

—Slug:.....COMM-0867.opin.persp.holiday  
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—For section.....Voices/Historical Lens  
—Format.....Opinions  
—Dateline.....Dummerston  
—Article Number:.....43591

**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Hi, Bill — Nice work. I needed a refresher about the 14th Amendment and thought it would be helpful for readers. I added a paragraph or two around line 21. By all means, let me know if those words are incorrect or insufficient in any way. I'm the student here, not the teacher. —Appreciatively, Jeff

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 The case that redefined U.S. schools

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Brown v. Board of Education overturned school  
3 segregation, but its legacy still asks what equal citizenship should  
4 mean

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 ON MAY 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court  
7 issued a unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of*  
8 *Topeka*, declaring that segregated public schools were

9 unconstitutional. That ruling has long been recognized as a  
10 turning point in American history.

11 Yet the path to *Brown* stretched back to the post–Civil  
12 War era and forward through years of resistance after 1954.

13 The material in this article comes from visits to the  
14 neighborhood of Linda Brown (the third grader who was the  
15 plaintiff in the case), the Capitol Dome in Topeka, Kansas, the  
16 Sumner Elementary School, and especially the Monroe  
17 Elementary School, which is central to the *Brown* case. Now the  
18 [Brown vs. Board of Education National Historic Park](#), the school  
19 building is now a place where the story of the decision is  
20 interpreted on site by the National Park Service.

21 \* \* \*

22 IN THE DECADES after the Civil War, many states —  
23 especially in the South, though not only there — translated  
24 longstanding racial prejudice into law.

25 This took place despite the passage of the 14th  
26 Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which had been passed in  
27 the aftermath of the Civil War to affirm the rights of the now-  
28 emancipated population of Black people.

29 The 14th Amendment guaranteed citizenship of people  
30 born in the United States, including former slaves; prohibited  
31 states and local governments from depriving "life, liberty, or  
32 property, without due process of law," and forbade states from  
33 denying equal protection under the law.

34 Despite the Constitutional protections, legislatures  
35 created a patchwork of statutes relegating African Americans to  
36 separate facilities or excluding them altogether from public  
37 spaces.

38 One such statute, the Louisiana Separate Car Act,  
39 required segregated railroad cars. In 1892, Homer Plessy, a Black  
40 citizen of New Orleans, deliberately challenged this law by  
41 sitting in a whites-only car. When he was arrested, his case  
42 eventually reached the Supreme Court as [Plessy v. Ferguson](#).

43           The Court upheld the law. It ruled that Plessy's rights  
44 under the 14th Amendment had not been violated because, in its  
45 interpretation, racial separation did not necessarily deny equality  
46 before the law. In the majority opinion, the justices rejected the  
47 "fallacy" of the argument that segregation by itself stamped  
48 African Americans with "a badge of inferiority."

49           Only Justice John Marshall Harlan dissented. He  
50 famously declared that the United States Constitution is "color-  
51 blind" and that there is "no caste" in America. Yet, despite  
52 Harlan's warning, the nation's highest court had effectively  
53 sanctioned a caste system.

54           The years after Plessy were deeply discouraging for  
55 African Americans. The judicial system that was supposed to  
56 ensure fairness and equality instead reinforced racial hierarchy.  
57 States, emboldened by Plessy, enacted Jim Crow laws that often  
58 ignored even the pretense of equality in the "separate but equal"  
59 formula. Congress refused to pass federal anti-lynching laws,  
60 further signaling that Black Americans could not depend on  
61 national lawmakers for protection or reform.

62           \* \* \*

63           OUT OF THIS bleak landscape came organized resistance.

64           In 1909, civil rights leaders, including W. E. B. Du Bois  
65 and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, helped found the National Association  
66 for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to fight for legal  
67 and political change.

68           The NAACP's broad goal was to end segregation, but its  
69 legal strategy was careful and incremental. Rather than  
70 immediately asking the Supreme Court to overturn *Plessy*, the  
71 organization first chose to attack the glaring inequalities that  
72 existed under the separate-but-equal regime.

