

Introduction ^[1]

In 1945, Americans emerged from sixteen years of depression and war hopeful about the future. Some of those hopes were quickly realized, as technology advanced, opportunities for education opened up, and prosperity returned. Hopes for peace, though, were dashed. Almost as soon as the war had ended, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had begun to grow, and a "Cold War" between the two victorious superpowers took shape. By 1948 the U.S. was mired in another war, this one in Korea, and students were doing "duck and cover" drills to prepare for an atomic attack. Some hopes were realized only slowly and with great struggle and sacrifice. Many African American veterans, resentful of the discrimination they had faced in the military and now faced again at home, were ready to reject second-class citizenship once and for all. Civil rights groups had been active for decades, but they grew larger after the war and found new strategies. Lawsuits forced the federal government to enforce the equal rights clauses of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments -- as when the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregated public schools violated the Constitution and must be integrated. Nonviolent protest, strikes, sit-ins, marches, voting drives, and "freedom rides" on buses -- and the violent response they drew from conservative whites -- drew the attention of people outside the South and gradually gathered national support for civil rights legislation. The pace of change quickened in the 1960s. Rosie the Riveter had been asked to go back to the kitchen after the war, and she wasn't always happy about it. Women increasingly demanded -- and got -- equal access to jobs, equal pay for equal work, and equal opportunities in education. North Carolina and the nation fought a "war on poverty." Battles over free speech raged on college campuses. All these changes divided the nation, but few as dramatically as the Vietnam War. Some Americans saw Vietnam as part of a crusade against communism and totalitarianism; others saw it as meddling in the affairs of a people and a nation that should be allowed to determine their own future. Soldiers were often confused about why they were there, resented the lack of support from home, and many had a hard time readjusting to civilian life after the war. In the U.S., protests raged against the war -- notably on college campuses, but Americans of all ages and backgrounds could be found on both sides of the issue. By the 1970s, the energy for all this change had faded. African Americans and women had achieved most of their early equal rights goals, and the work that remained to be done was more complex and had less broad support. A new conservative movement was growing, and in North Carolina, the Republican Party became a force for the first time since 1898. The Civil Rights Movement brought a revolution to North Carolina, but -- like the first two, in 1775 - 81 and 1861 - 65 -- it had unexpected consequences.

A note about sources

The nearer we come to the present, the more difficult it becomes to write history. When we consider events of a hundred years ago, we can evaluate their long-term impact. But the 1960s are still within the memory of a lot of people -- the people who lead North Carolina and the United States today. The events of that decade are still personal for a lot of people, as is the argument about what they really meant. It's harder to get perspective. Because recent history is still personal, it's also difficult to find primary sources for a project like this. That might seem strange, given the incredible quantity of *stuff* that survives from the 1950s and 1960s -- certainly as compared to the 1850s and 1860s. But nearly all of the sources created in the last seventy years are still owned by somebody -- personal letters from the 1960s aren't waiting in archives to be published. So for this module of our resource we don't have quite the variety of primary sources we had for some earlier modules. We do have oral histories which give wonderful personal accounts of historic events. We also have tons of detailed census data, which allows us to get the "big picture" more easily than we could in earlier eras.

Key questions

As in the rest of this resource, you'll have the opportunity to explore the experiences of various people firsthand, through a variety of primary sources -- oral histories, letters, newspapers, maps, photographs, film, and census data. From these raw materials and background readings, you'll answer questions like these:

- Why did the Cold War begin? What was its impact on North Carolinians?
- How did daily life for North Carolinians change -- and stay the same -- after World War II?
- Why did the Civil Rights Movement pick up steam after World War II? What were its early successes?
- What was the impact of school desegregation on students, parents, and teachers?
- How did civil rights groups use nonviolent protest and political activism in the 1960s?
- How did North Carolinians respond to the social changes of the 1960s?
- Why did the U.S. fight a war in Vietnam? What was its impact on the men who fought it and on people at home?
- Why did the momentum for change and reform fade in the 1970s?
- How did North Carolina's politics change in the 1960s and 1970s?

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