

What was the Supreme Court landmark case Plessy v. Ferguson?

Adapted from History.com

This 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case upheld¹ the constitutionality of segregation under the “separate but equal” doctrine². It stemmed from an 1892 incident in which African-American train passenger Homer Plessy refused to sit in the “colored” section of a car, breaking a Louisiana law. Rejecting Plessy’s argument that his constitutional rights were violated, the Court ruled that a state law did not conflict with the 13th and 14th Amendments.

The case came from Louisiana, which in 1890 adopted a law providing for “equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races” on its railroads. In 1892, passenger Homer Plessy refused to sit in a Jim Crow car. He was brought before Judge John H. Ferguson of the Criminal Court for New Orleans, who upheld the state law. The law was challenged in the Supreme Court on grounds that it conflicted with the 13th and 14th Amendments.

By a 7-1 vote, the Court said that the state law did not conflict with the 13th Amendment forbidding involuntary servitude. It also ruled that the state law did not violate the 14th Amendment.

The 14th Amendment was voted into law in order to prevent newly freed slaves from being discriminated against because of color. However, in the 1896 Plessy case, the Supreme Court ruled that the purpose of the 14th Amendment was “to enforce the absolute

¹ Upheld—when a court “upholds” a decision, it means that the higher court agrees with a decision made by a lower court

² Doctrine—a set of beliefs, or a government policy

equality of the two races before the law.... Laws ... requiring their separation ... do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race." The Supreme Court justices said that segregation laws did not conflict with the 14th Amendment because of the "the enforced separation of the two races does not stamp the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is ... solely because the colored race chooses to put that interpretation upon it."

The lone dissenter³, Kentuckian and former slave owner Justice John Marshall Harlan, denied that a legislature could differentiate⁴ on the basis of race with regard to civil rights. He wrote: "The white race deems itself to be the dominant race," but the Constitution recognizes "no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens." Harlan continued: "Our Constitution is color-blind.... In respect of civil rights all citizens are equal before the law." The Court's majority opinion, he pointed out, gave power to the states "to place in a condition of legal inferiority⁵ a large body of American citizens."

Following the *Plessy* decision, laws that allowed segregation based on race continued and expanded steadily, and were not changed until *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* 1954, which started the Civil Rights Movement.

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³ Dissent—on the Supreme Court, a judge who does not agree with the majority of judges is called a "dissenter"

⁴ Differentiate—to separate into different categories

⁵ A condition of legal inferiority—in other words, the law is making one race—African Americans—in a less equal legal position than another race—whites

The landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas

Adapted from History.com

On May 17, 1954 the United States Supreme Court handed down its ruling in the landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. The Court's unanimous decision overturned the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, which had allowed for "separate but equal" public facilities, including public schools in the United States. Declaring that "separate educational facilities are inherently⁶ unequal," the Brown v. Board decision helped break the back of state-sponsored segregation, and provided a spark to the American civil rights movement. This unanimous decision handed down by the Supreme Court on May 17, 1954, ended federal tolerance of racial segregation.

In Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) the Court had ruled that "separate but equal" accommodations on railroad cars conformed to the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection. That decision was used to justify segregating all public facilities, including schools. In addition, most school districts, ignoring Plessy's "equal" requirement, neglected their black schools.

In the mid-1930s, however, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) challenged school segregation in a series of court cases. In these the Court required ruled that equipment, books, and the quality and training of teachers needed to be equal in schools for African American and The rulings prompted several school districts to improve their black students' schools. Then the NAACP contested⁷ the

⁶ inherently—by their very nature

⁷ contested—argued against

constitutionality of segregation in four regions.

In the unanimous decision Chief Justice Earl Warren rejected the Plessy doctrine, declaring that "separate educational facilities" were "inherently unequal" because segregation deprived black students of equal protection under the law. A year later, the Court published guidelines requiring federal district courts to supervise school desegregation.

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