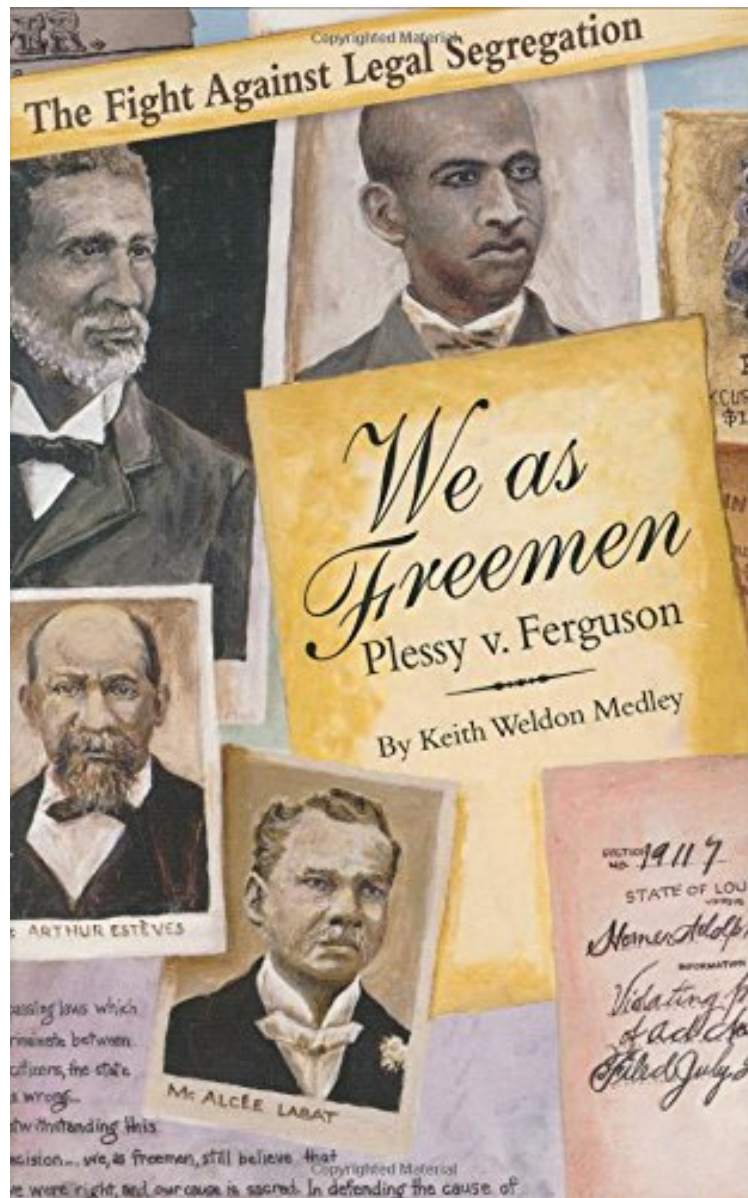


We As Freemen: Plessy v. Ferguson

Keith Weldon Medley

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Keith Weldon Medley : We As Freemen: Plessy v. Ferguson before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised We As Freemen: Plessy v. Ferguson:

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. A dramatic story rescued from what historians forgot By Bonnie Britt Long before Rosa Parks refused the disrespectful order to go to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, came Homer Plessy, the young shoemaker who knew he'd be arrested for refusing to leave the "whites only"

car on the New Orleans railroad. He refused to go to this segregated car in order to make the point that the law was cruel and unjust. A federal case was made of it, and in the end, the US Supreme Court made segregation the law of the land for the next 53 years. The high court ruled that "separate but equal" was fair and equitable but history has proven there was nothing fair or equal about that decision. History also proves there was no justice in that high court opinion and no wisdom or sense of human rights residing with the Justices who issued it. In "We as Freemen," Keith Medley uncovers the rich and intriguing history of the personalities who fought for equality 30 years after the Civil War ended, but generations before U.S. rulers ended legal discrimination based on skin color. In carefully crafted prose, the author is apparently the first researcher to explore the character, mores and lives of the long forgotten men of the Comit des Citoyen (Committee of Citizens) who planned and carried out the peaceful challenge to Louisiana's Separate Car Act of 1890. Homer Plessy did not suddenly challenge segregation. In a story well-told, Medley turned up primary research found in dusty nooks and crannies, and church, library and cemetery logs around New Orleans, which is his hometown. He describes the efforts of businessmen, lawyers, educators, and artisans to stop segregation from taking hold in the South. They conducted their campaign while the forces of reaction were regaining political control after the Civil War. The Comit aimed "to obtain a United States Supreme Court ruling preventing states from abolishing the suffrage and equal access gains of the Reconstruction period that followed the Civil War." Medley manages to summon Homer Plessy from the obscurity Jeremy Irons identifies in his "A People's History of the Supreme Court" (Penguin: 1999) with new research that portrays Plessy as a quiet, hardworking man anxious not to be treated disrespectfully because of his heritage and skin color. Like the U.S. Supreme Court's 1857 Dred Scott decision, which barred slaves and their descendants from citizenship, the high court's decision in Plessy vs. Ferguson was demeaning and hurtful to millions of people. The high court decision in Plessy divided the population, causing widespread suffering. For this reason, it is useful to recall the dark side of Supreme Court history and to appreciate that the Justices are, for better or worse, political appointees who often press their own viewpoints, which tend also to represent the narrow views of the class of politicians who appoint them. Or as Irons put the Plessy decision in context, amid growing strife "the Court remained a bastion of conservatism, earning this banquet toast from a New York banker in 1895: 'I give you, gentlemen, the Supreme Court of the United States - guardian of the dollar, defender of private property, enemy of spoliation, sheet anchor of the Republic.'" In 1857 and again in 1896, the Supreme Court inflicted upon the public the views of Southern plantation owners and thuggish ideologues, a tiny but disproportionately powerful part of the population. In short order, the Comit "formulated legal strategy while raising money from the neighborhoods of New Orleans, small towns throughout the South, and in cities as far away as Washington D.C. and San Francisco" and published their views in the African-American daily, The Crusader. Medley documents the heroic role of The Crusader in the battle for human rights in the humid South. The Comit held popular rallies, and did all anyone can do within democratic structures to organize resistance to the dark era of ignorance spreading through the legislatures, town halls and courtrooms controlled by rich white American men across the South. (Women would wait another generation to win the right to vote.) And, it would be more than five long decades before the wrongs of the high court's Plessy decision would be reversed, in part due to arguments put forward by then lawyer Thurgood Marshall to the high court sitting in 1954. Marshall argued the case in conjunction with the re-awakening across the land of the persistent struggle for Civil Rights. I highly recommend Keith Medley's "We as Freemen" and I particularly like that he was able to locate photographs portraying those who fought bravely but lost a key round in the struggle for human rights. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. If you want to understand how all the civil rights ... By Jacques Le Plumel If you want to understand how all the civil rights gained by African Americans in the immediate post-Civil War era were stripped away by determined Southern Democrats, you have to read this book. It is primarily the story of how a 'test case' brought before the US Supreme Court back-fired and paved the way for the 'Jim Crow' oppression of Blacks for another fifty years. The author's style is engaging and the result is a real historical page turner. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Keith Weldon Medley brings history to life in a interesting ... By Dexter Smith Keith Weldon Medley brings history to life in a interesting, informative and very readable way. The book should be a "must read" for every high school and college student.

