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Plessy v. Ferguson

During the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, the federal government made a concerted effort to improve the legal and social status of Black people. The 13th Amendment outlawed slavery, the 14th promised equal protection under the law, and the 15th granted Black men the right to vote. Federal troops occupied the South to enforce these laws. But it didn't last...

In 1877, Reconstruction reached an abrupt end.

Federal troops left the South, Southern Democrats began.

To reverse progress made on racial equality.

This was how difficult a Black person's life could be.

Jim Crow laws were enacted, which put racial segregation into action.

This meant separation for public accommodations

Like waiting rooms, schools, and transportation.

By 1890, a Louisiana law called

The Separate Car Act segregated railroad cars,

Requiring "equal but separate accommodations"

For Black and white passengers—it's baffling ain't it.

As Black people saw civil rights gains eroding,

Groups of organized resistance started forming,

Including one aimed at the Separate Car Act.

A group of Black New Orleans Businessmen,

They were called the Citizens' Committee, and they had a plan:

Send a Black man to sit in a "whites-only" train car and get arrested.

Then they would challenge the law,

Arguing it violated the equal protection clause

Of the 14th Amendment. After one failed attempt,

A group member was recruited as the new plaintiff.

Ready to go the distance and get messy.

What was his name? His name was Homer Plessy.

Homer Plessy v. Ferguson:

Constitutional rights were debated.

Separate but equal, it was made legal—it wasn't equal, nah, it wasn't equal.

Homer Plessy v. Ferguson:

Fighting for equal rights. When does it end?

Separate but equal, it was made legal—it wasn't equal, nah, it wasn't equal.

Plessy's involvement wasn't an accident.

He was mixed-race and had very light skin.

He described himself as one-eighth Black for sure.

He could pass as a white passenger.

The day was June 7th, 1892 when Homer Plessy made a historic move.

Plessy purchased a ticket, sat in the "whites-only" car.

The conductor asked his race, that's when he raised the bar:

I'm Black, and refuse to move to the black section of the train.

He was arrested, jailed and this made

The fight bigger than him; it means so much more.

Plessy took the fight to Louisiana State Court.

His lawyers argued that the Separate Car Act

Was unconstitutional, and they should really change that.

But Judge John. H Ferguson didn't agree

With Plessy's argument. He didn't see any problem with the Law.

Then the Supreme Court accepted an appeal to take the case on.

The court ruled that the Separate Car Act law

Didn't violate the constitution at all.

Their view was if the state maintained separate but equal facilities,

Then segregation could continue legally

And was not prohibited by the 14th amendment.

Plessy's plan had backfired in an instant.

The Supreme Court's 1896 "separate but equal" decision in Plessy v. Ferguson provided legal justification for racial segregation, laying the foundation for decades of Jim Crow laws and segregation in the South. Even though the law required equal accommodations, Black people were almost always left with worse conditions. The Plessy v. Ferguson decision wasn't overturned for nearly 60 years until the 1954 Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education. And even after that, the fight for integration was far from finished...