Separate But Equal

Directions: Analyze the sources and describe how life was like for African Americans in Louisiana during the years 1930 – 1970

Source 1

Plessy v. Ferguson

This 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case upheld the constitutionality of segregation under the “separate but equal” doctrine. It stemmed from an 1892 incident in which African-American train passenger Homer Plessy refused to sit in a Jim Crow car, breaking a Louisiana law. Rejecting Plessy’s argument that his constitutional rights were violated, the Court ruled that a state law that “implies merely a legal distinction” between whites and blacks did not conflict with the 13th and 14th Amendments. Restrictive legislation based on race continued following the Plessy decision.

The case came from Louisiana, which in 1890 adopted a law providing for “equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races” on its railroads. In 1892, passenger Homer Plessy refused to sit in a Jim Crow car. He was brought before Judge John H. Ferguson of the Criminal Court for New Orleans, who upheld the state law. The law was challenged in the Supreme Court on grounds that it conflicted with the 13th and 14th Amendments.

By a 7-1 vote, the Court said that a state law that “implies merely a legal distinction” between the two races did not conflict with the 13th Amendment forbidding involuntary servitude, nor did it tend to reestablish such a condition.
Source 3

Much schooling for African Americans, especially in rural areas, continued to take place in churches or in crude and poorly lit buildings. In some cases rudimentary instruction was provided in the home. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century many white Louisianans, particularly in rural areas, also received a poor education in inadequate facilities, but typically benefited from more funding, if only slightly. In the cities, when modern brick schools became standard for white students, frame buildings continued to be constructed for African American students. Examples abound of disputes over school buildings and misallocation of funds meant for African American schools to white schools in the early twentieth century.

Source 4

During the 1950s and 1960s, the connections between municipal and state governments, law enforcement, and racial violence were well known by officials and citizens alike. White officers were known to harass black people, disrupt black neighborhoods, and assault black women. Arrested for inflated charges, denied satisfactory counsel, and serving harsh sentences, African Americans were further disadvantaged in the courtroom. Rarely did they receive good counsel, nor could they serve on juries. When black lawyers could appear in the courtroom to argue cases, white judges and juries rarely listened. All-white juries decided against black defendants, even in the most obvious cases of innocence, but rarely convicted white defendants, despite evidence of guilt. African Americans—including the innocent—suffered the harsher punishments of extended jail time, forced farm labor, and peonage. Even women could be placed on the chain gangs working the roads and tracks across the South.
Louisiana Literacy Test

These tests, writes Rebecca Onion at Slate, were “supposedly applicable to both white and black prospective voters who couldn’t prove a certain level of education” (typically up to the fifth grade). Yet they were “in actuality disproportionately administered to black voters.” Additionally, many of the tests were rigged so that registrars could give potential voters an easy or a difficult version, and could score them differently as well.
Life as an African American in Louisiana