The Civil Rights Struggle in Virginia: Impact of Jim Crow Laws

Introduction

The struggle for civil rights in both Virginia and the entire country has its roots in the history of both Virginia and the United States. There were major periods of improvement and devastating setbacks that occurred for equal rights. The largest proponents in the ongoing and epic struggle is embedded in Virginia's history and in many ways, is still a current issue plaguing the great state. However, it is impossible to ignore history outside of Virginia's borders that has also shaped policy, laws, prejudices, and wrongdoings on both sides of the civil rights struggle. The civil rights struggle in Virginia is about much more than the color of someone's skin or gender. One must endeavor to comprehend the many facets of society that were affected by the immoralities of racism and sexism. By looking deeper into both Virginia's and the United States' history, there will be a better understanding of the struggle for civil rights in Virginia.

The Revolutionary Era

Beginning with The Revolutionary Era, the Revolutionary War had an enormous impact that was far reaching socially and economically on what was then considered England's property. Whenever there are catastrophic events such as a revolution, the impact on political systems, ideologies, and economies of the parties involved must not be overlooked. One of the social effects of The Revolutionary War involves both women and slaves. Prior to the Revolutionary War, women were considered to take on the roles of a basic housewife and were not involved in the same duties that revolved around men. Since the men of the households were now off fighting for the war, women were responsible for all those duties in addition to being the homemaker.[footnoteRef:1] Therefore, "the opportunity to engage in these areas gave women a chance to prove they could do more than just simple housekeeping. As a result, women attained more influence in society than they had before the war."[footnoteRef:2] Not only did the war have an impact on traditional gender roles, but it put women in the role of having more power in the day-to-day operations. [1: Alexa Josphine, "The Effects of the Revolutionary War on Women and Slaves," Classroom, Accessed February 20, 2020, https://classroom.synonym.com/did-new-england-colonies-slavery-12754.html.] [2: Alexa Josphine, "The Effects of the Revolutionary War on Women and Slaves," Classroom, accessed February 20, 2020, https://classroom.synonym.com/did-new-england-colonies-slavery-12754.html.]

In addition to the power shift conveyed upon women of that era, there were also changes in the slave industry. As could be expected from both sides fighting in the Revolutionary War, slaves were promised freedom in exchange for serving in the war. Many slaves attained their freedom from doing so. Not only did the war grant slaves freedom from their masters, but the war also aided slaves in escape that was most certainly not permitted. Although many slaves attained freedom, they still had to endure many years of cruelty because of the people who refused to see them as equals. As is common knowledge, slavery did not end until after the Civil War. The Revolutionary War brought forth an awareness of pursuing life, liberty, and happiness and

shunned the idea that individuals should be ruled by an overbearing authority. With the new idea of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” people began to see the hypocrisy within these ideas, as much of Virginia’s population owned slaves at the time. Antislavery societies and clubs formed and encouraged the call for the end to slavery. Some states banned while some gradually ended slavery, but Virginia was not among those states until after the Civil War.[footnoteRef:3] [3: Ibid.]

Major Contributors

Virginia’s own path for civil rights was a notable one. In order to dive deeper into Virginia’s history, a timeline of events should be explored. In exploring the timeline, many individuals that influenced the Virginia Civil Rights Movement come to light. Since the arrival of the first group of slaves on the Atlantic coast in the 1600s, the equality struggle has been difficult and lengthy. Some exceptionally important Virginians were among those influencing the Virginia Civil Rights movement. One contributor was Dred Scott. Scott was born a slave in the year 1795 and was most notable for fighting for his family’s freedom and winning the famous Supreme Court case, Dred Scott v. Stanford, in 1857. Scott’s Supreme Court victory ultimately led to the direct order of the abolishment of slavery, which was put in place by the Emancipation Proclamation. Scott passed away only one year after his victory in 1858. Another notable individual was Nat Turner. Turner was also born a slave in 1800 in Southampton County, Virginia. His contribution was his remarkable ability to rally his community of slaves against the institution. According to Patrick Breen in The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt, “On August 31, 1831, Nat Turner and four other men launched the bloodiest slave revolt in American history… never had so many whites died in a slave revolt.”[footnoteRef:4] The success of the revolt was short-lived with Turner being captured and hanged not long after. Although Turner’s life was taken, his legacy was not. He sparked a fire for rebellion within the slaves of Virginia. Like Turner, Booker T. Washington is another significant figure and was born only a few years before the abolishment of slavery in 1856. Although he was initially a slave, he was granted freedom after the end of the Civil War. Washington developed a passion for education and had a desire to read and write. During this time, he discovered how difficult it was for a black man to obtain an education in a time where black people were certainly not granted this natural-born right. Due to his passion and formal education obstacles, Washington eventually founded the Tuskegee Institute to educate other newly freed slaves.[footnoteRef:5] [4: Patrick H. Breen, The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.] [5: “Civil Rights Movement in Virginia: Hampton Institute and Booker T. Washington,” Virginia Historical Society, accessed February 23, 2020, h ttps://www.virginiahistory.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/hampton-institute.]