73           Charles Houston, who served as NAACP chief counsel  
74 from 1935 to 1938, and his successor, Thurgood Marshall,  
75 brought a series of cases in the 1930s and 1940s, focusing  
76 especially on education.

77 Beginning with higher education, they secured several  
78 victories that chipped away at the most obvious disparities  
79 between Black and white institutions. These rulings signaled the  
80 Court's discomfort with extreme inequality but also revealed the  
81 justices' reluctance to explicitly overturn Plessy.

82 By 1948 the NAACP concluded that the time had come  
83 to attack the "separate but equal" doctrine itself. The organization  
84 set out to build a series of test cases in public education that  
85 would directly confront segregation as inherently  
86 unconstitutional.

87 \* \* \*

88 By 1952, four of the five cases that would become  
89 *Brown v. Board of Education* had reached the Supreme Court  
90 under NAACP sponsorship. These cases, from Delaware, South  
91 Carolina, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Kansas, were  
92 deliberately drawn from different regions to demonstrate that  
93 segregation was a national problem, not only a Southern one.

94 The Supreme Court case took its name from as Brown's  
95 was the first name in alphabetical order. But the Kansas case —  
96 *Oliver L. Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.* —  
97 was also strategically chosen to be the lead case of the five for  
98 several reasons.

99 Too strong an emphasis on the Deep South, where racial  
100 tensions and politics were particularly volatile, risked  
101 complicating the Court's deliberations.

102 Topeka also offered a distinctive legal setting. Unlike  
103 many Southern districts where Black schools were clearly inferior,  
104 the Black and white schools in Topeka were, in construction and  
105 facilities, "essentially equal." This meant that the case could focus  
106 more sharply on the consequences of segregation itself, rather  
107 than on measurable inequalities in buildings or materials.

108 When Thurgood Marshall argued these consolidated  
109 cases before the Supreme Court, he advanced a clear and direct  
110 position: Racial classifications are unconstitutional, and separate

111 educational facilities created to maintain those classifications are  
112 themselves inherently unequal.

113 \* \* \*

114 ON MAY 17, 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its  
115 unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Court  
116 ruled that segregated public schools violated the Equal Protection  
117 Clause of the 14th Amendment.

118 The significance of this decision was profound and  
119 multilayered:

- 120 • It reaffirmed the 14th Amendment, which had long  
121 been undermined by *Plessy*.
- 122 • It clarified that the federal government had both the  
123 authority and the obligation to protect citizens' rights when state  
124 laws threatened those rights.
- 125 • It opened the modern Civil Rights Movement for  
126 African Americans, and it helped lay the groundwork for similar  
127 struggles by other minority groups.

128 \* \* \*

129 THE TOPEKA COMPONENT of *Brown* centers on the  
130 experience of Linda Brown and her family.

131 Linda attended Monroe Elementary School, a segregated  
132 Black school in Topeka. A photograph of her kindergarten class,  
133 taken on March 3, 1949, still survives; the classroom is  
134 preserved, and people are encouraged to look for Brown, the  
135 "little girl in the back row with pigtails," photographed in the very  
136 room where she once studied.

137 The superintendent of schools, A. J. Stout, described the  
138 kindergarten as a place where "little children play and work  
139 together" and where play is "directed towards useful purposes,"  
140 while work is made so interesting that it feels like pleasure. The  
141 stated goal was to cultivate habits and attitudes needed for good  
142 citizenship. Yet this rhetoric of shared citizenship existed  
143 alongside a different reality of segregated schooling.

144 Linda Brown had to walk six blocks through a railroad  
145 switching yard to catch a bus to the Monroe Elementary School,

146 the Black school, which was was approximately 2 miles from her  
147 home.

148         The white school, Sumner Elementary School, was closer  
149 — just four blocks away — but Linda was barred from attending  
150 because of segregation.

151         To understand Linda’s daily journey, I climbed to the top  
152 of the Kansas State Capitol dome (296 steps, the equivalent of a  
153 10-story building) and was stunned by the distance. This  
154 geography underscores the everyday burden segregation placed  
155 on African American children.

