

**Understanding
American History**



The Civil Rights Movement



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Important Events in the Civil Rights Movement



1896

In *Plessy v. Ferguson* the US Supreme Court rules that providing separate but equal facilities for African Americans is constitutional.



1958

Four black college students begin a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. The sit-in triggers similar protests at other segregated facilities.



1954

In *Brown v. Board of Education* the US Supreme Court rules that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional.

1900

1945

1950

1955

1948

President Harry S. Truman signs an executive order declaring "equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin."



1955

Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger. Her arrest launches a boycott of buses in Montgomery, Alabama, that will last more than a year.

1957

Nine African American students are blocked by state police from attending Little Rock Central High School, forcing federal troops to step in to offer protection.

Introduction



The Defining Characteristics of the Civil Rights Movement

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. stepped up to a podium in front of the Lincoln Memorial and looked out at the huge crowd gathered across the national mall. As a minister who had emerged as the most famous civil rights leader of his day, King was used to speaking to audiences, but this was different. An estimated 250,000 Americans had converged on the nation's capital in what King himself predicted would “go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.”¹

The crowd gathered on the mall had already heard from some of the most prominent leaders of the civil rights movement. King's speech, the last of the day, is generally considered to be among the best and most powerful speeches in American history. King began by mentioning some of the obstacles that the civil rights movement had overcome, but he soon focused on his dream of the future America:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the

sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!²

Thousands gather in Washington, DC, in 1963 to hear the words of Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights leader who inspired millions over the years with his heartfelt oratory and his dedication to achieving equal rights for African Americans.



Brown v. Board of Education

In 1950 more than eleven thousand school districts, including most of the school districts in the Deep South, were segregated. In theory, the districts were meeting the separate but equal standard; in reality, they were anything but equal. In rural Clarendon County, South Carolina, white students made up only 13 percent of the public school population. Nevertheless, the county budgeted roughly \$179 per student at white schools compared with \$43 per student at black schools. Whites went to school in brick buildings with well-maintained facilities; the schools for blacks were small wooden structures with just one or two classrooms and no running water or electricity. The county also provided buses for white students but not for blacks. Some black students had to walk miles to get to school. Parents of black students in Clarendon County sued for equal education, but in 1951 the court ruled that the schools fell within the legal parameters of separate but equal.

Immediately following the Clarendon County ruling, the NAACP turned its attention to a case brought by thirteen black families in Topeka, Kansas. The local NAACP chapter had encouraged the African American families to enroll their children in the closest neighborhood school, regardless of whether it was integrated. Unlike the Deep South, Kansas was not strictly divided along racial lines, but its schools were segregated. Linda Brown Thompson, who was just nine when her father signed his name to the class action suit, later reminisced, “We lived in an integrated neighborhood and I had all of these playmates of different nationalities, so when I found out that . . . I might be able to go to their school, I was just thrilled.”¹⁷ But when she showed up for the first day of school, Linda—like the children of the other twelve plaintiffs in the lawsuit—was turned away.

Prior to enrolling in the neighborhood school, Linda and her sister had to walk six blocks through a dangerous railroad switchyard to catch a bus for the rest of the long distance to school. The other twelve families in *Brown et al. v. Board of Education* had similar situations. The NAACP argued that requiring students like Linda to travel much farther than other neighborhood children to attend school was

inherently unequal. When the district court ruled against the plaintiffs, citing the “separate but equal” clause, the NAACP appealed to the Supreme Court.

The lawsuit in Topeka was but one of several school segregation cases that the Supreme Court was scheduled to hear. Since they all involved largely the same legal principles, the court decided to rule on them as a group. Thurgood Marshall and the other members of the NAACP legal team argued that the segregated schools did not conform to the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause. The lawyers argued that the education received at black schools was inferior to that at schools for white students.

On May 17, 1954, after more than a year of legal wrangling, the Supreme Court issued its finding that segregated schools were unconstitutional. The court based its ruling on the principle that segregation by

African American soldiers man an antiaircraft battery near the front lines in Italy during World War II. Demonstrations of bravery both on and off the battlefield seemed to have had little effect at home, where blacks still had few of the rights enjoyed by other Americans.



For Further Research



Books

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