



# Historical timeline of race relations



## Introduction

The most helpful conversations about race happen when people have knowledge of the racialized history of the United States. Racialized historical data provides a framework that helps make sense out of what confronts us today. This timeline is a tool to further that understanding and is far from exhaustive.

### *Did you know?*

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## How Did We Get Here? Timeline

### *Dum Diversas*, June 18, 1452

The Doctrine of Discovery: Pope Nicholas V authorizes King Alfonso V of Portugal to reduce any “Saracens [Muslims] and pagans and any other unbelievers” to perpetual slavery. This facilitates the Portuguese slave trade from West Africa.

### *Romanus Pontifex*, January 8, 1455

The Doctrine of Discovery: Pope Nicholas V confirms Portuguese dominion over all lands south of Cape Bojador on the northwestern coast of Africa.

### *Inter Caetera*, May 4, 1493

The Doctrine of Discovery: Pope Alexander VI grants to the Spanish crown the lands discovered by Columbus the year before, including “. . . all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered towards the west and south. . . .”

### First English Settlement, March 4, 1607

Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in the Americas, is founded.

### 1619

Slavery in America begins in Jamestown for the labor-intensive but lucrative tobacco crop.

### 1607

English paupers, petty criminals and those displaced by changing economic forces are encouraged or made to emigrate to the colonies of Virginia and Maryland. Over the next 75 years, approximately 92,000 people emigrate; more than 69,000 are indentured servants, that is, bond laborers.

### 1620

English Protestant dissenters (Pilgrims) seeking a utopian refuge settle on the coast of Massachusetts.

### 1650

Approximately 500 persons of African origin or descent are in the Virginia colony.

### 1662

Virginia declares that children born to slave women are also slaves.

### 1676, Virginia

Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia, the first armed rebellion in the American colonies. This alliance of poor White former indentured servants and Africans against bond servitude is alarming to the ruling class.

### 1705, Virginia

The Virginia Slave Codes are enacted to prevent biracial uprisings like Bacon’s Rebellion.

### 1793

The invention of the cotton gin makes cotton a valuable commodity, solidifying the importance of slave labor to the economy of the southern states.

### Early 1800s

America’s westward expansion, along with a growing abolition movement in the North, sparks a national debate over slavery. Southern states want new territories to be slave-holding.

### 1823

Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall rules “that the principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands.”

### 1830

Indian Removal Act. The U.S. government authorizes itself to relocate Native Americans from their homelands within established states to territories west of the Mississippi River.

## 1861–1865

American Civil War.

## 1863

The Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Abraham Lincoln, goes into effect on January 1.

## 1869

The Transcontinental Railroad, a 1,907-mile continuous railroad line, links the United States from Atlantic to Pacific.

## 1865

On June 19, or Juneteenth, Black people on Galveston Island, Texas, learn of the Emancipation Proclamation.

## 1865

Legally enforced racial segregation. Jim Crow laws are enacted in the South. Similar practices are also seen in the North, particularly the exclusion of Blacks in labor law. Sundown towns (all-white towns) were found in the North.

## 1865

Laws penalizing Blacks for such things as gambling, changing employers without permission, loitering and selling cotton after sunset become common.

## 1882

The Chinese Exclusion Act prohibits immigration of Chinese laborers.

## 1900

Thousands of Native American children are in almost 150 boarding schools around the United States.

## 1924

Native Americans who are not already U.S. citizens are granted citizenship by the Indian Citizenship Act.

## 1924

Quotas limit the annual number of immigrants from any country to 2 percent of the number of people

from that country already living in the U.S. The new law excludes Chinese, Arab and Asian immigrants, and severely restricts immigration from Africa.

The purpose of the act is “to preserve the ideal of American homogeneity.” Agricultural interests successfully oppose limits on Mexican immigrants.

## 1930s

Great Depression. Up to 2 million people of Mexican origin or descent are expelled from American cities and towns and sent to Mexico. Many, possibly more than half, are U.S.-born citizens.

