

## Landmark U.S. Supreme Court Case Study *Plessy v. Ferguson* 1896

### Essential Question of the Case:

Is Louisiana's law requiring racial segregation on its trains an unconstitutional violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment?

### Background

In 1890, Louisiana passed a law called the Separate Car Act. This law said that railroad companies must provide separate but equal train cars for whites and blacks. Blacks had to sit with blacks and whites had to sit with whites. This act of separating people based on race is called segregation. Anyone who broke this law would have to pay a \$25 fine or go to jail for 20 days.

Two groups of people wanted to challenge the constitutionality of the Separate Car Act. A group of black citizens who raised money to reverse the law worked together with the East Louisiana Railroad Company, which sought to end the Act mainly because of business and money reasons. They chose a 30-year-old shoemaker named Homer Plessy, a U.S. citizen who was one-eighth black and a Louisiana resident. On June 7, 1892, Plessy purchased a first-class ticket from New Orleans to Covington, Louisiana and sat in the railroad car for "White" passengers. The railroad officials knew Plessy was coming and arrested him for violating the Separate Car Act.

Plessy argued in court that the Separate Car Act violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. The Thirteenth Amendment banned slavery and the Fourteenth Amendment requires that the government treat people equally. John Howard Ferguson, the judge hearing the case, had stated in a previous court decision that the Separate Car Act was unconstitutional if applied to trains running outside of Louisiana. In this case, however, he declared that the law was constitutional for trains running within the state and found Plessy guilty. Plessy appealed the case to the Louisiana State Supreme Court, which agreed that the Louisiana law was constitutional. Plessy then took his case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, to the U.S. Supreme Court.

### Constitutional Principles Related to the Case

#### 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1865)

**SECTION. 1.** Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

**SECTION. 2.** Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1868)

**SECTION. 1.** All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

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### Decision & Impact

In a 7-1 decision, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Ferguson. The majority rejected Plessy's Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment arguments and instead agreed with the idea of "separate but equal."

The majority, in an opinion written by Associate Justice Henry Billings Brown, supported state based racial segregation. The justices based their decision on the idea of "separate but equal;" that separate facilities for blacks and whites did not conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment as long as they were equal. (The phrase, "separate but equal" was not part of the opinion.)

Justice Brown agreed that the 14th amendment intended to establish absolute equality for the races before the law. He identified the purpose of the Fourteenth Amendment as "enforce[ing] the absolute equality of the two races before the law," but then argued that "it could not have been intended to abolish [end] distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social...equality." According to the Court, the Fourteenth Amendment was only concerned with legal equality, the idea that everyone is equal in the eyes of the law.

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision greatly impacted society. The idea of "separate but equal" led to racial segregation and states began creating "separate but equal" spaces in public places. Separate but equal is based on the idea that the facilities are kept in equal condition. However, this was not generally the case. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision impacted public institutions immediately. For example, education funding was often much less for African American schools, than for white schools. This decision led to places in society that were separate, but not equal.

Adapted from:

[https://www.landmarkcases.org/assets/site\\_18/files/plessy\\_v\\_ferguson/student/loc\\_plessy\\_v-ferguson\\_full\\_c\\_student.pdf](https://www.landmarkcases.org/assets/site_18/files/plessy_v_ferguson/student/loc_plessy_v-ferguson_full_c_student.pdf) and <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/163us537>

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**1. What is the essential question of this case?**

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**2. Using the evidence you found during your reading, summarize the background of this case in three complete sentences.**

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**3. What are the constitutional principles related to the case? List the principles and summarize the meaning below.**


**4. How did the Court answer the essential question? What was the reason for their decision?**

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**5. What was the impact of this case on society?**

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**6. Why is this case considered a landmark?**

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