

Chapter 44

Segregation in the Post–World War II Period

How did segregation affect American life in the postwar period?

44.1 Introduction

For as long as she could remember, Melba Pattillo had wanted to ride the merry-go-round at Fair Park in her hometown of Little Rock, Arkansas. But whenever she asked her mother or grandmother to take her, they said it was not possible. So one day, when Melba was five, she decided to ride on her own.

Melba and her family were at Fair Park on a picnic. It was the Fourth of July. While the grownups were setting up tables of food, Melba made her escape. She later recalled, “I had had my eye on one horse in particular, Prancer, the one I had dreamed about during all those months I saved up the five pennies I needed to ride him.”

Melba tried to give her money to the man working the ride. “There is no space for you here,” he told her coldly. When she pointed out that Prancer’s saddle was empty, the man got angry. He banged so hard on the counter that the pennies fell off. “You don’t belong here!” he yelled.

Melba’s knees shook. She noticed other angry faces glaring at her as though she had done something wrong. She ran back to her family. “I was so terrified,” she said, “that I didn’t even take the time to pick up my precious pennies. At five I learned that there was to be no space for me on that merry-go-round no matter how many saddles stood empty.”

Melba Pattillo was a black child in the segregated South. In the 1940s, when this event took place, African Americans throughout the South suffered under a harsh system of racial discrimination. Jim Crow segregation laws not only kept blacks out of amusement parks like Fair Park. They also separated blacks from whites in most public facilities, including schools, libraries, and hospitals.

In this chapter, you will learn what life was like for African Americans in the postwar years in the South and the rest of the country. You will also learn how things finally began to change for the better.



Throughout the segregated South, African Americans were required to use separate waiting rooms, water fountains, and bathrooms. These facilities were labeled with signs reading “white” or “colored.” Above is the “colored” entrance to a movie theater in Florida. Facilities for blacks and whites were supposed to be equal, but often were not.

44.2 A Nation Divided: Segregation in American Life

Racial segregation forced blacks to behave in certain ways. They were expected to accept their lesser status in society and act accordingly. W. E. B. Du Bois called this pattern of behavior “living behind the veil.” In private or among other blacks, they acted normally. But around whites, they put on a “mask,” hiding their true feelings and acting meek and inferior.

In practice, this meant that most blacks avoided looking white people in the eyes. When they spoke to whites, they looked at the ground. A black male could not look at a white woman or touch her accidentally. If charged with inappropriate attention to white females, a black male might face a lynch mob in many states throughout the nation. Blacks had to accept white insults and degrading names such as “boy,” “girl,” “auntie,” or “uncle,” regardless of their age. This code of rules and behavior was the product of a long history of racial discrimination in the United States. It was most evident in the South, but it extended throughout American society.

Many southern whites strongly supported segregation. When a church in a white neighborhood of Fort Worth, Texas, was sold to a black congregation in 1956, white residents protested. They demanded that their community remain closed to African Americans.



