

BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION



Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka is the landmark case in the United States credited with leading to the end of school segregation. An attorney from Dilworth Paxson held an active role in the case and it remains a vibrant part of the firm's history.

The case has roots that date back to 1951, when a class action suit was filed by 13 parents on behalf of their 20 children, against the Board of Education of the City of Topeka, Kansas. The parents each attempted to enroll their children in the closest neighborhood school but were collectively refused enrollment and directed to segregated schools.

The suit called for the school district to reverse its policy of racial segregation. By the time the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, it was still known by the name of *Brown v. Board of Education*, but it was actually a combination of five similar cases; the other four originated in South Carolina, Virginia, Delaware and Washington D.C. All five cases were sponsored by the NAACP.

Thurgood Marshall, a prominent New York attorney who would later join the U.S. Supreme Court, sought assistance in writing briefs for the plaintiffs in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. He asked a young African-American attorney named William T. Coleman Jr. to assist in that process.

William Coleman was an appropriate choice to lend assistance, having experienced racial bias first hand. Despite having a Harvard law degree and completing a clerkship for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, Coleman was not offered a job at a major Philadelphia law firm until Dilworth Paxson hired him in 1952.

To get those briefs completed, William Coleman would leave Philadelphia on Fridays at 5 p.m. and commute to Thurgood Marshall's New York firm for the weekend. He would spend 14 hours per day helping to write the briefs and develop legal strategies. Then he would commute back to Philadelphia on Monday morning.

On May 17, 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a unanimous decision stating that



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"separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The idea of "separate but equal" education was ruled a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The court held that even if segregated black and white schools were equal in quality with facilities and teachers, segregation alone was harmful to black students and unconstitutional. The court found that the nature of segregation created significant psychological and social disadvantages for black children. Thus, the decision helped pave the way for integration in the U.S. as well as the civil rights movement.

William Coleman is still embraced by the attorneys of Dilworth Paxson. He served the firm through the mid 1970's before being named U.S. Secretary of Transportation in the administration of President Gerald Ford. William Coleman recently attended the 75th anniversary gala celebrating the founding of Dilworth Paxson. Now in his 90s, he still practices law in Washington, D.C.