Plessy v. Ferguson

In 1890, Louisiana passed a law prohibiting people of different races from traveling and informal, that came to be known as Jim Crow (named after a minstrel song). A group of African American educators, lawyers, journalists, and civic leaders in New Orleans decided to test the law in court.

Homer Plessy, a shoemaker whose great-grandmother was black, challenged the law by sitting in a car arrested and convicted. Plessy's attorney argued that the state law violated the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection of the laws.

The Supreme Court ruled in Louisiana's favor in 1896. Segregation statutes were constitutional, the court said, as long as equal provisions were made for both races. The court's majority distinguished between legal or political equality and social equality. According to the majority opinion, the 14th Amendment only protected legal and political equality.

In the Plessy decision, the court gave its sanction to the "separate but equal doctrine" and gave states permission to legally separate blacks and whites at everything from drinking fountains to schools. Plessy v. Ferguson remained in effect until it was reversed in 1954 by the court's landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision to integrate public schools.

The implications of the Plessy decision for education became apparent three years later. In 1897, the Richmond County, Ga. school board closed the only African American high school in Georgia, even though state law required that school boards "provide of the same facilities for each" race. The school board provided two high schools for white children. It provided sufficient funds to educate fewer school-aged African American children.

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