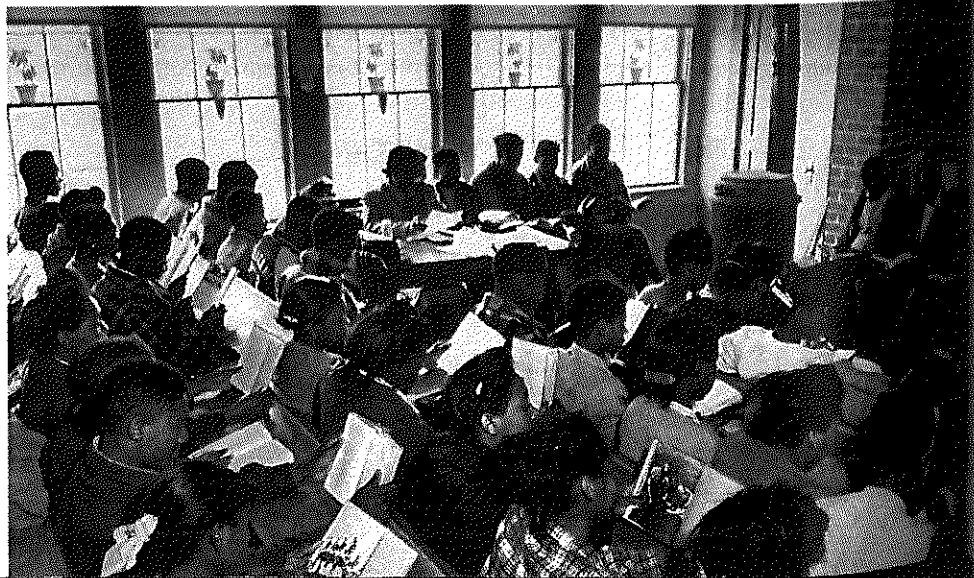
Segregation in Public Accommodations Segregation was common in public places, especially in the South. The segregation of public accommodations got a boost in 1896, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that railroad cars could be segregated as long as the accommodations were “separate but equal.” This ruling gave rise to many state laws legalizing segregation in public accommodations, including theaters, restaurants, libraries, parks, and transport services.

Jim Crow laws established separate facilities for whites and blacks across the South. In waiting rooms and rest rooms, train cars and buses, theaters and restaurants, and even on park benches, blacks and whites were kept apart. One state even passed a law requiring separate telephone booths.

Often there was simply no accommodation for blacks at all. Some restaurants refused to serve African Americans. And in some places there was a bathroom for whites but none for blacks. In other cases, the facility for blacks was notably inferior. That was often the case with schools.

Segregation in Schools Jim Crow laws for schools began to appear shortly after the Civil War. By 1888, school segregation had been established in almost every southern state, along with some northern and western states.

In the South, black schools were often much worse than white schools. In the 1940s, state governments in the South spent twice as much to educate white children and four times as much on white school facilities. Many black students had to make do with poor, unheated classrooms and few books or supplies.



Although the *Plessy* decision stated that separate accommodations for the races must be equal, the reality was often quite different. Southern states spent far more on white schools than on black schools. Teachers in black schools got lower salaries and worked under more difficult conditions. They often lacked books and supplies, and their school facilities were frequently substandard. In some schools, students had to gather firewood to heat their classrooms in the winter. Although white schools had bus systems, black students often had to walk miles to get to school.

Segregation in Housing African Americans also experienced housing segregation. This came in two main forms. One was **de facto segregation**, which was established by practice and custom, rather than law. This form was found in all parts of the country. The other was **de jure segregation**, or segregation by law. De jure segregation occurred mostly in the South.

De facto segregation was common in many northern cities. When large numbers of African Americans began moving north in the 1900s, many white residents used informal measures to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods. One practice was the **restrictive covenant**. This was an agreement among neighbors not to sell or rent to African Americans or other racial minorities. Restrictive covenants often forced blacks into poor neighborhoods that were farther from jobs, public transport, or good schools.

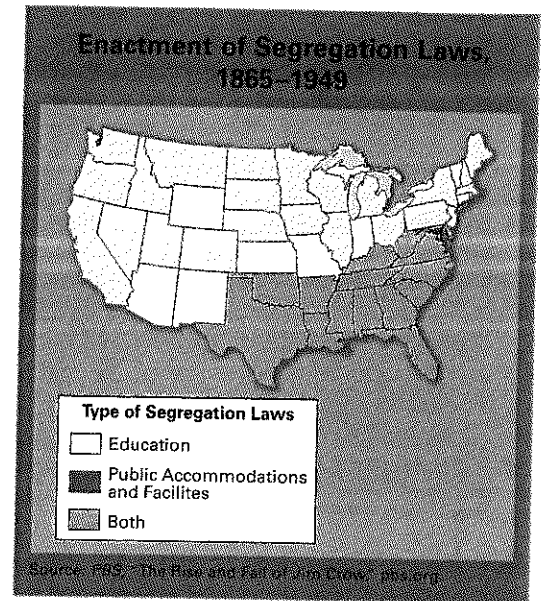
De jure segregation was accomplished through **racial zoning**. These local laws defined where the different races could live. In the 1930s and 1940s, the federal government supported racial zoning. In 1951, however, the Supreme Court declared racial zoning unconstitutional. Yet segregated neighborhoods remained the norm in many southern cities.

