



Five Communities Change a Nation

When Thurgood Marshall launched the full-scale attack on segregation, the United States was very different from today. For some white Americans, changes in attitudes about race followed dramatic events in American society—the Depression, World War II, the integration of major league baseball by Jackie Robinson in 1947, and the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948. But deeply rooted feelings of white superiority continued to guide daily life. In five different communities, African Americans from various walks of life bravely turned to the courts to demand better educational opportunities for their children. Together with the NAACP, these communities attempted nothing less than the destruction of segregation in the United States and the transformation of American society.

Clarendon County, South Carolina: *Briggs v. Elliott*

In the heart of the cotton belt, where white landowners and business leaders had ruled Clarendon County for generations, poor rural African Americans made a stand. They asked for a school bus for their children, and the county denied their request. Risking retaliation, they demanded that their children have the right to attend white schools.

Topeka, Kansas: *Brown v. Board of Education*

Slavery was never legally established in Kansas, and racial separation there was less rigid than in the Deep South. Nonetheless, African American parents and local activists from the NAACP challenged Topeka's policy of segregated schooling. *Brown v. Board of Education* gave its name to the collection of cases that ended segregation in public schools.

FAR LEFT: Desk from the Liberty Hill Colored School in Clarendon County, S.C.

Courtesy of Beatrice B. Rivers

LEFT: Lucinda Todd and her daughter Nancy. Lucinda Todd was the secretary of the Topeka branch of the NAACP and the first plaintiff to volunteer in the lawsuit against the Topeka Board of Education.

Courtesy of University of Kansas Libraries, Kenneth Spencer Research Library

BELOW: School pennant from Robert R. Moton High School in Farmville, Va.

Lent by John Arthur Stokes



Farmville, Virginia: *Davis v. the School Board of Prince Edward County*

Moton High School is just a few miles from Appomattox, Virginia, the site of Robert E. Lee's surrender ending the Civil War. In 1951, Barbara Johns, a determined eleventh-grader, led a group of students who organized a strike for a better school. The students rallied their fellow classmates, an entire community, and NAACP attorneys to their cause.

Delaware: *Bulah v. Gebhart and Belton v. Gebhart*

A border state during the Civil War, Delaware's laws on segregation followed the state's southern traditions. A small group of African American parents, upset when their children had to bypass white schools to reach black ones, sought to challenge state-enforced segregation. Two cases from Delaware ultimately reached the U.S. Supreme Court as part of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Washington, D.C.: *Bolling v. Sharpe*

In the 1950s, Washington, D.C.'s government and city schools were under the control of Congress. Most of the city's public facilities, schools, and housing were segregated by law or practice. Sparked by the protests of a local barber, a grassroots organization formed to expose this hypocrisy and demand equal treatment for all children.

▷ Lesson Plan Four: Five Communities Change a Nation

To the Teacher: The case that we commonly call *Brown v. Board of Education* was actually five cases from different communities around the country. In this activity, students will explore the nature of segregation in these five communities, and the different ways in which it was opposed. In order to do this, they will research both primary and secondary sources to gather information that they will use to create a radio broadcast that will present their findings to the rest of the class.

To assist the teacher, a Community Briefing Sheet for each of the five cases has been included on the accompanying CD. These briefing sheets give teachers an overview of the material that students will be researching for their radio broadcast.

Grade Level: 7th through 12th grade

Objectives: At the end of this lesson, students will be able to explain how segregation in five communities across America gained national attention and came to be the five court cases that made up *Brown v. Board of Education*. In particular, students will be able to identify, discuss, and compare and contrast the factors in each community that led community members to challenge segregation.

Time: 2 to 3 class periods

Materials: *On the CD:* Teacher Briefing Sheet on each case; Teacher Briefing Sheet: Additional Activity; Student Handout: Five Communities Research Sheet

National History Standards: Era 9 4A

Teacher Introduction: Explain to students that the *Brown* case was actually a combination of five cases from communities around the country. Explain that there were some similarities between the cases, but the nature of segregation differed in each community and each had its own history. What was true in all cases, however, was that the effort to end segregation began with the commitment of members of each community.

Discuss: Definitions of plaintiff and defendant

Shirley Bulah endured a long daily walk to the Hockessin Colored Elementary School. Her mother, Sarah, asked if her daughter could share a bus with white children or have a separate bus. When her requests were refused, she pursued legal action.

Courtesy of Philip E. Stamps, Jr.



Student Activities – Research: Divide the class into five groups, one for each case. After discussing research skills and methods with the class, provide them with copies of the Five Communities Change a Nation Research Sheet, found on the accompanying CD. The virtual exhibition, *Separate Is Not Equal: Brown v. Board of Education*, has additional background information and informative objects and photographs on each case at www.americanhistory.si.edu/brown. Also, refer to the annotated bibliography on the accompanying CD for additional books, Web sites and resources on the five communities.

Create a Radio Broadcast: Explain to students that their task is to create a three-minute radio broadcast highlighting the essential information about each case.

- What is a compelling moment in the story that could be featured in a broadcast? For example, in the Farmville, Virginia, case, the story of the student strike could be the basis for the radio show.
- Who are the key people behind the case that a radio reporter might interview? Community activists? Lawyers? Students and parents?
- What sound effects would you use to make the story seem more real?
- What key information would you want to leave listeners thinking about?

Summary Discussion:

- Compare and contrast the five cases. What do these five cases have in common? What is different?
- What do these five cases reveal about the nature of segregation in America?
- What do these five cases reveal about the different ways in which communities chose to confront segregation?
- What is courage? Are there different types of courage? What kind of courage were the people involved in these cases demonstrating? Who do you think is the most courageous individual among these five cases? Why?