Homer Adolph Plessy was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on March 17, 1862. His parents were Rosa Debergue, a seamstress and housekeeper, and Joseph Adolphe Plessy, a carpenter who died when his son was five years old. Plessy's mother remarried two years later, taking a local postal clerk named Victor Dupart as her husband. Young Homer Plessy's legal status was that of a free person of color, despite the fact that his ancestry was primarily white European and he could “pass” for white. He was classified as black because one of his great-grandmothers had been black.

As a young man Plessy established a shoemaking business with his step-brother, Formidor Dupart. Shoemaking at that time was recognized as a skilled craft, and the profession gave Plessy the money necessary to start a family. In 1888 he married Louise Bourdenave, a fellow native of New Orleans. They settled in a middle-class section of the city called Faubourg Tremé, where families of different ethnic heritages freely worked and socialized together. Plessy was actively involved in his community, which was widely recognized as one of the most vibrant and diverse neighborhoods in New Orleans. In the late 1880s, for example, he served as an officer in a neighborhood organization devoted to reforming the city's public school system.

**Becoming a Civil Rights Symbol**

Plessy had grown up during the 1860s and 1870s, when blacks enjoyed most of the same freedoms as whites in Louisiana. They were fully engaged in the political, cultural, and economic life of the state, and they rejoiced at Reconstruction-era measures that lifted bans on interracial marriage and integrated schools. During the 1880s, though, Plessy saw that all of these gains were slipping away. The close of Reconstruction in 1877 ended federal oversight of political and legal affairs in the South. White supremacists in the region seized this opportunity to re-impose laws that relegated blacks to an inferior position in Louisiana and elsewhere.

One of the most disturbing early examples of state-sanctioned discrimination came on July 10, 1890, when Louisiana governor Francis Nicholls signed the Separate Car Act into law. This bill, which passed by overwhelming margins in Louisiana's white-dominated state legislature, mandated that all rail-
Defining Moments: Plessy v. Ferguson

roads operating in the state separate their passengers into “white only” and “colored only” rail cars.

In 1892 Plessy was approached by an African-American civil rights organization called the Citizens’ Committee to Test the Constitutionality of the Separate Car Act. The group, which was led by New Orleans newspaper publisher Louis A. Martinet, was looking for a respected citizen who looked white—but was officially classified as black—and was willing to be arrested for sitting in a “white only” rail car. Once such an arrest was made, the Citizens’ Committee could use the case to challenge the constitutionality of the law in the courts.

Plessy agreed to the committee’s request. On June 7, 1892, Plessy walked to the Press Street Rail Station in New Orleans and bought a first-class ticket on an East Louisiana Railroad train bound for Covington, a small city located about forty miles north. Plessy got on board, sat in the “white only” section, and informed the conductor that he was actually legally classified as “colored.” He then refused the conductor’s request that he leave the train (it was not even equipped with a “colored” car, meaning that blacks were for all practical purposes not permitted to use the train at all). When Plessy refused to leave, the train was stopped and a private detective hired by the Citizens’ Committee boarded the train. He formally arrested Plessy for violating the Separate Car Act, then took him off the train and delivered him to a local police station. Several members of the committee were waiting at the station. They provided a $500 bond, which freed Plessy while he waited for his court trial.

Namesake of a Notorious Supreme Court Judgment

On October 30 the case of Homer Adolph Plessy v. The State of Louisiana formally opened before district judge John Howard Ferguson. Plessy’s lawyers, who had been secured by the Citizens’ Committee, asserted that Louisiana’s Separate Car Law violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. On November 18, though, Ferguson ruled that the state had the right to impose such regulations on railroad operations that operated only within Louisiana—and that Plessy was guilty.

The Citizens’ Committee appealed this decision all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, by which time the case had become known as Plessy v. Ferguson. In 1896 the Court returned a 7-1 decision that sided with Ferguson. It agreed with Ferguson that the Separate Car Law and other statutes that separated people by race were constitutional, as long as they provided equal accom-
modations to everyone. This decision endorsing the “separate but equal” doctrine became the foundation for Jim Crow laws all across the South. It is thus regarded as one of the worst decisions ever rendered in the history of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Court’s *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling left Plessy and the Citizens’ Committee with no other legal options. In January 1897 Plessy stood before a Louisiana court and pleaded guilty to violating the Separate Car Law. He paid the required $25 fine and left the courthouse. Plessy lived the rest of his life quietly, working as a warehouse laborer and clerk before becoming an insurance salesman with a black-owned insurance company. He died in New Orleans on March 1, 1925.

**Source**