Segregation in Marriage Between 1870 and 1884, eleven southern states passed laws against **miscegenation**, or interracial marriage. In the words of one historian, these were the “ultimate segregation laws.” They stated that blacks were inferior to whites and that any amount of racial mixing through marriage or childbirth threatened the “purity of the white race.”

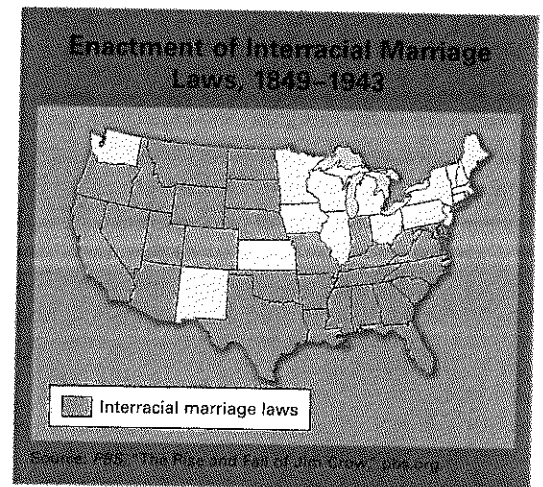
Some states outside the South also banned interracial marriage. Many laws against miscegenation prohibited marriage not only between African Americans and whites but also between whites and Asians or whites and American Indians.

Segregation in the Workplace Employment and working conditions reflected widespread segregation in American society. Few blacks held white-collar jobs, or jobs that do not involve manual labor. Those who did were usually teachers or ministers. Not many blacks were employed as skilled laborers, either. Most worked in agriculture or services. Their wages were much lower than those of whites. In 1940, for example, the median income level of black men was less than half that of white men.

Discrimination in employment was a direct result of racism, but it was also the product of poor schooling for African Americans. Illiteracy and a lack of education helped trap blacks in low-level jobs, especially in the South.



From the end of the Civil War through the 1940s, various states passed laws imposing segregation in public schools and accommodations. Although these laws were most common in the Jim Crow South, some northern and western states enforced segregation as well.



More than half of all states banned interracial marriage in the 1940s. In 1967, however, the Supreme Court ruling in the case *Loving v. Virginia* declared that laws against mixed marriage are unconstitutional. Alabama was the last state to repeal its interracial marriage law.