In June 1892, a thirty-year-old shoemaker named Homer Plessy bought a first-class railway ticket from his native New Orleans to Covington, north of Lake Pontchartrain. The two-hour trip had hardly begun when Plessy was arrested and removed from the train. Though Homer Plessy was born a free man of color and enjoyed relative equality while growing up in Reconstruction-era New Orleans, by 1890 he could no longer ride in the same carriage with white passengers. Plessy's act of civil disobedience was designed to test the constitutionality of the Separate Car Act, one of the many Jim Crow laws that threatened the freedoms gained by blacks after the Civil War. This largely forgotten case mandated separate-but-equal treatment and established segregation as the law of the land. It would be fifty-eight years before this ruling was reversed by Brown v. Board of Education. Keith Weldon Medley brings to life the players in this landmark trial, from the crusading black columnist Rodolphe Desdunes and the other members of the Comit des Citoyens to Albion W. Tourgee, the outspoken writer who represented Plessy, to John Ferguson, a reformist carpetbagger who nonetheless felt that he had to judge Plessy guilty.

From the Inside Flap
In 1896, Plessy v. Ferguson, Louisiana's famous Supreme Court case, established the separate-but-equal doctrine that prevailed in America until the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954. Homer Plessy's arrest in a New Orleans railway car was not mere happenstance, but the result of a carefully choreographed campaign of civil disobedience planned by the Comit des Citoyens. This group of Republican free men of color had watched their rights disappear under the increasingly strict Jim Crow laws of the post-Reconstruction period. To contest these new restrictions, they arranged for Plessy, who could "pass" for white, to illegally seat himself in a whites-only carriage. Keith Weldon Medley brings to life the players in this landmark trial, from the crusading black columnist Rodolphe Desdunes and the other members of the Comit des Citoyens to Albion W. Tourgee, the outspoken writer who represented Plessy, to John Ferguson, a reformist carpetbagger who nonetheless found Plessy guilty. The U.S. Supreme Court sustained the finding, with only John Marshall Harlan, a Southern associate justice, voting against the decision. Keith Weldon Medley was born in New Orleans and grew up in the Faubourg Marigny, not far from where Homer Plessy lived. He attended St. Augustine High School and graduated from Southern University in New Orleans with a B.A. in sociology and psychology. A two-time recipient of publication initiative grants from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, Keith Weldon Medley has published articles in American Legacy, Louisiana Cultural Vistas, New Orleans Times-Picayune, and other periodicals. We as Freemen is expanded from an article Mr. Medley wrote for Smithsonian magazine.

From the Back Cover
"This absorbing narrative makes an important contribution to the literature on that notorious 1896 United States Supreme Court case, Plessy v. Ferguson." -Journal of Southern History
"Medley's detailed history stands on its own as the most complete historical accounting of one of the Court's most infamous decisions." -Law Politics Book
In June 1892, Homer Plessy bought a first-class railway ticket from New Orleans to Covington. His trip had hardly begun when Plessy was arrested and removed from the train. Though Homer Plessy was born a free man of color and enjoyed relative equality while growing up in Reconstruction-era New Orleans, by 1890 he could no longer ride in the same carriage with white passengers. Plessy's act of civil disobedience was designed to test the constitutionality of the Separate Car Act, one of the many Jim Crow laws that threatened the freedoms gained by blacks after the Civil War. This largely forgotten case established segregation as the law of the land and prefigures both Rosa Parks' defiance of bus segregation in Alabama and the legal arguments of Brown v. Board of Education.

Jacket art by Louise Mouton Johnson
About the Author
Born in New Orleans, Keith Weldon Medley grew up in the Faubourg Marigny not far from where Homer Plessy lived. He attended St. Augustine High School and graduated from Southern University at New Orleans with a BA in sociology and psychology. A two-time recipient of publication initiative grants from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, Medley has published articles in American Legacy, Louisiana Cultural Vistas, the New Orleans Times-Picayune, and other periodicals. We as Freemen: Plessy v. Ferguson is expanded from an article he wrote for Smithsonian. Medley is the author of Black Life in Old New Orleans, also published by Pelican.