Separate, Not Equal

Trace how one Supreme Court decision shaped public life.

USH.C.2.2.C "Summarize changing race relations as a result of the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, establishing a doctrine that became known as "separate but equal.""

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the Louisiana law and the Court's ruling, circle two changes in public life, and write 1 beside an unequal result and 2 beside a response to it.

The Reach of Plessy

1. In 1892, Homer Plessy boarded a train in Louisiana and sat in a car reserved for white passengers. He was arrested under a state law requiring separate railroad cars for Black and white riders. The law had appeared during a period when Southern lawmakers were expanding racial separation, even though Black Americans had gained citizenship and equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. Plessy challenged his arrest, arguing that forced separation violated that amendment. Before the Supreme Court ruled, the central question was whether a state could order people of different races to use separate public spaces and still claim to treat them equally.

2. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy. The majority said that separate public facilities did not violate the Constitution if they were equal, a rule later called "separate but equal." This decision gave state officials legal support for enforcing racial separation. Across the South, laws and local rules increasingly divided Black and white people in railcars, schools, waiting rooms, and other places. Separation was not simply a choice about where to sit. It made racial divisions part of daily public life, with government power behind them. White passengers could enter spaces that Black passengers were barred from using.

3. The promise of equality did not match everyday conditions. Black Americans often received older school buildings, fewer school supplies, and poorer public services than white Americans. Segregation also sent a message that Black people belonged in a lower position, even when both groups paid to use a service. Black communities challenged these conditions through lawsuits, organizing, and demands for fair treatment. Still, the Plessy ruling helped racial separation endure for decades. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that separate public schools were inherently unequal, rejecting "separate but equal" in education. Changing the law did not immediately end segregation.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Louisiana's railroad law change travel for Black and white passengers, and why did Plessy challenge it?

2. How did the 1896 ruling affect state officials who wanted to separate Black and white people?

3. Summarize two ways the ruling shaped relations between Black and white people in public life beyond railroad cars.

4. How did Black Americans' experiences differ from the Court's condition for separation, and how did Black communities respond?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a museum displays two Louisiana train tickets from 1905, one held by a Black passenger and one by a white passenger who paid the same fare. Write a four-sentence label explaining why their travel experiences could differ after Plessy and how that difference compares with the Court's promise of equality.

ANSWER KEY

Separate, Not Equal

HIGH SCHOOL · USH.C.2.2.C

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the Louisiana law and the Court's ruling, circle two changes in public life, and write 1 beside an unequal result and 2 beside a response to it. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Louisiana's railroad law change travel for Black and white passengers, and why did Plessy challenge it?	**The law required Black and white passengers to use separate cars. Plessy argued that forced separation violated the Fourteenth Amendment.**
2	How did the 1896 ruling affect state officials who wanted to separate Black and white people?	**It gave officials legal support to enforce racial separation if the separate facilities were supposedly equal.**
3	Summarize two ways the ruling shaped relations between Black and white people in public life beyond railroad cars.	**Laws and local rules separated people in places such as schools and waiting rooms. Government-backed rules also barred Black people from spaces white people could use.**
4	How did Black Americans' experiences differ from the Court's condition for separation, and how did Black communities respond?	**Separate facilities were often unequal, with Black Americans receiving fewer school supplies and poorer services. Black communities challenged these conditions through lawsuits, organizing, and demands for fair treatment.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

These two tickets show travelers who paid the same fare but could be sent to different train cars. After the Plessy ruling, state officials had legal support for separating Black and white passengers. The Court said separate facilities were allowed if they were equal, yet Black Americans often received poorer public services. The tickets show how a promise of equality could exist alongside unequal treatment.

Accept other passage-based examples of separated spaces or unequal services. Responses should distinguish the Court's condition of equality from the unequal conditions Black Americans experienced.