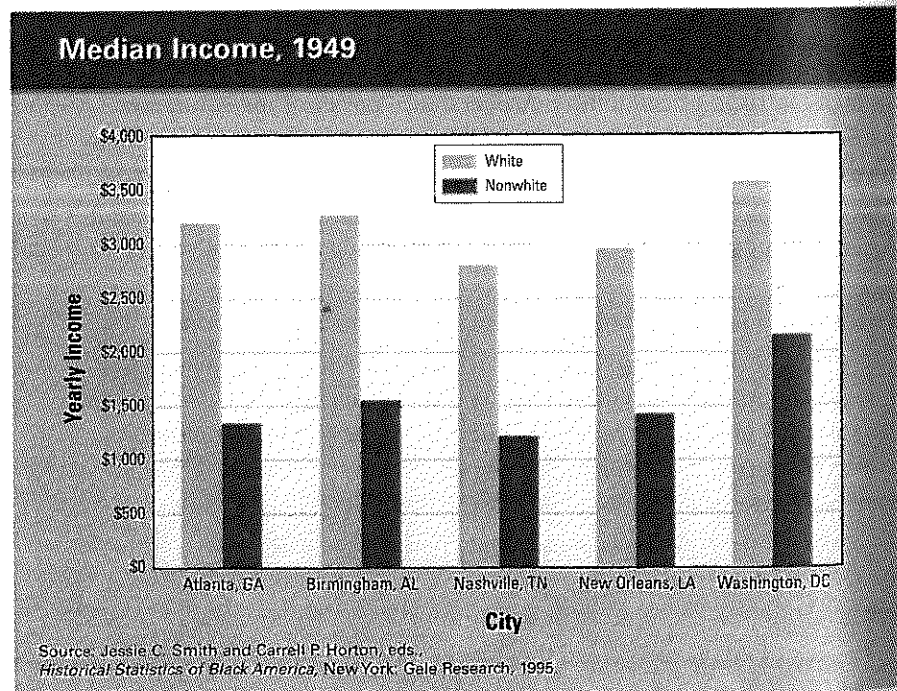
Segregation in Politics Southern whites also found ways to **disenfranchise**, or deny voting rights to, African Americans. In the years after Reconstruction, poll taxes and literacy tests kept many blacks from voting. Many southern states also disenfranchised blacks through use of the **white primary**. This was a primary election in which only whites could participate. It was based on the domination of southern politics by the Democratic Party, which southern whites perceived as the opponent of radical Reconstruction and civil rights. The Democrats excluded blacks from party membership and thus denied them the right to vote in party primaries. As a result, the Democrats had no need to court black voters, and blacks had no political representation.

Texas was one state in which the white primary was used extensively. Between 1923 and 1944, Texas Democrats used it to limit black participation in politics. In 1944, however, the Supreme Court declared white primaries unconstitutional. As a result, more African Americans began voting in Texas, and the number of registered black voters rose substantially.

Gerrymandering was another method used to discriminate against black voters and render their votes meaningless. Gerrymandering is the practice of redrawing the lines of a voting district to give one party or group of voters an advantage. If the majority of voters in a particular voting district are African Americans, they may be able to elect a candidate who represents their interests. But if the voting district lines are gerrymandered to break up that population and place African Americans in white-majority districts, the black vote gets diluted and becomes less effective. Through gerrymandering, black voters were often denied political influence.

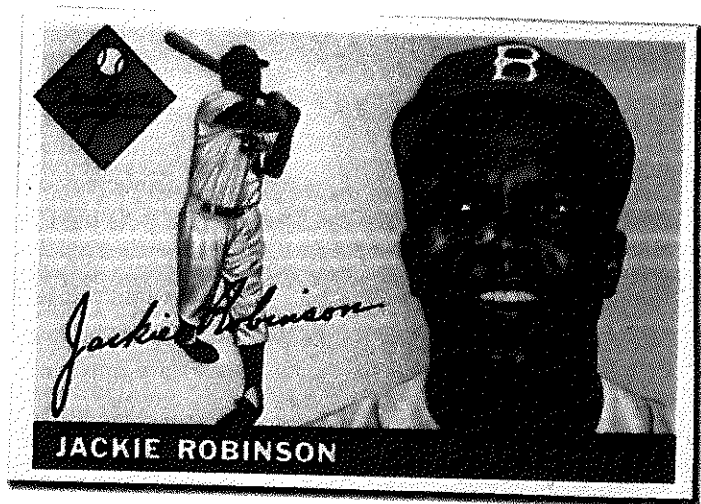
These methods were unlike the violent methods used in the early years after Reconstruction, when blacks were sometimes forcibly prevented from voting. But they were equally effective in denying blacks voting rights and limiting black representation in government.

Incomes varied considerably for blacks and whites in the 1940s. This graph shows the difference between white and nonwhite income in five major American cities. The median is the middle value in a set of numbers. Half of people have incomes below the median income, and half have incomes above it.



44.3 Small Steps Toward Equality

Jackie Robinson would become one of the greatest baseball players in the history of the game. In 1944, however, he was a lieutenant in the army, stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. Leaving the base one day, he got on a military bus and took a seat up front. The driver ordered him to move to the back, but Robinson refused. When he got off at his stop, he was arrested. Robinson was nearly court-martialed for his actions that day. Later, he would achieve fame on the baseball diamond and become a role model for millions of Americans. Over the course of his life, Robinson came to represent both the struggles of African Americans and their gradual advances in white-dominated society.



