

Honors Junior Humanities
African Americans During the Gilded Age- Plessy v. Ferguson

Homer Plessy & Plessy v. Ferguson



Homer Adolph Plessy (March 17, 1862 – March 1, 1925) was a French-speaking Creole from Louisiana, best known for being the plaintiff in the United States Supreme Court decision **Plessy v. Ferguson**.

Arrested, tried and convicted in New Orleans of a violation of one of Louisiana's racial segregation laws, he appealed through Louisiana state courts to the U.S. Supreme Court and lost.

The son of French-speaking creoles (Haitian refugees who fled the revolution), Homer Plessy was born on St. Patrick's Day in 1862, at a time when federal troops under General Benjamin Franklin Butler were occupying Louisiana as a result of the American Civil War and had liberated African Americans in New Orleans who had been in bondage but Plessy was a free person of color and his family came to America free from Haiti and France. Blacks could then marry whomever they chose, sit in any streetcar seat and, briefly, attend integrated schools.

As an adult, Plessy experienced the reversal of the gains achieved under the federal occupation, following the withdrawal of federal troops in 1877 on the orders of U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes. (*end of reconstruction*)

Due to Plessy's phenotype being white, Plessy could have ridden in a railroad car restricted to people classified as white. However, under the racial policies of the time, he was an "octoroon" (*offensive term today*), having 1/8th African-American heritage and therefore was considered black. Hoping to strike down segregation laws, the Citizens' Committee of New Orleans (Comité des Citoyens) recruited Plessy to deliberately violate Louisiana's 1890 separate-car law. To pose a clear test, the Citizens' Committee gave notice of Plessy's intent to the railroad, which opposed the law because it required adding more cars to its trains.

On June 7, 1892, Plessy bought a first-class ticket on a train from New Orleans and sat in the car for white riders only. The Committee had hired a private detective with arrest powers to take Plessy off the train at Press and Royal streets, to ensure that he was charged with violating the state's separate-car law and not some other misdemeanor.

Everything that the committee had organized occurred as planned, except for the decision of the Supreme Court in 1896. The resulting "**separate but equal**" decision against him had wide consequences for civil rights in the United States. The decision legalized state-mandated segregation anywhere in the United States so long as the facilities provided for both blacks and whites were putatively "equal."