Although race leader Bishop Henry McNeal Turner called Florida a “paradise” for blacks and a place where they could make a lot of money, race relations in Florida in the early twentieth century were not good. In fact, race relations were worse for Florida blacks in many ways than for blacks in other Southern states such as Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Texas. Although Florida is not usually thought of as a Deep South state, white Floridians carried the same attitudes and assumptions of superiority as other Southern whites. Florida had its share of lynching and mob violence, residential segregation, black codes, discrimination, and even the total destruction of one of its all-black towns, Rosewood. The Democratic Party controlled the political system in Florida and functioned on the tenet of white supremacy. Florida led the nation with eleven lynchings in 1920, and between 1880 and 1930, blacks were more likely to be lynched in Florida than any other state; for every hundred thousand blacks, 79.8 were lynched. Mississippi followed with a relatively distant second with 52.8 per hundred thousand.

Prior to his Florida trip in 1912, Washington caused a great stir in the Sunshine State on at least two occasions—once in 1901 when he had dinner with President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House and again in 1903 when he spoke in Gainesville. After white Floridians learned of Washington’s dinner with Roosevelt, the vast majority lambasted both men throughout Florida’s newspapers for violating the code of racial etiquette. White newspaper editors, along with concerned citizens, voiced their displeasure with this affair. “Eating at the same table means social equality. Social equality means free right of inter-marriage, and inter-marriage means the degradation of the white race,” E. Y. Harvey wrote to the *Jacksonville Evening Metropolis*.
“When the white race yields social equality with the negro it has defied the laws of God, and he will sweep them from the earth,” he said. According to Harvey, this social mingling could move from the dinner table to the bedroom, which would spell the genetic annihilation of the white race. 

Although white Floridians were more acerbic with comments toward Roosevelt than Washington, they still let the Tuskegee leader know he had stepped out of his “place” by accepting the dinner invitation from Roosevelt. The *Evening Metropolis* noted that “Booker Washington lost the golden opportunity of his life in not declining the invitation to dine with President Roosevelt. Booker rather went back on his own advice to his race by accepting.” As illustrated above, this dinner engagement and other acts by the Tuskegee leader, created dissonance on the part of whites because they often were blatantly confronted with the fact that Washington’s rhetoric did not match his actions. They erred in interpreting the Tuskegean’s words literally and not as a strategy of black survivalism. Roosevelt never invited Washington to a White House dinner again, and over time fury over this affair diminished. Ultimately, African Americans, Washington’s main constituents, praised him for the dinner and his prestige suffered very little among most Floridians over the long term.

Controversy over Washington erupted again in Florida a little over a year later, early in 1903. Washington received an invitation to speak at the joint meeting of the General Education Board and county superintendents of education at Gainesville. Intense controversy emerged because he was invited to lecture to white educators at a white school. This invitation stirred up so much commotion that the speech had to be moved to the courthouse in Gainesville. Washington even considered withdrawing his acceptance of the invitation. William N. Sheats, the state superintendent of education and one of the South’s most renowned educators, among others, extended the invitation to Washington.

Highlighting this controversy, the *New York Times* on January 30, 1903, headlined a story: “Race Prejudice in Florida, Citizens of Gainesville Refuse to Allow Booker T. Washington to Speak in Auditorium.” Jefferson B. Browne, chairman of Florida’s railroad commission, summed up the sentiment of many Florida whites when he cautioned that Washington was “a threat to the preservation and purity of the white race.” He felt that if blacks followed Washington’s lead, they would think that by industrial education “they too can dine with the white president in the North and sit on the rostrum with the white educators of the South.”