

PUBLICATION

Plessy Day 2012

Authors: Amelia W. Koch, Benjamin West Janke

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The Louisiana Supreme Court Historical Society, with board members Donna Fraiche, Mimi Koch and Ben Janke (New Orleans), co-sponsored "Plessy Day" – an event to memorialize the history and legacy of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and to remember the truth that separate but equal is inherently unequal when decisions are made based on race.

The Plessy and Ferguson Foundation was established by Keith Plessy and Phoebe Ferguson, descendants of Homer Plessy, a shoemaker who on June 7, 1892, bought a first-class ticket to sit in the white-only train bound for Covington, Louisiana; and Judge John Howard Ferguson, a judge in Criminal District Court, who ruled against Plessy for violating Louisiana's Separate Car Act. The Separate Car Act of 1890 provided that railway companies carrying passengers must provide equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races. Judge Ferguson's decision was upheld by the Louisiana Supreme Court, and in 1896, was affirmed by the United States Supreme Court, establishing the doctrine of "separate but equal" and cementing the use of law to separate the races. Not until the United States Supreme Court decided the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 was the precedent overturned.

Each year, on June 7, the Plessy and Ferguson Foundation sponsors a program to remember Plessy and the events surrounding his actions in buying the railway ticket. The Foundation focuses on ways to teach the history of Civil Rights through understanding the *Plessy* case and its effect on the American conscience. This year, the Supreme Court of Louisiana Historical Society joined as a co-sponsor of the 2012 Plessy Day program held at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) to bring Professor Blair Kelley of N.C. State University to speak about her 2010 book *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts of African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson*. Professor Kelley's work recalls the well-known events leading up to *Plessy v. Ferguson* as well as the lesser-known stories from 1900-1907 of brave fights against segregation inspired by Plessy.

Professor Kelley was introduced by Keith Medley, author of the book *We as Freeman: Plessy v. Ferguson*. Professor Kelley discussed her research for her book which chronicles the litigation and organizing by local groups against segregated rails that led to the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 and the streetcar boycott movement waged in twenty-five southern cities from 1900 to 1907. She was grateful for the opportunity to visit New Orleans and to see the historical marker placed on the spot at Press and Royal Streets where Homer Plessy boarded the train in 1892. Professor Kelley's presentation was followed by readings by five students who wrote essays sharing their impressions about the *Plessy* case from their present day perspective.

The Plessy and Ferguson Foundation will continue in its mission to present programs to bring discussion, debate, and understanding on the subject of civil rights to the community. You can read more about the foundation at <http://plessyandferguson.org/>.