One notable female figure is Irene Morgan Kirkaldy. She was born in 1917 in Baltimore, Maryland. She played a significant role in the struggle for equality in Virginia by refusing to give up bus seat to a white couple while traveling in Middlesex County, Virginia.[footnoteRef:6] Defying Jim Crow Laws in 1944 had major consequences. But in 1946, the Morgan v. Virginia case moved all the way to the Supreme Court and Kirkaldy even won the case with the ruling that it was unconstitutional to segregate on interstate buses. Moving to another important female contributor, Maggie L. Walker was born in Virginia in 1864 and died in 1934. During her time on this earth, she made significant contributions to the movement. She was the first black female bank president and was also co-founder of the NAACP in Richmond, Virginia. Walker

not only encouraged the advancement of African Americans, but she was a proponent for the advancement of women as well. Among her accomplishments, she established The St. Luke Herald, a newspaper where she served as editor. Walker's significance "provided a sharp challenge to the complex gender relations that existed in the African American community during the last years of the nineteenth century."[footnoteRef:7] Both women, Walker and Kirkaldy, inspired not only the African American community, but women as well. [6: "Civil Rights Movement in Virginia: Equal Access to Public Accommodations," Virginia Historical Society, accessed February 23, 2020, https://www.virginiahistory.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/equal-access.] [7: Elsa B. Brown, "Constructing a Life and a Community: A Partial Story of Maggie Lena Walker," OAH Magazine of History 7, no. 4 (1993): 28.]

Examining yet another contributor, it is both important and inspiring to look at currently living Virginia Civil Rights figures. Douglas Wilder was born in 1931 and was a man of many achievements. First, he became a Virginia attorney. Later, he became the first African American state senator since the end of the Civil War. Finally, Wilder served as the first African American lieutenant governor, then climbed to be the governor in all the United States. Another contributor currently still living is Henry L. Marsh III. In 1977, Marsh became Richmond's first black mayor and appropriately became a civil rights lawyer in the state of Virginia. The infamous instigator of the Brown v. Board of Education case, Barbara Johns, lived from 1935 until 1991. Although she was born in New York and not Virginia, she moved to Virginia while young. Johns organized and led a student strike that prompted the previously mentioned case and brought about the ruling that deemed segregation of whites and blacks unconstitutional. Looking at the brief biographies of the important figures of the movement for equal rights is not only fascinating, but helps better connect history with current times.

Setbacks and Improvements

Moving from Virginia specifically, an examination of federal legislations that restricted the equality of black Americans and laws that helped them recognize true freedom is essential. One of the first setbacks of the movement was the creation of Jim Crow laws. The name "Jim Crow" did not come from an actual human, but rather referred a ridiculous and offensive fictional black character. In 1820, "Jim Crow" was initially a popular dance. Thomas "Daddy" Rice performed show around 1828 in which he was dressed up in raggedy clothes and danced in imitation of a derelict black man.[footnoteRef:8] As sad as Rice's portrayal of black people was, it did not compare to the unfair ordinances known as Jim Crow Laws. The laws were created around 1874 and consumed the southern portion of the United States. The main goal of Jim Crow laws was to separate whites and blacks in multiple different aspects. Supposedly to create separate but equal treatment, Jim Crow Laws did nothing but condemn the black race and to make them feel inferior. Every aspect of life in America including schools, restaurants, and even the military service was segregated. It wasn't the end of World War II that the military was no longer segregated, but everything else remained. [8: W. T. Lhamon, Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003), 9.]

