Again, in this text, Matthew Frye Jacobson offers an account of changing ideas of whiteness, and highlights the contexts for these changing ideas.

A very common immigrant narrative goes like this, “My ancestors came here with nothing and were able to work hard and build a life for themselves and their children. They didn’t get any help, they did it on their own.” While this narrative is certainly inspiring and highlights the opportunities that were available to many, this narrative needs to be situated within the historical context of migration, and within the United States, and largely depended on one’s racial status as a free white person. As we’ve established, there was no path to citizenship for those who were not considered white until 1965.

Matthew Frye Jacobson organizes the political history of whiteness into three eras:

1790-1840—Beginning with the Naturalization Act of 1790 that states that Only free white persons were able to naturalize. What was meant by a Free White Person was a landholding white male who supported republican ideals—liberty, freedom, democracy, self-government. Eventually, during a period of Jacksonian democracy, this was extended to those who didn’t own land. There was little debate about who was white and it was simply assumed that the subject of law was a white man.

1840-1920—Was a period of Mass migration from Europe beginning with Irish and Germans and then followed by other European groups, including Italians, Russian Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Syrians, and Polish. This period ends with the Johnson Reed Act of 1924 that halts most migration from around the world while still giving preference to Britain and Germany. During this period, the different groups were questioned as to their ability to assimilate into the American republican ideal. Could Italians, Irish, Russians, Poles, Greeks be Free White Persons? Even while they were still considered white, what kind of white were they? The category of white was fractured during the period by the idea that the nature of these groups was essentially different. That the different groups had different natures. This idea was then backed by racial science or ethnology that then argued that each group had a different racial makeup and that even while they could be considered part of the larger category of white or Caucasian, they were placed on a hierarchy of being from most civilized to least civilized With Anglo-Saxon on top and usually Jew or Syrian on the bottom. – (We will go more in-depth with this in two weeks when we discuss biopolitics, eugenics and immigration, so hold onto this text), (pp. 68-90).

1924—After immigration restriction defined by the Johnson Reed Act, there is a consolidation of white races to an idea of consanguine Caucasian group—consanguine (what does this mean?).

1. There is also a widespread critique of scientific racism and the racist logics of ethnology that placed different groups on a racial hierarchy. This doesn’t mean that it there is a prevailing idea of colorblindness, but that *white* racial groups are actually not racially distinct. Furthermore, there is the widespread movement from the idea of racial distinctions as significant between European groups and a move to define these distinctions as cultural as an ethnic heritage.

2. Finally, there was movement of African Americans to the North due to Great Migration and the there was a sentiment that there was a kind of natural opposition between white and black, and intensifying the racism and segregation between whites and blacks in the North, different European groups which had previously been considered black, were obviously not when next to black neighbors

3. Also, due to the geopolitical context of fighting fascism abroad, there is the concern that racism needed to be fought at home—The NAACP embraced the double V campaign as Victory over fascism and Victory of racism. Of course, this rejection of prejudice was easier within the so-called Caucasian race, then between whites and blacks. Many groups participated in the War—as fighters or in the war effort, even while African Americans and Japanese fought in segregated ranks, and when the men returned, they were able to avail themselves of benefits in ways that other minorities were not—especially housing benefits that became the bedrock of American wealth. The war was a kind of bonding experience for whites and whites were able to benefit from the national programs set up to help veterans—these programs were largely unavailable to African Americans.

The House I Live In was a 1945 short film written by Albert Maltz and made by producer Frank Ross and actor Frank Sinatra to oppose anti-Semitism and prejudice at the end of World War II.

It received a special Academy Award in 1946.

The House I live in

https://youtu.be/vhPwtnGviyg

The Geopolitical context is critically important to understanding how the Cold War ultimately led to the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act or the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which finally did away with the restrictive quotas that were instituted in 1924. The U.S. Wars in Asia and the fight against the spread of communism in Korea and Vietnam made the migration of war brides and orphans a possibility in the 1950s. Also, the need to be perceived as not only the most powerful nation on earth, but as a land of capitalist opportunity for all especially in relation to Communist regimes spurred the passage of the 1965 Act.

Legal definitions:

This question of who was a “free white Person” was contested in the courts by those who felt that they fit the definition—either the racial or phenotypical definition or by the definition of who could be an individual capable of self government.

Matthew Frye Jacobson points out:

In defending both the border of national belonging and the border of certifiable racial whiteness, the courts gave legal, codified form to a complex of popular street-level prejudices on the one hand and learned, scientific judgments on the other. These rulings drew upon a number of different sources in wildly inconsistent fashion, but the power of the courts’ decisions-like the power of race generally—resided in their withholding or extending favor *seemingly*  by a fixed logic of natural, biological fact. … Courts consolidated and defended the idea “Caucasian” in their naturalization decisions just as popular and congressional debate over immigration was producing a contrary notion of Anglo-Saxon supremacy and Celtic, Hebrew, Slavic, and Mediterranean degeneracy. …these cases shored up the whiteness of Europe’s probationary white races by inflating the difference between the insiders and the outsiders of 1790… The bids for citizenship on the part of Chinese, Indian, Armenian, Syrian, or Filipino petitioners, in other words, were *part* of what kept the probationary white races from Europe *white.*

In re Ah Yup,

* “The first application made by a native Chinaman for naturalization”
* Circuit Court Judge Sawyer set precedent establishing “Caucasian” as a legally recognized racial group.
* Did “Mongolian race” qualify Ah Yup as a white person?
* “one would scarcely fail to understand that the party employing the words “White Person” word intend a person of the Caucasian race.”

This case became precedent for a number of other cases that were brought before the courts by Native Canadian, Hawaiians, Burmese, Mexicans… Armenians, Turks, --there was a lot of contradiction in the way that these decisions were made and all used the ethnological evidence to try to explain why a particular group was or was not white.

Ozawa vs. United States

U.S. vs. Bhagat Singh Thind

“It may be true that the blond Scandinavian the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knowns perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today” (236).

These cases, Jacobson argues, contributed to the consolidation of whiteness, they worked to create a boundary between those who were white/Caucasian and those who were not, and through legal discourse created a unity between many groups that were until that point considered separate groups. By not addressing their fitness for self-government, they were then assumed to be fit as “free white persons.”