

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

Plessy v. Ferguson is one of the most controversial cases in the history of the Supreme Court. Who was Plessy? Why did this case become so important?

The state of Louisiana passed the Separate Car Act in 1890. This law stated that separate accommodations were required on trains for white passengers and African American passengers.

There were many in Louisiana who thought this law was unfair, including railroad companies that had no desire to purchase additional cars to meet the specifications. Therefore, a group of concerned citizens persuaded Homer Plessy to violate the law so he could be arrested. Their intention was to use Plessy's case to challenge the legality of the Separate Car Act.

Words to watch for:

persuaded intention

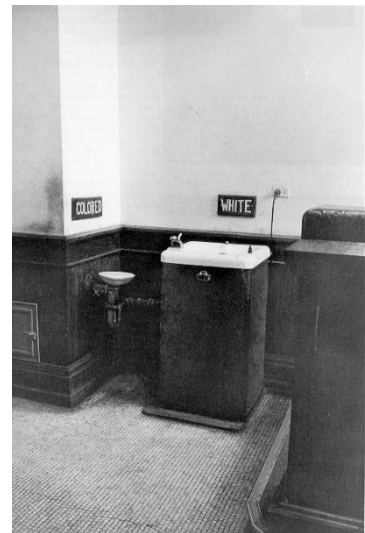
promptly presiding

In June of 1892, Plessy (who was only one-eighth African American but still considered Black by Louisiana law) boarded a train in New Orleans. He sat in the "whites only" car and was promptly asked to leave by a detective (who had been hired for the specific purpose of arresting Mr. Plessy). When Plessy refused to leave, he was arrested on the charge of violating the Separate Car Act.

When the case (then known as *Homer Adolph Plessy v. State of Louisiana*) went to court, Plessy claimed that the law violated his Fourteenth Amendment rights to equal protection under the law. However, the presiding judge, John Ferguson, ruled against Plessy and ordered him to pay a \$25 fine.

The case was appealed to the Louisiana Supreme Court and then again to the U.S. Supreme Court. In April of 1896, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the case and eventually reached a 7-1 decision. Their decision stated that the Louisiana law in no way violated the Fourteenth Amendment. Finally defeated, Plessy pleaded guilty and paid his \$25 fine in January of 1897.

Plessy v. Ferguson was a significant moment in the history of the Supreme Court, as well as the history of the nation. It helped solidify the legal basis for the "separate but equal" doctrine that became the law of the land throughout the first half of the 20th century. Segregated facilities for whites and African Americans would become the norm in most large communities. While these segregated facilities were certainly separate, they were rarely equal.



The decision established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* would help shape and define America for decades to come. The "separate but equal" doctrine would not be overturned until 1954 when the Supreme Court heard the case *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

Vocabulary Check: *Select the option that best identifies the use of the underlined word.*

1. _____ “This law stated that separate accommodations were required for white passengers and African American passengers.” In the previous sentence, the word accommodations seems to mean...
 - a. a financial favor, such as a loan.
 - b. a seat, compartment, or room on a public vehicle.
 - c. reconciliation or settlement of opposing views.
 - d. a monetary payment to someone you are indebted to.
2. _____ In the third paragraph, the word persuaded is used to imply...
 - a. having thought about something carefully.
 - b. having given guidance to.
 - c. having engaged in an argument or debate.
 - d. convinced to undertake a course of action.
3. _____ “Their intention was to use Plessy’s case to challenge the legality of the Separate Car Act.” In the previous sentence, the word intention means...
 - a. to be used to convey; denote.
 - b. a course of action that one intends to follow.
 - c. to state the importance or value of.
 - d. a covert or implied meaning.
4. _____ In the fourth paragraph, the word promptly means...
 - a. an act carried out or performed without delay.
 - b. the act of giving a cue.
 - c. to give rise to; inspire.
 - d. to assist with a reminder.
5. _____ “However, the presiding judge, John Ferguson, ruled against Plessy, and he was ordered to pay a fine of \$25.” In the previous sentence, the word presiding means...
 - a. a person featured as an instrumental performer.
 - b. the person possessing or exercising authority or control.
 - c. to put into a stable or unalterable form.
 - d. something adjusted to a particular specification or requirement.

