

# Historical Background

- The Civil War in the United States was fought from 1861-1865. When the war was over, many Southern landholders lost their lands due to the lack of available money to pay the taxes on the land. The land was often bought by Northerners who came South to make money during the hard times (carpetbaggers) or others who had access to funds after the war.
- When the war was over, many Southern state legislatures passed **Black Codes**. These were laws that restricted the freedom and movement of freedmen in the South. Black Codes restricted freedmen to jobs in agriculture or as domestic laborers. Harsh **vagrancy** laws were passed which would fine wandering persons without jobs. If they could not pay the fine, they could be hired out against their wills to anybody who would pay the fine in return for their labor.
- Few freedmen had land after **emancipation**. As a result they had no choice but to work as **sharecroppers**. In this system a family (black or white) would be given a section of land to farm and then were allowed to keep a share of whatever they grew while they paid the rest as rent. Because cotton prices stayed low after the war until 1900, sharecroppers barely earned enough to stay alive. They often owed the landlord or the local storeowner more than they made from the crop.
- After the Civil War, secret groups (Ku Klux Klan, the Mississippi Society of the White Rose, etc.) terrorized the countryside in the South, flogging, maiming, tar-and-feathering and sometimes killing blacks who tried to vote or who, in other ways, tried to be equal to whites. Congress passed the Ku Klux Klan Acts to outlaw these organizations; these laws had little effect.
- **Segregation** was enforced by the passage of **Jim Crow** laws after the war. In 1896 the Supreme Court case of **Plessy v. Ferguson** approved segregated facilities that were “**separate but equal**.” Separate schools (and other facilities such as washrooms and public transportation) existed for the races but the facilities were not equal.
- The **Great Depression** occurred from the time of the stock market crash of 1929 to the beginning of World War II. Farmers were hard hit but especially those who were sharecroppers in the South. They were not slaves but were “tied” to the land by the



debt they owed. Since they had no capital (money), the only way they could buy seeds for the next crop and food and clothing for their families was to pledge their profits from the crop in advance. If they had a bad crop, they were in debt with no way to pay what they owed. For many sharecroppers, they could not make enough to survive on the land but they were not able to leave. A large number of black laborers moved from the South to the North during the 1930s since conditions were so hard in the South. Even though there was a high unemployment rate in the nation's northern cities in the 1930s, there was a better chance of earning money than as a sharecropper.

