

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

Harvey Fireside

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On June 7, 1892, Homer A. Plessy, a New Orleans shoemaker, white in appearance but Negro according to the "one drop" rule that discriminated against anyone with even a small fraction of African blood by that injurious label, boarded a "Whites Only" railroad coach. He then volunteered his lineage to the conductor, who ordered that he move to a car set aside by state law for Negroes—and so began the legal crusade that culminated in one of the most tragic and dishonorable decisions in Supreme Court history. Here, acclaimed historian Professor Harvey Fireside presents a powerful account of Plessy v. Ferguson, the famously unlawful ruling that institutionalized racism and helped inspire the civil rights movement. Separate and Unequal combines judicial records and historic photographs with a richly evocative portrait of Jim Crow-era Louisiana and a tale of the personal heroism of Homer Plessy; lawyer Albion Tourgée, who argued his case pro bono; and Justice John Marshall Harlan, the decision's sole dissenter, who argued fervently against the Court majority opinion that "separate but equal" accommodations were not unjust and demeaning. With sophistication and passion, Fireside shares a history less renowned but every bit as explosively influential as that of Rosa Parks.



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