted a very political, largely hands-off stance on Jim Crow and the movement to integrate the South until the Civil

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Rights movement of the 1960s was well underway. White federal troops may have destroyed slavery as an institution in 1865, but it was up to African Americans in the South to fight another bloody and destructive civil war to see the great struggle through to its end. To Southern politicians and citizens, they were dangerous upstarts and malcontents. It is to be remembered that “ the goal of racial segregation was the maintenance of white supremacy in all its manifestations. Jim Crow forced black people to struggle to gain decent housing, adequate health care, meaningful educations, and worthwhile jobs that offered a living wage” (Orleck and Hazirjian 2011, 327). To all appearances, this describes slavery, or a form of slavery. To have accepted this life would have amounted to a re-acceptance of perpetual bondage.

In Richmond, Va., the tobacco industry encapsulated the ironclad racial system that typified Jim Crow. During the early 20th century, tobacco companies maintained an exploitative economic system which kept blacks in menial, low-paying jobs that were increasingly marginalized by the advent of mechanization. Technology provided cigarette-making machines that took jobs away from African-American workers. Better-paying positions were reserved for white workers. “ The fine-tuning of these machines, which could produce up to 12, 000 cigarettes a day by the 1880s, coincided with the rise of Jim Crow. As machines became more prominent, so did white operators, and segregated workplaces followed” (Gellman 2012, 66). By the 1930s, Richmond’s tobacco workforce were so segregated that “ anyone with a basic knowledge of the industry could describe jobs in racial terms” (Gellman

2012, 66). Blacks were relegated to the worst jobs, including stemming, blending and redrying, which were dangerous and unhealthful tasks.

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Black men and women in Richmond's tobacco processing plants made as little as \$5 a week; only white male employees earned a living wage (Gellman 2012, 67). The system of exploitation within the factories was reflected in Richmond society, where the violent nature of Jim Crow in the Deep South was replaced by a more genteel form that substituted deferential good manners and simply avoided what whites considered an unpleasant subject, creating a situation far more subtle but no less damaging to black civil rights than in Alabama or Mississippi. The situation in Virginia was described as "separation by consent" (Gellman 2012, 68). In a movement that presaged civil rights some 30 years later, black activists from the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) organized a conference in Richmond to discuss various aspects of social and economic segregation. The conference was given moral weight when leaders of Richmond's largest black Baptist church agreed to host the event. The militant stance adopted by the Richmond conference created an environment of agitation among African Americans in Richmond and, in April 1937, black workers at the Carrington and Michaux tobacco factory began organizing a strike. The Richmond protest was one of the first examples of organized labor and the black civil rights movement joining forces. This nascent movement eventually brought poor black and white tobacco workers together with the SNYC. They founded the national Tobacco Stemmers' and Laborers' Union in

Richmond. The experience was a transformative one for blacks, who had been told for generations that they were helpless against the city's white power structure. Many black men and women proved to be strong organizers and speakers. "The inspiration of this SNYC-supported Black unionization spread through the rest of the city, and influenced other unionization campaigns" (Fletcher and Agard 2000).

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In 1901, at the height of the Jim Crow power structure, many southern states moved to formalize their segregationist positions by revising their constitutions. These revisions would, among other things, make it nearly impossible for most blacks to be able to register to vote in elections. Virginia, Mississippi and South Carolina were some of the more prominent examples of this constitutional maneuvering. In Alabama, the state legislature, with the support of Governor Jelks, also modified its state constitution. This movement, known as "disfranchisement," had the force of law behind it, which legitimized the institutionalization of racist segregation. William Hooper Councill, president of the State Agricultural and Normal School for Negroes at Huntsville, wrote the governor asking that he intervene on behalf of a people who were as helpless "as babes in the hands of giants" (Riser 2010, 141). Councill's plea was ignored, and a much more prominent African American figure rose to take his place.

