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Getting Started Inquiry Question

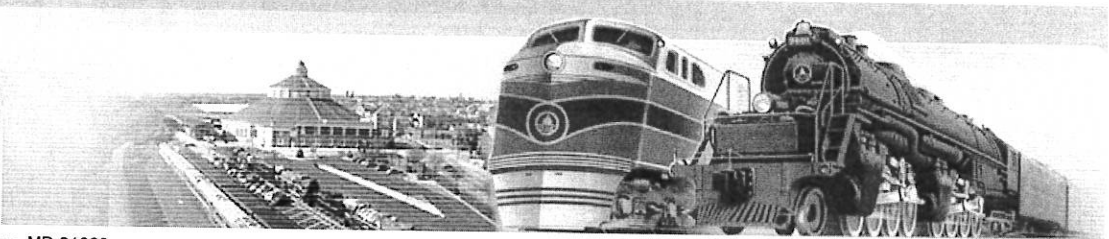


From the collections of the B&O Railroad Museum.

1. Describe what you see in the photo.
2. Why do you think these men are preparing such large amounts of food?

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Setting the Stage Historical Context

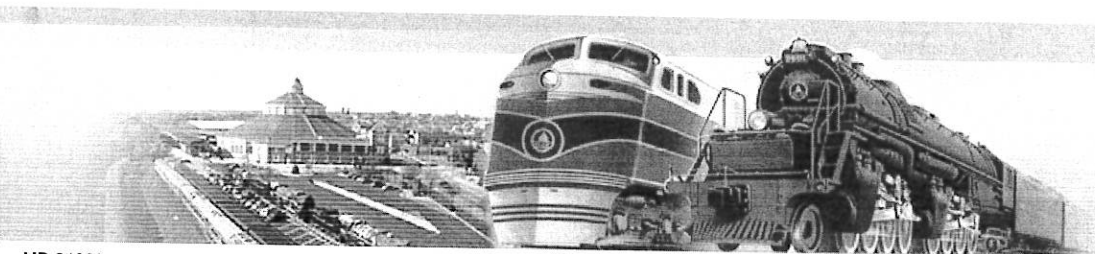
While African-Americans were employed in significant numbers by the railroads, it is important to note that most were denied membership in the traditional railroad unions. This meant that the jobs they held were usually the most grueling and labor intensive in the railroad industry. In spite of the hardships they endured, the jobs they performed were vital to the operation of the railroad. Prior to the Civil War, slaves were put to work building many of the original railroads in the south. Following the war, many former slaves went to work rebuilding the railroads that, like much of the south, had been left in ruins by the conflict.

In the north and on railroads such as the B&O, African-American laborers competed for jobs with the immigrants who were coming to America in ever-increasing numbers. There was a fierce rivalry between various ethnic groups for these low-paying jobs. Nevertheless, railroads like the B&O could not have been constructed or operated without the contributions of African-American laborers.

Despite the significant number of African-American employees on railroads, most were denied membership in the traditional railroad unions. Established in 1912, the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen and Locomotive Firemen was one of the first African-American labor unions. At its peak in 1926, this organization could boast approximately 3,500 members. A. Philip Randolph formed the nation's first widely successful African-American union in 1925. Called the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids, this organization successfully lobbied for greater economic opportunities and equality for both male and female African-American railroad employees. Mr. Randolph became an influential figure on the national political scene, speaking out on civil rights issues for decades. One of his notable achievements was to organize the famous March on Washington in 1963. He can be seen standing with Martin Luther King as he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

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Determining the Facts

Reading 1: "Ambassadors of Service"



From the collections of the B&O Railroad Museum.

Questions for Reading 1

1. Why do you think the jobs of sleeping car porter, portrette, and dining car waiter were looked upon as professional careers within the African-American communities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries?
2. Why would providing excellent meals and comfortable sleeping accommodations help increase the amount of freight that was carried on a particular railroad?

