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Arkansas and the Civil Rights Movement

Slavery was a critical issue in the United States from the beginning of the country. Founding Fathers and early presidents like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were Virginia plantation owners who also owned slaves from Africa. In the 1700s, the Founding Fathers did not see a conflict in stating that "All men are created equal." and owning slaves. Democracy and equality were new ideas in the 1700s in a world then ruled by royalty and dictators.

Arkansas and Slavery

By the early 1800s slavery was an issue that was already dividing the new nation. Southern states relied on slave labor to work large plantations and southern citizens were accustomed to this way of life. Meanwhile slavery was not allowed in most northern states and many people in those areas were opposed to slavery. At this time in American history there were an equal number of states that allowed slavery (Slave States) and those that didn't (Free States).

In the Missouri Compromise of 1820, Missouri was admitted as a Slave State and at the same time Maine was admitted as a Free State. The Compromise also prohibited slavery north of the latitude 36 degrees 30 minutes north, which coincided with the northern border of the Arkansas Territory. When Arkansas was ready for statehood, a high percentage of the population consisted of slaves from Africa and the newly created state constitution allowed slavery. In 1836, Arkansas was admitted as a Slave State while Michigan was admitted as a Free State to keep the balance of power in the United States Congress.

By 1860 slaves made up about 26 percent of the population of Arkansas. When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, southern pro-slavery states seceded and formed the Confederate States of America, but Arkansas did not join them until the Civil War began in 1861. When the Civil War ended in 1865, the period known as Reconstruction, or rebuilding, began. In order to be readmitted to the Union former Confederate states needed to write a new state constitution that recognized the civil rights of black men; in those days women were not allowed to vote. In 1868, the Arkansas legislature adopted a new constitution that met federal guidelines and it became a state once again.

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Arkansas and Civil Rights

The fact that there was a new state constitution did not change the feelings of people who lived in Arkansas. Black citizens in Arkansas and other southern states faced discrimination and hostility on a daily basis. Twenty years after adopting the new state constitution, the Arkansas legislature passed laws that mandated segregation, the separation of people based upon race. Black citizens attended separate schools and used separate restrooms. The laws ensured that the races did not socialize together at all. These laws mandating segregation were called Jim Crow laws. Black men were also prevented from voting in most elections.

Even in the 1950s segregation was still the normal way of life in Arkansas. There was a small amount of progress towards integration when a few black students were admitted to the University of Arkansas in 1954. In 1956 the capital city of Little Rock integrated its public bus system. In 1957, three school districts in Arkansas voted to end segregation and integrate since the United States Supreme Court declared in 1954 that segregation in public schools was illegal.

On September 4, 1957 nine black students, now called the Little Rock Nine, arrived at Little Rock Central High School for the first day of school but Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus sent the state's National Guard troops to prevent integration of the school. Under a federal court order, the students finally began school on September 23 while approximately 1,000 white students and adults protested outside. Television technology had recently advanced and there was live television coverage of the event broadcast throughout the nation. The entire country viewed the results of segregation for the first time.

President Dwight Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock and armed American soldiers made certain that the black students were able to attend their classes safely. This time the Arkansas National Guard assisted in ensuring the safety of black students instead of preventing them from attending school, but Little Rock citizens weren't finished with their protests. The following year, 1958, they completely closed the Little Rock public schools rather than integrate them. A new school board was elected and integrated schools reopened in 1959. Public schools in other areas of Arkansas did not become integrated until the 1970s.

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Circle True or False after analyzing each of the following statements.

1. True False Early American Presidents like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned African slaves who worked on their Virginia plantations.
2. True False In the early days of the United States, there were an equal number of Slave States and Free States.
3. True False The Missouri Compromise set the national north-south boundary between Slave States and Free States.
4. True False Arkansas was admitted as a Slave State while Michigan was admitted as a Free State to keep the balance of power in the United States Congress.
5. True False Since Arkansas was a Slave State it immediately joined the Confederate States of America as soon as Abraham Lincoln was elected President.
6. True False About twenty years after the slaves were freed as an outcome of the Civil War, the Arkansas legislature passed laws that mandated segregation, the separation of people based upon race.
7. True False George Crow laws, another name for laws mandating segregation, prevent black men and women from voting in many elections.
8. True False In the late 1950s Little Rock, Arkansas was the scene of major turmoil over the integration of its high school.
9. True False The new technology of television was responsible for bringing the reality of segregation into the homes of Americans across the nation.
10. True False After the Little Rock schools were integrated the other school districts in Arkansas quickly and peacefully integrated as well.

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Answers

1. True
2. True
3. True
4. True
5. False
6. True
7. False
8. True
9. True
10. False