Student Response: *Please respond to the questions raised below. A thorough response should be a paragraph of at least three to five complete sentences.*

6. Why do you suppose the Supreme Court’s stance on the “separate but equal” doctrine changed in the time between 1896 and 1954? In your opinion, is it more likely that the culture changed the Court or that the Court changed the culture? Explain your response.

Jim Crow Laws

From the 1880s through the 1960s, many American states enforced what came to be known as “Jim Crow” laws. What were Jim Crow laws? Why were they known by this name?

In the years following the Civil War, white Southerners went to extensive lengths in their efforts to restrict the rights and freedoms of African Americans. Ten of the eleven former Confederate states passed new constitutions or amended their existing constitutions in an effort to disenfranchise Black voters. For example, in Louisiana, by 1910, there were only 730 African Americans registered to vote. This was significant, considering that African Americans represented a majority of the population in some Southern states.



Various methods were used to prevent Black Americans from voting. In some instances, poll taxes (a fee that had to be paid in order to vote) were used. Since many African Americans were poor, they could not afford to pay the tax; therefore, they were not allowed to vote. Other locations used literacy tests to prevent African Americans from voting. These were tests to verify whether someone could read or not. Most Black Americans of this era were undereducated and unable to read the required text.

In many cases, the test administrator manipulated these literacy tests, making them virtually impossible to pass. For example, the test-taker might be asked to read an extremely complex passage from the Constitution or to read it in a very short amount of time. They might also be asked to explain what they had just read.

Words to watch for:

disenfranchise poll taxes

Jim Crow integrate

These measures prevented many poor and uneducated whites from voting as well. However, many of these laws included what was known as a grandfather clause. Such a clause might state that “if your grandfather voted in the 1840 election, then you are exempt from this law.” Since only whites were allowed to vote in that election, it was said that these poor, uneducated whites had been “grandfathered in.”

With no Black voters or officeholders, African American interests went overlooked by state legislatures. In fact, white-controlled state legislatures were able to pass laws that systematically segregated American life and treated African Americans as second-class citizens. Every aspect of day-to-day life was becoming segregated, from restaurants and hotels to railway cars and schools.

In 1896, these segregation laws were legally challenged in the Supreme Court in a case known as *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Homer Plessy was challenging a Louisiana state law that required African American passengers to ride in separate train cars. Plessy was arrested for

violating this law on June 7, 1892, after he boarded the “whites only” train car. The Supreme Court determined that racial segregation was legal as long as the separate facilities were equal to each other. Thus, with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, “separate but equal” became the law of the land.

All facilities quickly became segregated and remained that way throughout the first half of the 20th century. For example, there were schools for whites and schools for African Americans. There were “white libraries” and “Black libraries.” However, the African American facilities were usually underfunded and lacked the resources to be effective.

There were few limits to what places could be segregated. African Americans were not allowed in white eating establishments. Public facilities were required to include both white restrooms and Black restrooms. Separate parks were also constructed so that white children and African American children did not play together.

Some states went to even more extreme measures. For example, an Alabama law forbade white and Black men from playing billiards together. A Georgia statute outlawed African American barbers from cutting a white woman’s hair. There was also a Georgia law that prohibited African American baseball teams from playing on a field if they were within two blocks of a playground devoted to white children.

These segregation laws became collectively known by the name “Jim Crow” laws. The name was taken from a popular song-and-dance routine performed by Thomas D. Rice in the 1830s. Rice was a white performer who would dress as a Black man and sing a song titled “Jump Jim Crow.” Throughout the 1800s, the term “Jim Crow” came to be used to describe African Americans.

Jim Crow laws were challenged periodically throughout the 1900s, but the most significant blow came in 1954. That year, the Supreme Court heard a case known as *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. A Black family was challenging the notion of segregated schools because their daughter was required to attend a school that was a mile away from her home (there was a white school only seven blocks away). The Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional. As a result, all school districts across the country were required to integrate (something that did not happen for many years in some areas).