156         Importantly, during the period when the Browns lived  
157 near Sumner, the school’s racial identity shifted. Originally built  
158 for African American students, Sumner (named for Charles  
159 Sumner, the Massachusetts senator and prominent abolitionist  
160 who fought for civil rights and the end of slavery) became a white  
161 elementary school as the neighborhood’s white population grew  
162 faster than the African American population.

163         This left the Browns in a neighborhood where their own  
164 children were excluded from the local school.

165         \* \* \*

166         KANSAS OCCUPIES a complicated place in the history of  
167 slavery and civil rights. The state had fought violently over  
168 whether it would enter the Union as a free or slave state during  
169 the “Bleeding Kansas” period of the 1850s.

170         Yet roughly a generation after it was admitted as a free  
171 state, the Kansas Legislature passed a law permitting segregated  
172 elementary schools in certain cities.

173         The explanation lies in fear. Following the Civil War,  
174 large numbers (20,000 to 40,000) of African Americans, known  
175 as Exodusters, migrated from Southern states to places like  
176 Kansas. The Black population in the state exploded, from 627 in  
177 1860 to 43,110 less than 20 years later.

178         Some white Kansans feared that the state would become  
179 “an all-Black state.” Some stated, “we want to be free, we just  
180 don’t think we want to be that free.”

181 The solution chosen by the Legislature was the “first-class  
182 city statute” of 1879–1880, which allowed cities of more than  
183 15,000 residents to construct segregated elementary schools.

184 Key features of Kansas segregation policy included:

185 • Only elementary schools could be segregated by law.  
186 • Junior high and high schools that developed later in  
187 qualifying cities remained integrated.

188 • Elementary segregation would thus be the only legal  
189 form of segregation in Kansas. Other forms of separation — such  
190 as in public accommodations or transportation — were a matter  
191 of practice rather than explicit law.

192 By 1950, 12 cities across Kansas were operating separate  
193 elementary schools for African American children under this legal  
194 framework.

195 Monroe Elementary — where Linda Brown attended  
196 kindergarten and where several other plaintiffs’ children also  
197 went to school — was one of four segregated Black elementary  
198 schools in Topeka, all built to the same standards and quality as  
199 the city’s white elementary schools but separated by race under  
200 the authority of state law.

201 \* \* \*

202 THE LOCAL LEGAL CHALLENGE that would become part of  
203 *Brown* began in 1951, when 13 African American parents in  
204 Topeka sued the local school board.

205 Crucially, they did not argue that the Black schools were  
206 physically inferior. Instead, they claimed that the segregation  
207 itself was a violation of the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection  
208 Clause — denying their children equal opportunity and equal  
209 access to education.

210 A three-judge federal district court in Topeka heard the  
211 case. The judges ruled in favor of the school board, and “nothing  
212 really changed” at the local level.

213 The plaintiffs then appealed, and the case became part of  
214 the consolidated *Brown v. Board of Education* before the  
215 Supreme Court.

216           Meanwhile, Topeka’s school board ended legal  
217 segregation in its schools more than eight months before the  
218 Supreme Court issued its decision in *Brown*. Yet this local step  
219 did not erase the national implications of the case or the lived  
220 consequences for teachers and administrators.

221           \* \* \*

222           SCHOOL DESEGREGATION in Topeka brought uneven  
223 benefits. While students of color gained access to formerly all-  
224 white schools, many Black educators paid a steep professional  
225 price.

226           During the *Brown* proceedings, Black teachers in Topeka  
227 worried about their jobs. Integrating students was one thing;  
228 placing Black teachers in front of white classrooms was another.

229           The school board’s actions confirmed those fears. Before  
230 the Supreme Court ruled, letters were sent to Black teachers with  
231 less than two years of service warning that, if segregation ended,  
232 “your services would no longer be needed,” because “the  
233 majority of the people in Topeka will not want to employ Negro  
234 teachers for white children.”

