

When Homer Plessy boarded a 'Whites Only' train carriage in New Orleans in 1892, he knew he would be arrested – in fact, that was his plan.

He was mixed race, and a member of a civil rights group. He wanted his case to be tried in court, as a way of challenging Louisiana's race segregation laws.

The case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

Plessy's lawyers had a strong argument – that all citizens were equal under the Constitution.

But they lost. The court ruled that states had the right to enforce segregation.

Known as the 'separate but equal' decision, it meant that states across the US South could continue to make laws which prevented Black people from realising their rights.

They were called 'Jim Crow' laws – and their purpose was to make sure that Black people remained second class citizens – blocking them from good education or employment.

Black people could not depend on the protection of the law, as their white neighbours could...

The Ku Klux Klan was a White supremacist organisation that saw a surge in membership in the 1920s.

They inflicted a reign of terror on black communities – marching in robes and hoods, burning crosses as warnings, and publicly killing anyone they believed to be guilty of a crime.

The police did nothing to stop them – some policemen were themselves members.

Black communities had no way of changing the laws which oppressed them. As US citizens, they had the right to vote – but the Southern states

put 'voting qualifications' in place. Any black person who wanted to register to vote had to pay a poll tax – or pass a literacy test.

Clauses meant that these qualifications didn't apply to poor white voters.

"When voting time came round the Ku Klux Klan would be waiting outside the voting place. No coloured folk would try to vote."

By 1915, only 3% of Black citizens in Southern states were registered voters

The lack of opportunity, and brutality of life in the South forced many Black people to move – between 1910 and 1970, 6 million made their way to the cities of the North.

But through the first half of the 20th century, civil rights movements were slowly growing in strength... Homer Plessy's challenge to racist laws was just the first of many...