## 1933

New Deal under President Franklin Roosevelt does not cover domestic or agricultural workers, effectively excluding people of color.

## 1941–1945

World War II.

## 1942

President Roosevelt orders the internment of 120,000 people of Japanese origin or descent, of whom more than 70,000 are U.S.-born citizens.

## 1942

Bracero program allows Mexican nationals to take temporary agricultural work in the U.S. More than 4.5 million Mexican nationals are hired over the next 22 years.

## 1943

Chinese Exclusion Act is repealed. An immigration quota is set for China of about 105 visas annually.

## 1944

G.I. Bill is enacted to establish hospitals, offer low-interest mortgages and fund college or trade school tuition and fees for veterans. However, veterans of color are effectively excluded from the mortgage program by redlining and restrictive covenant deeds.

**1945**

Fair Deal under President Harry Truman does not cover domestic or agricultural workers in labor law, effectively excluding people of color.

**1954**

Operation Wetback begins, with the purpose of deporting undocumented Mexican agricultural workers to Mexico.

**1964**

Civil Rights Act of 1964 is passed after a long filibuster by Southern senators. It prohibits discrimination in public facilities and employment. The Act has undergone several changes and additions since its passage.

**1965**

Voting Rights Act of 1965 is passed in response to restrictions of minorities' voting rights, primarily in the South. The Act has undergone several changes and additions since its passage.

**1968**

Civil Rights Act of 1968, or Fair Housing Act, passed. This law seeks to ensure equal housing opportunity, but in many ways that goal has never been realized. Racial segregation continues as the result of weak enforcement.

**1971**

President Richard Nixon announces the creation of the Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention. For the only time in the history of the war on drugs, the majority of funding goes toward treatment, not law enforcement.

**1981**

The administration of President Ronald Reagan works to weaken affirmative action through judicial appointments, staffing decisions and severe budget cuts to the Equal Economic Opportunity Commission and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance.

**1982**

President Reagan launches the War on Drugs, creating the Office of National Drug Control Policy to coordinate drug-related legislative, security, research and health policy.

**1990**

Immigration Act raises the number of permanent visas given out each year from 290,000 to 675,000, and creates the diversity-visa lottery, which allots 55,000 visas annually to immigrants from underrepresented countries.

**1993**

President Bill Clinton raises the Office of National Drug Control Policy to Cabinet level. Such enforcement tactics as seizure of property and the use of surplus military equipment by municipal and state police department SWAT units become common.

**1996**

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, a cornerstone of the Republican Contract with America, is passed. President Clinton signs it into law, fulfilling his campaign promise to “end welfare as we have come to know it.” The reform burdens poor families and communities already in distress.

**2009**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ranks this country 27th out of 34 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for infant mortality.

**2010**

Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors, or DREAM Act, which would provide a path to citizenship for young undocumented Americans, passes the House of Representatives. However, it is filibustered in the Senate and fails to become law.

## 2013

U.S. Supreme Court limits the Voting Rights Act, ending the requirement for federal pre-clearance of voting law changes for states with a history of voter discrimination. Voter ID requirements are one tactic used to discourage voting by immigrants and people of color, while redrawing of districts can be used to dilute representation. Legal battles over the constitutionality of recently enacted voting laws are expected.

## 2013

Republicans break with decades-old legislative custom and separate food stamps from the regular omnibus farm bill that authorizes spending by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Food stamps, or SNAP, is a lifeline for people living in poverty, among whom people of color are disproportionately represented.

## 2013

George Zimmerman is acquitted in the shooting death of African American teen Trayvon Martin. Black Lives Matter movement begins with the use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on social media. BLM becomes nationally recognized for street demonstrations after the 2014 deaths of two other African Americans: Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City. #BLM continues to be used.

NOTE: This timeline is not exhaustive; many significant events do not appear in this timeline.