

Mississippi

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Mississippi, with the picturesque river, magnolia scented evenings, and antebellum mansions is the quintessential southern state. However, there is much more to this, our 20th state, than confederate attitudes and racial tension. " The state never adopted progressive ideas or embraced social change with any enthusiasm. History made Mississippi a conservative place. " (Woodard, 2006) Organized on April 7, 1798, from territory ceded by Georgia and South Carolina, Mississippi expanded twice to include disputed territory claimed by both the U. S. and Spain. Land was purchased from Native American tribes from 1800 to about 1830.

Mississippi was admitted to the Union December 10, 1817. Mississippi became the second state to secede from the Union on the cusp of the Civil War, January 9, 1861. Briefly forming the Republic of Mississippi, not one Mississippian voted in favor of Abraham Lincoln. Mississippi ranked as the third largest slaveholding state in the nation with nearly 437, 000 slaves. This represented slightly more than half of the state's total population. From 1810 to 1820, the enslaved population on the Mississippi frontier grew by more than 90%.

The span of 1830 to 1840, Mississippi's white population grew by a whopping 154%, while the state's slave population grew by 197%. " (Mississippi Slave Laws Summary and Record , 2004) The slaves in Mississippi mainly resided on cotton plantation. Before the invention of the cotton gin, the slaves had to manually hand pick the seeds out of the cotton plants. The average plantation owner owned 14. 1 slaves. They tended to cultivate both corn and cotton because of their complimentary growth cycles.

Slave uprisings and other insurrections forced legislature to find ways of regulating the massive slave population. Slave laws or "black codes" were introduced. Mississippi government even made it clear that freemen were not wanted there. Offenders would be sold into slavery, regardless of status. Runaway slaves were to be captured and returned to their owners at all costs. Black men could take the stand in a trial if no white witnesses were available, as long as it was not against their owner. Even though the south has become the heartland for slavery, the whole nation is responsible for upholding it.

Our constitution required Free states to return fugitive slaves, and it enhanced the South's power in Congress and the Electoral College by counting three-fifths of the slave population in determining a state's representation. Of sixteen presidential elections between 1788 and 1848, all but four placed a Southern slaveholder in the White House. While the northern states may not have taken it to the level that the south did, they are not innocent on the issue of slavery. After the Civil War, the idea of Reconstruction entered.

Historically, Reconstruction can be broken down into three distinct sections over a span of 1863-1877. While the Civil War was still in play, Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson had hopes of quickly reuniting the country. The Emancipation Proclamation can be viewed as the beginning tactic. While freeing the slaves was a product of the proclamation, political ploy was definitely a factor. By freeing the slaves, Lincoln assumed they would join

forces with the Union therefore elimination the backbone of the South's fight. Congressional Reconstruction was the period of 1866-1873.

During this time, civil rights were emphasized and voting rights of the freedmen were enforced. 1873-1877 marked the end for reconstruction when white southern democrats took control of all southern states. Black codes were implemented as a way to hinder the rights of the newly freed African Americans. Even after the 13th amendment abolished slavery, the slaves were only given second-class citizen rights and still did not have the right to vote. After winning large majorities in the 1866 elections, the Republicans put the South under military rule.

New elections were held in which free black men could vote. The new governments repealed all the Black Codes and they were never reenacted. After reconstruction, the south was put under military rule. There were provisions that each state had to meet in order to be readmitted into the Union. Each state had to produce a new constitution but before it would go into effect, it had to be approved by congress. Confederate states had to agree to give voting rights to all men as well as ratify the 15th amendment. Complying with the rules, Mississippi was readmitted to the union February 17, 1870.

Mississippi surprised congress by electing Hiram Revels as a U. S. senator. Mississippi was readmitted to the Union, but the New York Herald predicted that Revels would never be allowed to take his Senate seat--especially since Mississippi's most recent senator had been Jefferson Davis, who had walked out to become president of the Confederacy. In fact, political bickering did

delay approval of the new senator's credentials. Finally he was seated on February 25, 1870 and held the office until March 3, 1871, becoming the first African American U. S. senator.