In the 1870s, northern industrialist George Mortimer Pullman recruited former slaves as porters onboard his new sleeping cars. These porters were charged with the responsibility of providing impeccable service to his passengers. By the 1920s, Pullman was one of the largest private employers of African Americans in the United States. The expert service provided by these dedicated employees was a key focus in the advertising campaigns aimed at potential travelers. However, the career had its roots in slavery and perpetuated negative stereotypes of African Americans as servants. For example, porters were commonly referred to generically as "George," after Mr. George Pullman, instead of by their actual names. Nevertheless, many within the African-American community considered the job an admirable, distinguished, and professional career. During this time in our history, sleeping car porters received higher wages than other jobs available to African-Americans.

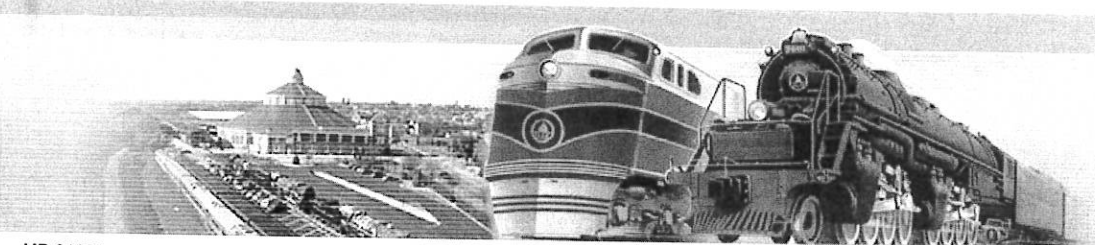
In an industry where competition was fierce, railroads distinguished themselves based on the quality of their services both on and off the train. In addition to Pullman porters, African-Americans also worked as chefs and waiters onboard dining cars, and as redcaps at stations. Redcaps provided baggage handling and other customer services needed at railroad stations. Chefs and waiters delivered the legendary meals with flawless service to passengers. All of these amenities provided excellent selling points for the railroad to market to its customers. Many business travelers who were pleased by a

fine meal and excellent sleeping accommodations were more than willing to trust the same lines with the care and prompt delivery of their products.

Frequently hired as female porters (or porterettes) and maids, African-American women also contributed to the successful operation of the railroad industry. Employing roughly 200 in 1926, the Pullman Company required their maids to meet certain physical guidelines. Most were between 20-39 years old, had a petite frame, and wore little makeup. Maids were primarily hired to tend to the customer service needs of female passengers. Duties could include cleaning car interiors, tending to children, sewing, and providing manicures and hairdressing services. Like many women during World War II, African-American women were called to fill traditional male jobs in the offices, shops, and onboard trains. The Pullman Company hired porterettes to perform duties similar to male porters, like preparing sleeping berths and helping passengers on and off the train.

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Determining the Facts

Reading 2: "Separate, Not Equal"

The concept of "Jim Crow" and "separate but equal" policies first occurred on railroad passenger coaches. By the 1850s, southern railroads began enforcing policies that segregated African-American travelers from white travelers. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1875 declared that all individuals had a right to equal public accommodations, states continued to impose "Jim Crow" laws. In 1883, the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional due to the belief that the federal government could not mandate racial integration when it pertained to private industries. Railroads and private corporations had a right to refuse service or create separated venues as long as they were "equal."

On June 7, 1892, 30-year old shoemaker Homer Plessy challenged the Louisiana "Jim Crow" law by sitting in the white section of a passenger coach. Judge John Howard Ferguson upheld the state law, resulting in an appeal to the Supreme Court. In the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson case, the Supreme Court ruled that "separate but equal" accommodations were legal. Of course in reality these accommodations were not equal. Typically, segregated coaches were located directly behind the locomotive. If windows were open, smoke and burning cinders flew inside. If the windows were closed, the coach was stuffy and poorly ventilated. In many cases, the segregated coaches were also used to store tools and materials for the conductor.

