

# Perspective: African American Life circa 1900

## THE NOT SO GILDED AGE OF JIM CROW

The Maymont era coincided with the beginning of the Age of Jim Crow, one of the most violent and repressive periods in American race relations. The term **Jim Crow**, coined from an antebellum theater character, refers to the subordination and separation of African Americans through law, custom, and force.

Strict segregation compounded other hardships, such as low income, poor housing, limited education, and inadequate health care. In Richmond at the turn of the century, the average life expectancy for black residents was 37 years, compared to 52 years for whites.

Between 1900 and 1925, the Virginia General Assembly passed a series of laws building the racial divide—obstructing the black vote and mandating racial separation in schools, hospitals, churches, cemeteries, public transportation, and assembly. Despite organized protests by the black community, as in Richmond’s 1904 streetcar boycott, segregation remained intact until the 1960s.

Even James Dooley’s prestige and wealth could not protect Maymont employees from the sting of Jim Crow practices. In 1920, a Richmond taxi company refused to transport his black employees.

In the face of segregation, black Richmond provided support networks through family, churches, clubs, and benevolent and fraternal societies. Jackson Ward—with its black-owned banks, businesses, restaurants, theaters, and churches—became the heart of a growing community consciousness. Leaders, like bank president Maggie L. Walker, stressed social uplift, the dignity of honest labor, and the importance of saving. Many laundresses invested at her Saint Luke Penny Savings Bank.

Dependent on jobs in the white community, black workers often assumed a polite attitude of deference, described by W. E. B. Du Bois as a protective veil. The **Richmond Planet**, the leading black newspaper, explained: “We cannot reach the top of the ladder at one bound. Bow low, and work! ‘Stoop to conquer.’ You do the stooping, and your children will do the conquering.”