In the 1890's, certain states began to amend their constitutions and to enact a series of laws intended to reestablish and entrench white political supremacy. " Such disfranchising laws included poll taxes, literacy tests, vouchers of " good character," and disqualification for " crimes of moral turpitude. " These laws were " color-blind" on their face, but were designed to exclude black citizens disproportionately by allowing white election officials to apply the procedures selectively.

Other laws and practices, such as the " white primary," attempted to evade the 15th Amendment by allowing " private" political parties to conduct elections and establish qualifications for their members. " (United States Department of Justice: Civil Rights Division, 2003) Racial tension is something that has always been rampant in Mississippi, as it was all southern states. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had substantial bearing on the political landscape of Mississippi. Congress determined that the existing federal anti-discrimination laws were not sufficient to overcome the resistance by state officials to enforcement of the 15th Amendment.

The legislative hearings showed that the Department of Justice's efforts to eliminate discriminatory election practices by litigation on a case-by-case basis had been unsuccessful in opening up the registration process. As soon as one discriminatory practice or procedure was proven unconstitutional and enjoined, a new one would be substituted in its place and litigation would

have to commence anew. President Andrew Johnson signed the legislation into law on August 6, 1965. This act applied a nationwide prohibition against the denial or abridgement of the right to vote on the literacy tests on a nationwide basis.

Voter registration drives were often met with violence. When the students gathered for the famed Freedom Summer in 1964, three activists were arrested for speeding only to be handed over to the KKK. The three men were murdered and it took almost 50 years for justice to be served. Many people were killed for their plight. Emmitt Till's young face was used as a catalyst for the civil rights movement. Supposedly, he whistled at a white woman while visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi. Two days later, two men dragged the 14 year old out of his uncle's home.

He was beaten severely, shot in the face, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. His body was weighted down with the fan from a cotton gin tied around his neck. The men were arrested but an all white jury acquitted them after only a short deliberation. Young Till was not the only person killed for a minor infraction, although he has become one of the most notorious.

Mississippi is also the home of James Meredith. He was born in Kosciusko in 1933. In 1962, he became the first black student successfully enrolled at the University of Mississippi.

The state's governor, Ross Barnett, steadfastly opposed his enrollment, and the violence and rioting surrounding the incident caused President Kennedy to send 5, 000 federal troops to restore the peace. Meredith graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1963. Today, Mississippi's economy still

withstands the worst of the turmoil. 21. 6% of the state's total population is below the national poverty level. 63. 8% of the residents have employment; however, 61% of those workers work for minimum wage. The state ranks almost last in education standards for all levels.

After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Mississippi has to rebuild itself once again. Our federal government has not done all that it could in assisting the fledgling state. Regardless of poverty levels or racial demographics, equal protection should be given to all citizens. This is why our Constitution as well as our laws is in place. Not only to make sure we as citizens do what we are supposed to do but also to keep our government where they need to be. Politics in Mississippi are an interesting concept.

From the time Mississippi joined the Union in 1817 until the end of World War II, the Democrats won the state's presidential electoral votes in every election except two. Those exceptions occurred in 1840, when William Henry Harrison carried Mississippi for the Whigs, and in 1872, when the circumstances of Reconstruction virtually guaranteed victory for Republican Ulysses S. Grant. After Reconstruction, Mississippi, as part of the solid South, cast its electoral votes for every Democratic presidential candidate from Samuel Tilden to Franklin Roosevelt.

This Democratic solidarity lasted almost three quarters of a century, from 1876 to 1944. Then Democratic solidarity was shattered by the meeting of two revolutionary forces: the New Deal's re-orientation of American party politics and the arrival of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Because of those two forces, in the presidential elections following FDR's 1944 re-

election to an unprecedented fourth term, Mississippi voted for the Democrats only three times. The solid South finally cracked in 1948 when the Democratic Party nominated Harry Truman for president on a platform that featured a prominent Civil Rights plank.

