

Jim Crow

In western culture we tend to avoid the subjects of defecation and urination. This is easy to do with flush toilets that encourage an out-of-sight, out-of-mind attitude in regard to the subject. However, US history includes a rich chapter in which public toilets played a central role. After the US Civil War (1861–1865), the states of the defeated Confederacy were placed under martial control in a period called Reconstruction. The presence of federal troops insured the role of the newly freed black men (but not women) in governance. Alas, when the US Army withdrew in 1877, the old order resumed control and instituted a system of laws called "Jim Crow." Jim Crow laws diminished the rights of people of color and encoded segregation based upon hue of skin. One feature of Jim Crow was separate public bathrooms and drinking fountains. When facilities for both black and whites were present, those for whites were invariably nicer and cleaner. However, places in the South that wanted to discourage "colored" attendance (such as museums and movie theaters) would have just the "whites only" bathrooms. These practices persisted until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s succeeded in eliminating them.



A sign for a segregated waiting room