Booker T. Washington, president of the renowned Tuskegee Institute, was savvy enough to know that to leave the matter of black voting rights in the hands of white Alabama politicians was nothing short of folly. Acting on the

advice of former Alabama governor William Oates, who told Washington that “ the greatest bulwark of protection (for blacks) is to be found in the federal judiciary,” Washington sought out New York attorney Wilford Smith. They brought two cases before the U. S. Supreme Court, *Giles v. Harris* and *Giles v. Teasley*, both of which were defeated. Undismayed, Washington continued to work through the courts. He and Smith brought a case before the High Court seeking an injunction against barring black men from serving on juries. In 1904, they succeeded in getting the court to overturn the conviction of a black man who had been found guilty by a jury on which blacks were not allowed to serve (*Cato*

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The white political ascendancy in Virginia continued to fight the segregation battle despite the setbacks of the 1930s. Matters came to a head in Norfolk, as they did in other parts of the South, during the 1950s when the Norfolk school board closed six public schools rather

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than adhere to the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The state responded by making integration a ballot issue in Norfolk, but which was nothing more than an attempt by local government to manipulate the electorate into upholding segregation. The ballot measure made it clear that if the measure passed, there would be no public funding for the schools and that parents would have to foot the tuition bill themselves. This was overturned, however, and integration was scheduled to begin in Norfolk in January 1959.

History often overlooks what occurred after the courts upheld integration. Black students were given full rights to attend public schools on the same terms as white students, but the simple act of walking into a southern school was fraught with danger and difficulty for young black students. In Norfolk, the state's decades-long attempt to prevent school integration proved to be a losing battle. But even in 1959, African Americans were still in a vulnerable position. The first black students began attending school in Norfolk in late 1959, but only after widespread public demonstrations and protests were held to show that blacks were fully organized and determined to carry out the law. On January 1, 1959, the Congress of Racial Equality held a rally called "Pilgrimage of Prayer" and a march on the state capitol in Richmond, where they called on the Virginia state legislature to change its policy concerning school integration in the interests of both black and white children (Virginia Historical Society 2009). Norfolk proved to be a major battlefield in the fight against Jim Crow, and black resistance to segregation there had important legal implications for the integration battle in many other parts of the South.

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African Americans in the rural South had to use other means of resisting the systematic oppression of Jim Crow. In Georgia, a white planter named James Smith sought to maintain traditional means of agricultural production using black tenants as unempowered cheap labor, little better than slaves. Under normal sharecropping arrangements, all those who worked the land were supposed to share in the profits, but white "overlords" like Smith were

influential enough to determine how land and revenue would be distributed. The exploited black farmers decided to take matters into their own hands and established their own underground cotton market in an attempt to bypass Smith's iron-fisted control. When Smith tried to take action, black tenant farmers responded by burning down his barns and by accusing him of perpetrating a form of economic slavery (Coulter 1961, 40). Similar "informal" forms of resistance cropped up throughout the South. In Kentucky, black agricultural workers formed a group which agreed to protest the daily wages offered by white farmers.

Blacks sometimes stole cotton from white planters and sold it as their own, a move that had more to do with desperation and staving off hunger and abject poverty than with preconceived burglary. In some cases, white and black farmers resorted to violence and armed battles resulted in many farming communities. The fallout of Reconstruction, during which state and federal government failed to provide adequate economic and social support for freed slaves, left behind a palpable residue of the slavery system. This meant that blacks not only were forced to agitate for social equality, they had to take matters into their own hands to ensure that they could make a living capable of supporting their families. It is a strange matter that blacks who simply fought for survival were seen as dangerous subversives. This was the true legacy of

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Jim Crow.

African Americans sought to fulfill the promise of American citizenship in



many ways during the Jim Crow era. Black activists worked through the courts and in government to overturn school segregation. Blacks partnered with the labor movement to establish equality of pay and employment opportunity in urban centers, while attempts to conserve white supremacy in the agricultural sector, the traditional source of income in the Old South, met with both passive and active resistance. The struggle against Jim Crow, which led to Civil Rights in the 1960s, was a manifestation not of social progressivism but of sheer survival. Having been badly under-served by the government, blacks found themselves in the position of having to act on their own, in their own behalf, within a system created and maintained by wealthy white men. It is a testament both to the African American pioneers who fought against Jim Crow, and the actions of federal and state judiciaries, that African Americans succeeded in forcing government to recognize and uphold their rights as Americans.

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