Thomas D. Rice dressed
as “Jim Crow”

African Americans and other civil rights supporters continued to work throughout the late 1950s to bring an end to the Jim Crow era. However, segregation continued to be a reality in many facets of life well into the 1960s. Finally, on July 2, 1964, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in public places, including restaurants, hotels, stores, and other workplaces.

Summarize: *Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!*

1. Who performed the “Jump Jim Crow” song-and-dance routine?
2. Which law finally outlawed discrimination in public places?
3. When did Homer Plessy violate a Louisiana state law regarding segregation on trains?
4. Where were only 730 African Americans registered to vote in 1910?
5. Why was the grandfather clause being used?
6. How might a test administrator manipulate a literacy test?

Student Response: *Write a paragraph addressing the question raised below. A thorough response should consist of three to five complete sentences.*

7. Why do you suppose state legislators in Southern states were so interested in preventing African Americans from voting? Explain your answer as thoroughly as possible.

The NAACP

For more than a hundred years, the NAACP has been fighting for the rights and freedoms of African Americans. How did the NAACP come into being? What years was it most influential?

Following a race-related riot in 1908, it became apparent to many people that a nationwide civil rights organization was needed. In the spring of 1909, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Archibald Grimke, Mary White Ovington, and six others established an organization that would officially become known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The members of this founding group were diverse, consisting of both African Americans and whites. Some were socially minded individuals, one was a journalist, and one actually came from a former slave-owning family.

The NAACP's mission was "to promote equality and rights and to eradicate caste or race prejudice among the citizens of the United States..." They also strived to secure the right to vote, justice in the courts, and education and employment opportunities for African Americans.



Moorfield Storey, a white lawyer from Boston, served as the organization's first president. The organization grew quickly. By 1914, there were more than 6,000 members across the nation. Some early successes included a boycott of the film *The Birth of a Nation*, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan, and gaining the right for African Americans to serve as officers in the military during World War I.

The NAACP also fought to overturn Jim Crow laws that legalized "separate but equal" facilities. The group filed lawsuits with the purpose of challenging these segregation laws. Several of these court cases were heard by the Supreme Court. The culmination of this effort was *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, KS*. In this decision, the Supreme Court determined that "separate but equal" schools were unconstitutional.

Words to watch for:

diverse eradicate

caste prejudice

In the 1950s and '60s, the NAACP was heavily involved in the civil rights movement. In 1955, they helped organize the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, which successfully resulted in the integration of the Montgomery bus system. The association played a major role in many other boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and other demonstrations throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the mid-1960s, the NAACP began heavily promoting the passage of federal civil rights legislation. These goals were achieved with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The NAACP lost much of its influence toward the end of the 1960s. However, it continues to exist today. The organization still promotes the rights of African Americans and fights for equality and justice under the law.

Summarize: *Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!*

1. Who was the NAACP's first president?
2. What was the result of the bus boycott in 1955?
3. When was the NAACP founded?
4. Where was the bus boycott in 1955?
5. Why did the NAACP oppose *The Birth of a Nation*?
6. How did the NAACP influence the military during World War I?

Provide a short description of the role that each of the following played in the history of the NAACP:

7. W. E. B. Du Bois:

8. Moorfield Storey:

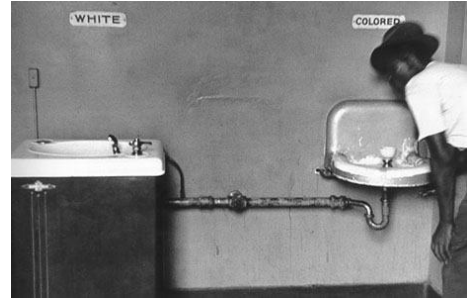
9. Montgomery, AL:

10. Civil Rights Act of 1964:

De Jure vs. De Facto Segregation

Segregation has long been an issue in the United States of America, as well as in other countries. Segregation can generally be broken into two types. What are those two types? How does one differentiate between the two?