Breaking the Color Line in Sports Jackie Robinson began his baseball career in the Negro Leagues after World War II. At the time, baseball was divided by the **color line**, a barrier created by custom, law, and economic differences that separated whites from nonwhites.

In 1945, Robinson crossed the color line when Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey hired him. After briefly playing for a minor league team, Robinson took the field in a Dodgers uniform in 1947. Being the first black major league baseball player was not easy. Fans taunted him, and some of his own teammates resented playing with a black man. Players on opposing teams sometimes tried to “bean” him with the ball or spike him with their cleats. As he later recalled, “Plenty of times I wanted to haul off [and fight] when someone insulted me for the color of my skin, but I had to hold to myself. I knew I was kind of an experiment. The whole thing was bigger than me.” Robinson overcame these challenges and eventually led his team to six league championships and one World Series victory.

Around the same time, other professional sports began to open up to black athletes. Football became integrated in 1946, when four black players joined the professional leagues. Four years later, the National Basketball Association accepted its first African American players. By the 1950s, the color line in professional sports was gradually disappearing.

Desegregation of the Armed Forces Another area of American life in which the color line would soon fall was the armed forces. But again, change did not come easily. Despite the valuable contributions of African American soldiers during World War II, the military remained segregated after the war.

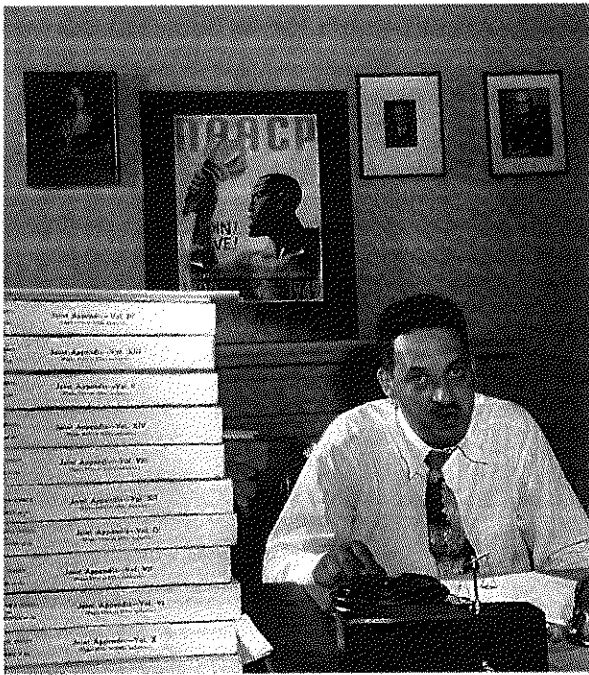
Many GIs returning from combat continued to face segregation at home, especially in the Jim Crow South. In 1946, army veteran Isaac Woodard was traveling by bus from North Carolina to Georgia. At one stop, the driver threatened Woodard for taking too much time in the “colored” bathroom. The two men argued, and Woodard was arrested. Police officers then beat him so badly that he was permanently blinded. When President Truman learned of the incident, he was appalled and vowed to do something about segregation in the military. “I shall never approve of it,” he wrote. “I am going to try to remedy it.”

When Jackie Robinson signed a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1945, he became the first African American to cross the color line in professional baseball. He credited his black fans with helping him get through his first difficult years in the major leagues. This baseball card shows Robinson in 1955.

Truman knew that desegregation in the armed forces was necessary, not only on moral grounds but also for political reasons. Like many Americans, he recognized that it was hypocritical to fight Nazism and anti-Semitism abroad while maintaining a color line at home. Likewise, he saw that continued segregation in the United States could undermine efforts to promote freedom and democracy overseas as part of the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union.

