

Teaching With Documents: Documents Related to *Brown v. Board of Education*

Frontiers in Civil Rights: *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*

Introduction

Arguments presented and decisions rendered in court cases often illuminate, open, and sometimes close frontiers in social history. For example, the arguments presented in school desegregation cases of the early 1950s illustrate how the "separate but equal" doctrine presented in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896 virtually closed the civil rights frontier for nearly 60 years. Conversely, the decision rendered in the desegregation cases opened up that frontier and encouraged the expansion of the civil rights movement in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Background

In April 1951, the students at Robert Russa Moton High School in Prince Edward County, VA, went on strike. Although their protest was intended to persuade their local school board to build them a better school, it actually led to a landmark civil rights case that marked the end of segregation in the nation's public schools.

Moton High was typical of the all-black schools in the central Virginia county. It was built in 1939 to hold half as many students as it did by the early 1950s; its teachers were paid substantially less than teachers at the all-white high school; and it had no gymnasium, cafeteria, or auditorium with fixed seats like the nearby white Farmville High had. Repeated attempts made by Moton's principal and PTA to convince the school board to erect a new black high school were fruitless. So, in the spring of 1951, the students, led by 16 year-old Barbara Johns, took matters into their own hands. They went on strike and asked for help from the NAACP's special counsel for the Southeastern region of the United States.

The NAACP lawyers told the striking students that the only way the organization could commit to getting involved in the students' cause was to sue for the end of segregation itself. This was a huge step beyond the students' goal of obtaining a new school building! After thinking it over very carefully and gathering the support of their parents, the students agreed to challenge segregation directly. On May 23, 1951, a NAACP lawyer, on behalf of 117 Moton students and their parents, filed suit in the federal district court in Richmond. The first plaintiff listed was Dorothy E. Davis, a 14-year old ninth grader; the case was titled *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*. It asked that the state law requiring segregated schools in Virginia be struck down

In the spring of 1952, a three-judge U.S. District Court decided in favor of the school board and upheld segregation. On appeal, the case made it to the Supreme Court of the United States and was decided along with three other school segregation cases from South Carolina, Delaware, and Kansas, in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

The Brown decision marked the end of the "separate but equal" precedent set nearly 60 years earlier in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The court stated that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," and that school segregation violated the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Commonwealth of Virginia, and Prince Edward County in particular, resisted the Supreme Court decision. The county closed its public schools from 1959 to 1964 to avoid desegregation.

Note: This article originally appeared in the 2001 *National History Day Teachers' Guide: Frontiers in History: People Places, Ideas*.

The Documents

Exterior View, Farmville



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Plaintiffs' Exhibits:

Photograph filed in

Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus

County School Board of Prince

Edward County, Virginia,

Civil Action No. 1333.

Record Group 21

Records of the District Courts of the United States, 1865 - 1991

NARA's Mid Atlantic Region (Philadelphia)

Exterior View, Moton



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