The two forms of segregation are de jure segregation and de facto segregation. De jure is a Latin phrase that means “according to law.” This means that de jure segregation is legally established and enforced by law. De facto is a Latin phrase that means “in fact” or “in reality.” Therefore, de facto segregation is not enforced by law; it merely exists based on where people choose (or are financially able) to live, work, and attend school.



De jure segregation became law in the United States in the 1890s. More and more states began passing segregation laws with the intention of keeping African Americans separated from whites, thus forcing them into the role of “second-class citizens.” These segregation laws were challenged by the Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. However, the Supreme Court ruled that these laws were constitutional as long as the segregated facilities were “separate but equal.” Therefore, de jure segregation became the law of the land. These “separate but equal” laws became collectively known as the Jim Crow laws and remained in place throughout the first half of the 20th century.

In 1954, another Supreme Court case, *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, was the first step in removing de jure segregation from the United States. The Supreme Court determined that separate but equal schools were unconstitutional. Other aspects of life continued to be segregated by law throughout the 1950s, ‘60s, and even into the 1970s in some places. However, through the diligent efforts of civil rights activists, de jure segregation is no longer legal in the United States.

De facto segregation was not enforced by law but could be just as effective at segregating different groups of people. In the first half of the 20th century, African Americans left the South in droves and moved to larger cities in the North. At the time, many white residents had no desire to live near African Americans, so they moved out of the cities and into the suburbs. This had the effect of leaving large inner-city urban areas with almost exclusively Black populations and suburbs on the outskirts of cities with almost exclusively white populations. This evacuation of the inner cities for the suburbs has become known as “white flight.”

Words to watch for:

de jure de facto

diligent urban

Other measures were unofficially practiced to ensure that communities remained segregated. In some cases, banks would refuse loans to Black customers if they intended to purchase a home in a white area. Some neighborhoods overinflated the prices of their homes to discourage prospective Black buyers. Some homeowners even made secret agreements with their neighbors that they would not sell their homes to African Americans.

Many of these practices are still in use today in places around the country. As a result, de facto segregation remains a part of American society. However, most would agree that the United States has come a long way since the days of the Jim Crow era.

Summarize: *Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!*

1. Whose diligent efforts helped to bring an end to de jure segregation?

2. What was the white evacuation of inner cities known as?

3. When was *Plessy v. Ferguson* decided?

4. Where were African Americans leaving (in favor of large cities in the North)?

5. Why were white residents moving away from the inner cities?

6. How did banks attempt to keep neighborhoods segregated?

Student Response: *Write a paragraph addressing the questions raised below. A thorough response should consist of three to five complete sentences.*

7. There are still many de facto “white neighborhoods” and “African American neighborhoods” in America. What factors do you think led to de facto segregation still being so prevalent in our society? Explain your answer as thoroughly as possible.

Name _____

Period _____

The Great Migration: Primary Source Documents



At the beginning of the 20th century, over six million African Americans moved from the rural South to Northern cities. The following letters were sent to a newspaper called *The Chicago Defender*. It was an African-American newspaper that was read across the country, and it encouraged its readers to move to Chicago.

Journalist and activist Emmett J. Scott collected some of the letters that black southerners wrote to the *Chicago Defender*. He removed the personal information and then published them in an academic journal in 1918.

These letters describe the reasons why people wanted to leave the South in the early 20th century. Historians describe reasons for migrating with “push” factors and “pull” factors. A push factor is a reason that they want to leave their home, and a pull factor is a reason why they want to move to their destination. As you read through the letters and consider if this person was more “pulled” to the North with the lure of good jobs, or “pushed” out of the South because of violence against African Americans.

Typos from the original documents are included--typos can be an important clue when determining the dialects of the authors because people usually misspell words by writing them out phonetically.

1. Troy, Alabama (October 17, 1916)

Dear Sirs: I am enclosing a clipping of a lynching again which speaks for itself. I do wish there could be sufficient pressure brought about to have federal investigation of such work. I wrote you a few days ago if you could furnish me with the addresses of some firms or co-operations that needed common labor. So many of our people here are almost starving...quite a number here would go any where to better their conditions. If you can do any thing for us write me as early as possible.