As the Cold War intensified in the late 1940s, political leaders began to discuss the need to rebuild the armed forces. Many African Americans said they would refuse to fight in a segregated army. Although many leaders in the armed forces opposed desegregation, Truman believed that discrimination in the military must end.

On July 26, 1948, Truman signed **Executive Order 9981**, which stated, "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin." With this order, desegregation became official policy in the armed forces.



Thurgood Marshall, head of the NAACP's legal defense branch, was denied admission to the University of Maryland because he was not white. He went on to earn a law degree from Howard University. In one of Marshall's first legal victories, he sued the University of Maryland for its race-based policy. Marshall later served on the Supreme Court.

Civil Rights Organizations Challenge Discrimination The fight to end segregation would never have succeeded without the determined efforts of civil rights activists. Many Americans worked tirelessly for various organizations dedicated to achieving equal rights.

One of these organizations was the **Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)**. Founded in Chicago in 1942 by a group of students, CORE was committed to nonviolent direct action as a means of change. Its first action—a peaceful protest at a segregated coffee shop in Chicago in 1943—gained national attention and helped CORE spread to other northern cities. It went on to assist in the desegregation of many public facilities in the North and then turned its attention to the South in the late 1950s.

Another key group, the National Urban League, formed in response to the Great Migration of blacks to northern cities in the early 1900s. The Urban League focused on helping African Americans achieve success in the North. It counseled newly arrived migrants and trained black social workers. It also promoted educational and employment opportunities for African Americans. During World War II, the Urban League helped integrate defense plants.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the oldest major civil rights organization, also remained active in the struggle for equal rights. Founded in 1909, the NAACP continued its efforts to promote civil rights legislation. In 1939, the group established a legal arm for civil rights actions, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. The following year, Thurgood Marshall became the head of this group.

The Legal Defense and Educational Fund focused on defeating segregation through the court system. Its main weapon was the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. This clause prohibits states from denying any person equal protection of the laws. Since the clause does not allow states to discriminate, it is crucial to the protection of civil rights.

4.4 The Courts Begin to Dismantle Segregation

In 1951, getting to school every day was hard for Linda Brown, a seven-year-old in Topeka, Kansas. First she had to walk a mile, passing through a railroad yard on her way to the bus stop. Then she had to take a long bus ride to school. All of this made no sense to Linda because there was a good school only seven blocks from her house. But the schools in Topeka were segregated. The school near Linda was for whites only, and Linda was black. Her father, Oliver Brown, decided to do something about that. With the help of the court system, Brown and other civil rights activists began to dismantle segregation.

Early Court Decisions Make Big Strides In the 1930s and 1940s, the Supreme Court began to strike down Jim Crow laws. In 1935, the Court ordered the University of Maryland to admit a black student. Later it declared white primaries unconstitutional and barred segregation on interstate transport. These were important steps in breaking down segregation.

In 1948, the Supreme Court tackled the issue of segregated housing. In *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the Court ruled that states could not enforce restrictive covenants. As a result, many city neighborhoods became desegregated. Over the next few years, for example, thousands of black families in Chicago moved into areas that had previously been restricted to whites.

In 1950, the Court handed down strong rulings against discrimination in education. In two cases, the Court declared that segregation in graduate schools and law schools was unconstitutional. It began to look as if all “separate but equal” education was on the way out.

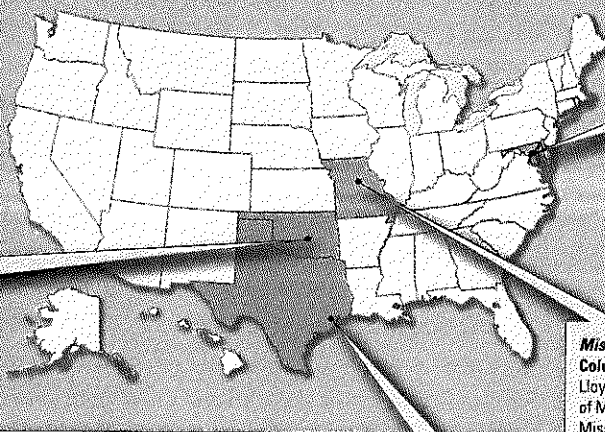
Beginning in the 1930s, the Supreme Court began to strike down laws mandating segregation in public facilities. Several of these Court rulings had to do with public schools. The map below shows four key education cases decided by the Supreme Court between 1938 and 1950.

