



Foundation Document Overview

Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site

Kansas



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE is to preserve, protect, and interpret for the education, enjoyment, and inspiration of present and future generations, the places that contributed materially to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that brought an end to segregation in public education; interpret the integral role of the Brown v. Board of Education case in the civil rights movement; and assist in the preservation and interpretation of related resources within the city of Topeka that further the understanding of the civil rights movement.



Significance

Significance statements express why Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declared unconstitutional the doctrine of “separate but equal” in the nation’s public educational system, striking down the 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The decision affirmed the constitutional right of all persons to equal protection under the law as guaranteed by the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, establishing a legal precedent for dismantling other forms of segregation in the country.
- Segregated schools and the quality of education they provided were crucial to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Monroe and the other black Topeka elementary schools were found tangibly equal to their white counterparts, but the court determined that segregation itself had a negative effect on African American children and therefore ruled segregation was unconstitutional.
- From the violent statehood struggles of the 1850s known as “Bleeding Kansas” to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the city of Topeka and Eastern Kansas frequently played an early and central role in America’s struggles over civil rights and racial equality.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Monroe Elementary School and Grounds**
- **Associations / Partnerships**
- **Personal Experiences and Oral Histories**
- **The Local Story of Segregation in Topeka and Kansas**
- **The Clark Doll**
- **The Story of *Brown V. Board of Education's* Impact on Civil Rights in America**

Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Archeological Collections**



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court was the culmination of a century of personal struggles and legal battles in the fight to achieve racial equality in the United States and continues to influence the everyday lives of Americans today. The focus of this theme is on the circumstances leading up to the case and the case itself, and it is intended to convey the significance of the “case of the century” as the result of the efforts of many people.
- The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision provided the legal, social, moral, and philosophical underpinning for the major civil rights actions later taken by citizens and the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government, establishing a landmark precedent that continues to inform debate over the meaning of equality. The focus is on the subsequent impact of the case, and the theme is intended to convey its legacy.
- Monroe Elementary School reflects the excellence of all-black schools in an educational system in Topeka that implemented racial segregation in elementary schools, representing the conflicted attitudes and policies toward African Americans that have characterized Kansas from its bloody entry into the Union as a free state to its adoption of permissible segregation laws. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was shaped by events in Kansas, a state that was deeply involved in the national struggle for freedom and equality from the 1850s to the 1950s. The focus of the theme is on the unique history and culture of Kansas, and it is intended to convey that significance.
- The local communities that initiated the five court cases comprising *Brown v. Board of Education* experienced significant consequences as a result of the movement to desegregate the nation’s public schools, reminding us of the costs as well as the benefits involved in the national fight for equality and racial integration. The focus of this theme is on the local communities and their experiences. It is intended to convey the significance of the “case of the century” and its history and legacy, as well as inspire audiences through the stories of personal sacrifices made for the greater common good.
- *Brown v. Board of Education* inspires the celebration of our common humanity and reminds us that engaged citizens, whether they are students, parents, teachers, lawyers, or judges, can move a nation—and the world—toward equality and justice for all. The focus of this theme is on inspiration and a call to action.

Description

Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site covers two acres and includes the historic Monroe Elementary School, which served African American students during the segregation era. Brown v. Board interprets the people, places, and events that contributed to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlawed segregation in public education. Furthermore, the park interprets the integral role of the Brown case in the civil rights movement, preserves the former Monroe Elementary School and associated cultural landscape, and assists in the interpretation of related local, national, and international resources that further the understanding of the civil rights movement.

The park was established on October 26, 1992, and opened to the public in 2004 on the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Monroe Elementary School had, with Sumner Elementary School, been designated a national historic landmark in 1987. The park works with many partners to explore—through exhibits, education programs, interpretation, and special events—the story of *Brown v. Board of Education* in the context of the ongoing civil rights struggle. Working with partners enriches the services provided by the park staff as well as allowing educators and NPS rangers to engage new untapped audiences.

The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) is one of the most pivotal opinions ever rendered by that body. This landmark decision highlights the court's role in affecting changes in national and social policy.

In 1948, members of the Topeka chapter of the NAACP volunteered to challenge the “separate but equal” doctrine governing public education. Following a strategy mapped out by Thurgood Marshall, head of the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, the Topeka chapter continued to petition the Board of Education to voluntarily desegregate the public schools while branch lawyers began putting a case together and signing up plaintiffs. A group of 13 parents agreed to participate on behalf of their 20 children. Education was the main target of the NAACP legal strategy against segregation because of the role public education plays in promoting an equal society.

In December 1952, the U.S. Supreme Court had on its docket cases from Kansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, and Virginia, all challenging the constitutionality of racial segregation in public schools. The court had consolidated these five cases under one name, *Oliver Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka*. This collection of cases was the culmination of years of legal groundwork laid by the NAACP in its work to end segregation. None of the cases would have been possible without the many individuals who were courageous enough to take a stand against the segregated public school system. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a unanimous decision stating that it was unconstitutional—a

violation of the 14th Amendment—to separate children in public schools for no other reason than their race.

Kansas wrestled with the question of incorporating African Americans into the legal and social fabric of the territory from the beginning. During a period known as “Bleeding Kansas” in the 1850s, men took to the ballot box and the battlefield with equal fury to decide whether Kansas would enter the Union a free or slave state. Even when it was determined that Kansas would be a free state, citizens argued bitterly over the presence and position of African Americans in the new state. Kansas had voluntary segregation of public elementary schools in larger cities, with an emphasis in Topeka on providing materially equal facilities for African American children. This policy stood firm from the 1920s until the time of the Brown decision.

