



Separate and Unequal: Homer Plessy and the Supreme Court Decision that Legalized Racism

Harvey Fireside

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When Homer A. Plessy, a New Orleans shoemaker, refused to move to the “Jim Crow” railroad car set aside for Negroes by state law, he initiated a lawsuit challenging the entire system of racial segregation. In *Separate but Unequal*, Harvey Fireside traces the roots of the Supreme Court decision that enshrined racial separation in America for the next sixty years. He uncovers little-known areas of U.S. history, such as the remarkable Black Creole community that flourished as a distinct culture after Louisiana was purchased from France and Spain. Well-educated and prosperous, they threw in their lot with recently freed Negroes in the 1890s, because new racist laws relegated them both to second-class citizenship. Among the “carpetbaggers,” demonized in history as corrupt and greedy Northerners, Fireside reveals true idealists like Albion Tourgee, who argued Plessy's case without fee to the Supreme Court. Seven justices there approved segregation laws, but Justice John Marshall Harlan — a former slave owner — dissented. He memorably punctured the hypocrisy behind a law claiming to provide “separate but equal” accommodations, which were actually inferior and racist. Unfortunately, as this book argues, these standards for African Americans still exist. Photographs are featured in this compelling historical drama.

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