235           After *Brown* and the local end of segregation, the district  
236 moved cautiously and quietly to place Black teachers in  
237 integrated settings. By the early 1960s, Merrill Ross became the  
238 assistant principal of a formerly all-white school, breaking the  
239 color barrier for administrators in Topeka.

240           These changes highlight a recurring theme: legal  
241 victories for students did not automatically translate into justice  
242 for teachers. The dismantling of segregated structures in  
243 education was uneven, and progress often came at the expense  
244 of those Black professionals who had sustained segregated  
245 schools for decades.

246           \* \* \*

247           THE SITE of the Monroe Elementary School today presents  
248 not only the “Road to *Brown*” exhibit and the broader “Legacy of  
249 *Brown*” exhibit, which traces the subsequent Civil Rights  
250 Movement in the United States. Visitors are reminded that:

251 • The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown* (1954) preceded  
252 iconic Civil Rights Movement events like the March on  
253 Washington by almost 10 years.

254 • *Brown* is often understood as the first major step in  
255 dismantling the “separate but equal” system in the United States.

256 • The “white” and “colored” signs marking segregated  
257 facilities across the country would later be found unconstitutional  
258 and violations of the 14th Amendment, especially through the  
259 Civil Rights Act of 1964.

260 \* \* \*

261 MONROE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL was closed in 1975, and  
262 the property was donated to the National Park Service in 1993.  
263 As a national park, the former school has hosted notable figures  
264 in civil rights history, with visits from Michelle Obama, Ruby  
265 Bridges, and Andrew Young underscoring its symbolic role as a  
266 national landmark in the struggle for equality.

267 In the preserved kindergarten room, the historic  
268 photograph of Linda Brown and her classmates offers a quiet but  
269 powerful reminder that this constitutional revolution began with  
270 the everyday experiences of children — walking past nearby  
271 schools they could not attend, boarding buses at distant corners,  
272 and learning in classrooms shaped by law and custom.

273 The story told within the former Monroe Elementary  
274 School situates *Brown v. Board of Education* within a long arc of  
275 American history, from Reconstruction and *Plessy v. Ferguson*,  
276 through the NAACP’s careful legal strategy, to the everyday  
277 realities of segregated schooling in Kansas and beyond.

278 The unanimous decision of May 17, 1954, did more than  
279 reorder public education. It reasserted the 14th Amendment as a  
280 living guarantee of equal protection, signaled federal willingness  
281 to confront state-sanctioned discrimination, and helped to launch  
282 a broader Civil Rights Movement that would reshape U.S. law  
283 and society.

284 \* \* \*

285 THE INFLUENCE OF *Brown* extended beyond the United  
286 States. The ruling served as a model for the inclusion of education  
287 as a basic right in the constitution of post-apartheid South Africa.

288 Yet, *Brown* was only the beginning.

289 For more than a decade after the 1954 decision, it was  
290 met with fierce resistance. Even today, the case is framed as a  
291 guidepost from half a century ago, a reminder that the ideals of  
292 the U.S. Constitution — equality, fairness, and equal protection  
293 — can never be assumed or taken for granted.

294 *Brown* remains unfinished business. Resistance in the  
295 decade after the ruling, the displacement of Black teachers, and  
296 ongoing debates over educational equity all point to a central  
297 lesson: that the high ideals of the U.S. Constitution can never be  
298 taken for granted.

299 In Topeka, the distance between Monroe and Sumner  
300 schools — physical, legal, and symbolic — has become a  
301 powerful teaching tool. From the rooftop of the State Capitol to  
302 the worn floorboards of a former kindergarten room, the story of  
303 *Brown v. Board of Education* continues to ask Americans to  
304 reconsider what equal protection, citizenship, and public  
305 education should truly mean.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

306 **BILL HOLIDAY**, a retired veteran social studies teacher of  
307 48 years, believes in exposing students to primary sources in  
308 history and would introduce his students at Brattleboro Union  
309 High School to people who could tell them firsthand about their  
310 lived history. He notes that the United States Supreme Court  
311 recently weakened the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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