Jim Crow laws were backed by the judicial branch in 1896 when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of "separate but equal" in the Plessy v. Ferguson case.[footnoteRef:9] Different states across the country made sure that blacks and whites were segregated in every place

imaginable. Bathrooms, restaurants and public transportation were the most common segregated areas. When thinking of remarkable figures that challenged segregation, Rosa Parks often comes to mind. The actions of Parks attempted to change people's views and challenge Jim Crow Laws. Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on December 1, 1955 and was arrested, fingerprinted, and jailed for her defiance.[footnoteRef:10] She unknowingly started the spark to defy Jim Crow Laws. In November of 1956, Parks' case was held by the Supreme Court and was achieved with the ruling that segregation on public transportation was unconstitutional. This ruling and Parks' bravery gave life to the beginning of the modern civil rights movement. [9: Ronald L. Heinemann, Old Dominion, New Commonwealth: A History of Virginia, 1607-2007 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 271.] [10: "Rosa Parks Ignites Bus Boycott," A&E Television Networks (2019), accessed February 25, 2020, https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/rosa-parks-ignites-bus-boycot.]

Voting rights are intertwined with movement towards equality and had several setbacks before true equality was achieved. An example of a setback surrounding voter rights in Virginia occurred in 1901. To resist the 15th amendment of the U.S. Constitution that granted voting rights to black men, Virginia brought together its own Constitutional Convention. This convention required voters to test their understanding of Virginia's Constitution. This "proof" was obviously targeted towards blacks. In addition, Virginia imposed an annual tax at the registered voter polls of $1.50 and recently registered or new voters were taxed an additional $4.50.[footnoteRef:11] Back then, this was a large amount of money so it ultimately prohibited many poor white and black voters from being allowed to vote. As an intended result of Virginia's voter tax, more than 125,000 of 147,000 black voters were deemed ineligible to vote within 90 days of the laws inception.[footnoteRef:12] Other states also enacted literacy tests as a requirement for voter registration. Literacy tests were another just another immoral attempt at keeping blacks from voting, but the tests did not last. Because of the regression, it sparked yet another desire in the African American community to fight for their rights. [11: "Civil Rights Movement in Virginia: Voting Rights," Virginia Historical Society, accessed February 25, 2020, https://www.virginiahistory.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/voting-rights.] [12: Ibid.]

Civil Rights in Modern Times

Looking back on the civil rights movement in Virginia and the national civil rights movement, it is also important to enter the area of current issues in Virginia's progress towards equality. A relatively recent and current issue facing Virginia includes the white nationalist march in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12, 2017. The rally was a symbol of objection to the plans for removing the statue of General Robert E. Lee. Anti-white nationalists were also in attendance of the "Unite the Right" rally which led to multiple altercations and incidence of violence. Virginia's governor was forced to declare a state of emergency as tensions rose and violence erupted. There was even a point in the march where a counter protestor drove a car into a group of people in the street killing one woman and injuring 19 more.[footnoteRef:13] The information was validated by Charlottesville officials on the city's verified Twitter account, which goes to show how racial issues persist in Virginia today. [13: Jason Hanna et al., "Virginia Governor to White Nationalists: 'Go Home… Shame on You,'" CNN (2017), accessed February 27, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-white-nationalists-rally/index.html.]

Conclusion

Common sense and reason must prevail for there to be true equality and fair treatment of every person regardless of race, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation. Civil rights should be guaranteed as basic rights by the United States Constitution. History cannot be erased, but mistakes can be learned from. Terrible and awful atrocities have been committed in the name of religion or misguided and there is likely much worse not stated within history books. Only the tip of the iceberg has been revealed concerning slavery, bigotry, discrimination and outright hatred of persons that differ from the white race. Society's norms for behavior have changed drastically for the good from the time the first slave was delivered to the colonies in the 1600's. Evil intent and greed appear to have been the motivation of slavery in the past. However, that is not the case for today and cannot explain the heinous behaviors of the white supremacy movement that is evident as recently as August 2017.

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