Four Important Cases Involving Segregation in Education, 1938–1950

McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education

Norman, Oklahoma, 1950

G. W. McLaurin sued for admission to the University of Oklahoma, but was told he must sit in a designated row of chairs and study at a certain table in the library. The Court demanded that McLaurin receive “the same treatment . . . as students of other races” while attending a state-supported school.



Mills v. Board of Education of Anne Arundel County

Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 1939

Walter Mills, a black schoolteacher, sued the board of education over salaries, citing the minimum annual salary as \$1,250 for white teachers and \$765 for black teachers. The Court ordered that salary discrimination based on race be stopped, but refused to order the board not to pay black teachers less than white teachers.

Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada

Columbia, Missouri, 1938

Lloyd L. Gaines was denied admission to the University of Missouri's all-white law school. The Court held that Missouri had no in-state higher education for black citizens that compared to that for white citizens. The state responded by developing a black law school within the University of Missouri.

Sweatt v. Painter

Houston, Texas, 1950

The University of Texas Law School rejected Heman Sweatt because of his race. The Court held that the educational opportunities offered to white and black law students by Texas were unequal and required that Sweatt be admitted.

Source: *The History of Jim Crow*, www.jimcrowhistory.org



The Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* was big news across the nation. The headline on this issue of the *New York Times* was typical of news coverage around the country.

A Landmark Ruling: *Brown v. Board of Education* Meanwhile in Topeka, Oliver Brown, Linda's father, had contacted the NAACP, which in turn gathered 12 other parents to join in efforts to desegregate the city's schools. First the parents tried to enroll their children in white schools, but all were denied admission. So in 1951 the NAACP sued the Topeka school district in court. A local court found "no willful discrimination." The NAACP appealed the case, and it went all the way to the Supreme Court.

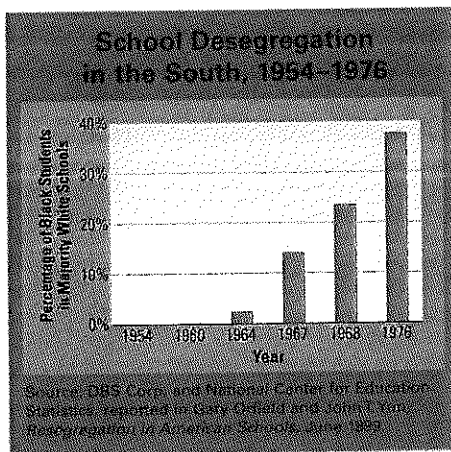
Brown v. Board of Education was actually a set of cases from Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, and Washington, D.C., that had moved up through the court system at the same time. The Court decided to combine the cases because the plaintiffs were all looking for the same legal remedy. The *Brown* case was a **class-action lawsuit**, a lawsuit filed by people on behalf of themselves and a larger group who might benefit.

The NAACP's lead attorney, Thurgood Marshall, argued the case. He supplied evidence showing how segregation harms African American children. The most famous piece of evidence was the "doll test." In the test, 16 black children had been shown a white doll and a brown doll. Ten of the children chose the white doll as the "nice" doll. The children were also asked to identify the doll that looked "bad." Eleven children selected the black doll. According to the psychologist who conducted the test, "the Negro child accepts as early as six, seven or eight the negative stereotypes about his own group."