By the 1950s, railroad passenger services in general were expensive to operate and not financially productive. Therefore, it was becoming economically impossible for railroads to operate any passenger services, let alone additional segregated cars. In 1954, the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling overturned the "separate but equal" clause stating that separate accommodations were "inherently unequal." In 1955, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ordered an end to segregated cars on railroads, but some railroads continued to enforce their segregation policies until the late 1960s.

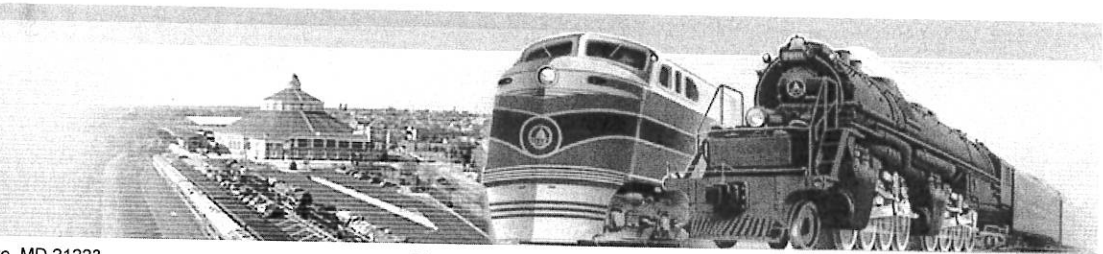
In 1997, a railroad historian and a professor of African Studies compiled a list of 29 known existing Jim Crow cars that have been preserved as evidence of this injustice of the past. The B&O Railroad Museum's C&O No. 409 (on display in the Roundhouse) was referenced on this list. Visitors are able to enter the front section of the car and view the areas of the car where segregation was enforced.

Questions for Reading 2

1. What was the decision of the Supreme Court in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896?
2. How did the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954 affect the segregation of rail travelers?

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Visual Evidence

Image 1: "Women at Work"



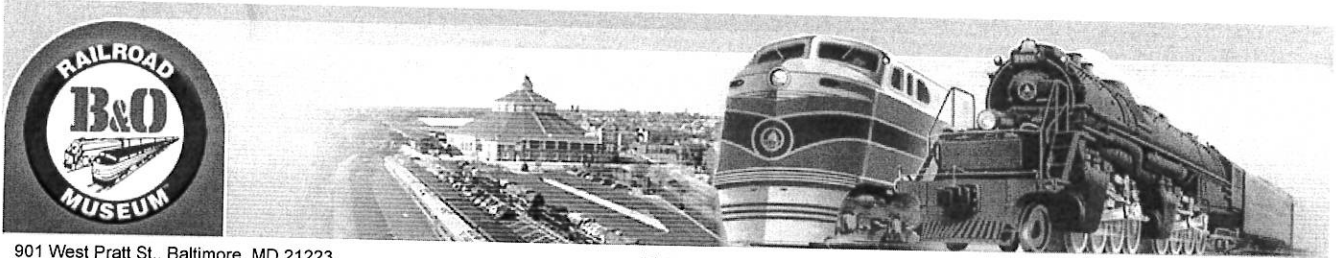
From the collections of the B&O Railroad Museum.

Questions for Image 1

1. What does this photo suggest about the way workers were organized when it was taken during World War II?
2. What conclusions does this photo allow you to make about the kind of work done by these women?

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Image 3: "The Real McCoy"



African-American inventor Elijah McCoy patented an automatic lubricator in 1872 to regulate the flow of oil to locomotive cylinders and pistons. Railroads insisted that their locomotives have the "real McCoy" and not some inferior imitation.

Questions for Image 3

1. What obstacles do you think Mr. McCoy may have faced during the time he was pursuing his career as an inventor?
2. Would you consider Mr. McCoy's accomplishments as an inventor during the latter part of the 19th century to be remarkable? Explain

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