Disgruntled southerners, led by the Mississippi delegation, bolted the convention and later organized a separate States' Rights Party that nominated U. S. Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina for president and Mississippi Governor Fielding Wright as his running mate. Despite Truman's re-election, this Dixiecrat ticket carried four deep-South states, including Mississippi, which gave the Dixiecrats 87. 2 percent of the vote. The mounting Cold War soon turned hot in Korea and helped divert attention from domestic tensions, and most southerners sullenly returned to the Democratic fold.

Not even Dwight Eisenhower's popularity could overcome Mississippi white voters' traditional distaste for Republicanism, and Democrat Adlai Stevenson carried the state in 1952 with 60. 4 percent of the vote, and in 1956 with 58. 2 percent. " With the passage of time," however, as historian Dewey Grantham wrote, " it became clear that overwhelming southern fidelity to the Democratic Party had come to an end. " (Grantham, 1988) Increasingly alienated by their own party's attacks on segregation, yet still averse to a Republican Party that seemed little better, Mississippi's white voters by 1960 found themselves adrift in presidential politics.

That year, they spurned both the Democrat John Kennedy and Eisenhower's Republican Vice President Richard Nixon in favor of a ticket of unpledged

electors who eventually cast the state's votes for U. S. Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia. In the mid-sixties, however, two ironically related developments - the emergence of Goldwater Republicanism and congressional passage of the Voting Rights Act - paved the way for a permanent realignment of Mississippi presidential politics around the conventional two-party system.

Goldwater's opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act endeared him to defenders of segregation, but his appeal in Mississippi transcended race. Goldwater's brand of social and political conservatism, including an aggressive anti-communism stance, resonated with the traditional sensibilities of many white voters. While Goldwater suffered a disastrous thrashing by Lyndon Johnson in the 1964 election, he won 87.1 percent of Mississippi's votes and exposed the state to a version of Republicanism that would later bear fruit in its reincarnation under Ronald Reagan.

By the mid-seventies, "the twin forces of race and class," (Lamis, 1990) as the scholar Alexander Lamis describes it, were converging to form the central feature of the South's new partisan structure. Conservative opponents of government activism - on social and economic as well as racial issues - lined up under the Republican banner to oppose a viable but fragile black-white coalition loyal to a Democratic Party increasingly committed to New Deal-Great Society programs. The next two elections demonstrated the Democratic coalition's viability and exposed its fragility.

Jimmy Carter's 1976 victory over Republican Gerald Ford drew Mississippi back into the Democratic column, but by the narrowest of margins, 1.9 percent. Four years later, the nomination of Ronald Reagan gave the

country, as one Mississippi Delta Republican put it, " a second chance to elect Barry Goldwater. " The victorious Reagan carried Mississippi with 50. 8 percent of the vote. For a generation, what Lamis calls " electoral chaos" had reigned in Mississippi. One needs only to track the wild fluctuations in voting percentages by party to see just how chaotic presidential voting had become.

In 1948, 87. 2% of the population voted on the Dixiecrat ticket. The other numbers were 10. 1% and 2. 5% for the Democrats and Republicans respectively. Just 4 years later, 60. 4% voted for Adlai Stevenson while only 39. 6% pulled for Dwight D. Eisenhower. In 1964, 12. 9% voted for Lyndon B. Johnson while 87. 1% voted for republican, Barry Goldwater. Since this time, Mississippi politics seemed to settle into a stable pattern with republicans out polling democrats. Statewide politics are decidedly republican. The senate seats are held both by republicans.

Thad Cochran and Trent Lott have both been in their seats for 5 terms. Governor Haley Barbour was elected in 2003 to his first term as republican governor of the state. The state of Mississippi is an intriguing part of our history. Each southern state is like a distinct region with infiltration from the surrounding areas. From reconstruction to Jim Crow Laws, from many lynching to electing the first African American Chief Justice, Mississippi has experienced it all. Its rich history and eclectic population make an interesting place to visit. The hurricanes are enough to make me not want to live there.