2. Anniston, Alabama (April 23, 1917)

Dear Sir: I say your add in the Chicago Defender for laborers. I am a young man and want to finish school. I want you to look out for me a job on the place working morning and evening. I would like to get a job in some private family so I could continue taking my piano lessons I can do anything around the house but drive and can even learn that. Send me the name of the best High School in Chicago. How is Wendell Phillips College. I have finish the grammar school.

3. Palestine, Texas (March 11, 1917)

Sirs: this is somewhat a letter of information I am colored Boy aged 15 years old and I am talented for an artist and I am in search of some one will Cultivate my talent I have studied cartooning therefore I am a Cartoonist and I intend to go visit Chicago this summer and I want to go keep in touch with your association and too from you knowledge can a Colored boy be an artist and make a white man's salary up there I will tell you more and also send a few samples of my work when I rec an answer from you.

4. Chicago, Illinois (Undated)

My dear Sister: I was agreeably surprised to go hear from you and to go hear from home. I am well and thankful to go say I am doing well...Please remember me kindly to any who ask of me. The people are rushing here by the thousands and I know if you come and rent a big house you can get all the roomers you want. You write me exactly when you are coming. I am not keeping house yet I am living with my brother and his wife. My sone is in California but will be home soon. He spends his winter in California. I can get a nice place for you to go stop until you can look around and see what you want. I am quite busy. I work in Swifts packing Co, in the sausage department. My daughter and I work for the same company—We get \$1.50 a day and we pack so many sausages we don't have much time to go play but it is a matter of a dollar with me and I feel that God made the path and I am walking therein. Tell your husband work is plentiful here and he wont have to go loaf if he want to go work.

5. Lexington, Mississippi (Undated)

My dear Mr. H --- :

I am writing to you for some information and assistance if you can give it. I am a young man and am disable, in a very great degree, to do hard manual labor. I was educated at Alcorn College and have been teaching a few years: but ah: me the Superintendent under whom we poor colored teachers have to teach cares less for a colored man than he does for the vilest beast. I am compelled to teach 150 children without any assistance and receives only \$27.00 a month, the white with 30 get \$100.

I am so sick I am so tired of such conditions that I sometime think that life for me is not worth while and most eminently believe with Patrick Henry " Give me liberty or give me death. " If I was a strong able bodied man I would have gone from here long ago, but this handicaps me and, I must make inquiries before I leap.

Mr. H ---, do you think you can assist me to a position I am good at stenography typewriting and bookkeeping or any kind of work not to rough or heavy. I am 4 feet 6 in high and weigh 105 pounds. I will gladly give any other information you may desire and will greatly appreciate any assistance you may render me.

6. Greenwood, Mississippi (April 22, 1917)

Sir: I noticed in the Defender about receiving some information from you about positions up there or rather work and I am very anxious to know what the chances are for business men. I am very anxious to leave the South on account of my children but my husband doesn't seem to think that he can succeed there in business, he is a merchant and also knows the barber trade what are the chances for either? Some of our folks down here have the idea that this Northern movement means nothing to any body but those who go out and labor by the day. I am willing to work myself to get a start. Tell me what we could really do. I will do most anything to get our family out of Barn. Please let this be confidential.

The Great Migration: Push or Pull?

Were African Americans mainly pushed out of the South or pulled to the North during the Great Migration?

Record your research on this graphic organizer, then write a paragraph that supports your position.

Document Number	Were they pushed or pulled?	Provide evidence (quote) for your answer:
1		
2		
3		

4		
5		
6		

- ☐ Were African Americans mainly pushed out of the South or pulled to the North during the Great Migration?
- ☐ Write a 7-8 sentence paragraph on a SEPARATE SHEET OF NOTEBOOK PAPER to respond to this question.
- ☐ You must include AT LEAST 3 QUOTES to support your response. These quotes count as 3 sentences total towards your paragraph.