The *Brown* case stayed in the Supreme Court for a year and a half. During this time, a new chief justice, Earl Warren, was appointed to the Court. Warren was a firm opponent of segregation. Believing that a unanimous decision in the *Brown* case would carry more weight than a divided one, he worked hard to convince all the judges to rule in favor of the plaintiffs. Finally, in May 1954, he succeeded. On May 17, he announced the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*:

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does . . . We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

—*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954



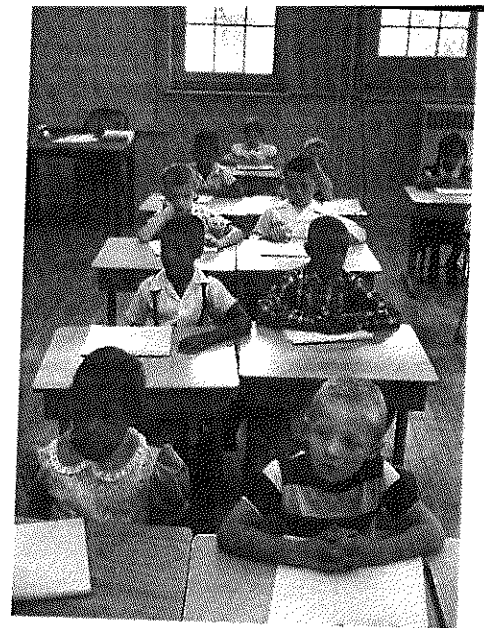
In the first 10 years after the *Brown* ruling, slow progress was made in school desegregation. After 1964, however, the pace of desegregation quickened.

The *Brown* decision dismantled the legal basis for segregation in schools and other public places. It was one of the most important judicial decisions in the nation's history. It was also one of many key rulings on civil rights made by the Court under Earl Warren, who served as chief justice from 1953 to 1969. In fact, the **Warren Court** became known for its activism on civil rights and free speech.

All Deliberate Speed? Much of the South Resists Change A year after the *Brown* decision, the Supreme Court issued a second ruling, known as *Brown II*. This ruling instructed the states to begin desegregation “with all deliberate speed.” The phrase was chosen carefully. The justices wanted desegregation to go forward as quickly as possible, but they also recognized that many obstacles stood in the way. They wanted to allow states some flexibility in desegregating their schools in accordance with *Brown*.

In some border states, desegregation took place without incident. But in parts of the South, there was greater resistance. For example, in 1955 a white citizens’ council in Mississippi published a handbook called *Black Monday*, referring to the day the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown* decision. The handbook called for an end to the NAACP and public schools. It also advocated a separate state for African Americans.

Despite such opposition, the *Brown* decision inspired hopes that African Americans could achieve equal rights in American society. It served as a catalyst for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, a time when many individuals and groups dedicated themselves to promoting equality, opportunity, and rights.



Some southern states had begun to integrate their schools by the mid-1950s. This photograph of an integrated classroom in Louisville, Kentucky, was taken in 1956.

Summary

Segregation remained widespread in the United States after World War II, especially in the South. But there were also signs of change. In the 1940s and 1950s, desegregation began in sports and the military. Civil rights organizations grew stronger. The landmark Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education* heralded the beginning of the modern civil rights movement.

Segregated society Segregation affected every aspect of life in the Jim Crow South. *De jure* segregation was defined by law, while *de facto* segregation was determined by custom. Blacks in the North and West also experienced *de facto* segregation, especially in housing.

Breaking the color line Professional sports began to be integrated in the late 1940s. Most notable was Jackie Robinson’s entry into major league baseball. The integration of professional football and basketball soon followed.

Executive Order 9981 President Truman was determined to integrate the armed forces. His executive order, issued in 1948, ended segregation in the military.

Civil rights groups Civil rights organizations gained strength in the postwar years. CORE was dedicated to civil rights reform through nonviolent action. The National Urban League tried to help African Americans who were living in northern cities. The NAACP began a legal branch and launched a campaign, led by Thurgood Marshall, to challenge the constitutionality of segregation.

Brown v. Board of Education The NAACP’s legal campaign triumphed in 1954, when the Warren Court issued the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. This ruling declared segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional and undermined the legal basis for segregation in other areas of American life.