



From 'Brown v. The Board' to the Highest Bench

Honoring the legacy of Thurgood Marshall



STUDENTS GATHER AROUND A SEGREGATED SCHOOL IN WHITEHALL, ALABAMA, 1965. IMAGE SOURCE: [EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE](#)

Separate and not Equal

From a young age, Thurgood Marshall had the will to navigate an often complex and obstructionist legal system. Born on June 2nd, 1908 in Baltimore, Maryland, Marshall would file to have his name legally changed to 'Thurgood' from 'Thoroughgood' due to constant jibes and mocking from his neighborhood friends. He truly fell in love with law when as a punishment for misbehavior at school, he was made to read out loud the United States Constitution. While the document inspired him, at the same time, even at so young an age, the hypocrisy of a paper guaranteeing basic rights for all in an era of segregation and [Jim Crow](#) laws was staggering. Marshall would attend segregated schools in Maryland for both his primary education into high school.

Attending a segregated school as a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) child in early 20th-century America meant navigating an educational system designed to be separate and profoundly unequal. These schools were severely underfunded, with buildings that were often overcrowded, poorly maintained, and lacking basic facilities. Textbooks and supplies were usually hand-me-downs from more affluent schools; worn, outdated, and incomplete. The curriculum in schools was often limited, sometimes intentionally focused on vocational training rather than academic advancement, reinforcing societal barriers to higher education and professional careers. Despite being deeply committed and often highly qualified, BIPOC teachers were [paid significantly less](#) than their counterparts in other schools and faced overwhelming class sizes and scarce resources. Beyond the material shortcomings, the psychological toll of segregation was immense; the system communicated a clear message of inferiority, affecting the self-esteem of many students. Yet within this adversity, BIPOC schools also became centers of resilience, where families, churches, and communities rallied to support children's education and cultivate pride, discipline, and hope for a better future.

Thurgood Marshall would attend the oldest Africa-American education institution in the country, Lincoln University with the intention of becoming a lawyer. After facing [racial discrimination](#) in his application to the University of Maryland School of Law, Marshall enrolled at Howard University, where he would go on to shape his groundbreaking legal career. The vice-dean of Howard, a man named [Charles Hamilton Houston](#), was the director of the [NAACP](#) Legal Defense and Education Fund. Marshall was quickly recruited as his right hand man in the fight to end segregation in the United States. Thurgood was disillusioned by segregation, enshrined in law by the [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) Supreme Court Case. This case upheld racial segregation laws under the doctrine of "separate but equal." The Court ruled that segregated public facilities for "blacks" and "whites" were constitutional as long as they were equal in quality. This decision legitimized Jim Crow laws and institutionalized segregation for nearly 60 years. [Justice John Marshall Harlan's lone dissent](#) argued that the Constitution is "color-blind" and condemned segregation as unjust. Thurgood's goal was to make good on that dissent.

Thurgood would graduate from Howard University at the very top of his class, and would argue in some of the most important civil rights cases of the 20th century. Cases such as [Murray v. Pearson](#) or [Smith v. Allwright](#). Thurgood Marshall would argue 32 cases before the Supreme Court and would claim victory in 29 of them. But the case that would cement his legacy as one of the most influential lawyers in Judicial History was still ahead of him.

Brown v. The Board of Education

Oliver Brown was a disgruntled welder for the Santa Fe Railroad and an assistant Pastor at his local church. He was also a father, deeply dismayed by his daughter's, Linda Carol Brown, daily long journey to her nearest bus stop. Her segregated school, Monroe Elementary, was over a mile away from her home while the 'Whites only' Sumner Elementary was walking distance from her house. Oliver Brown would file a suit against the Topeka Kansas Board of Education in 1954. When the local courts struck the case down, Brown appealed to the Supreme Court. Brown was represented by the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall was now the NAACP's Legal Director-Counsel. Thurgood and his team would succeed on May 17th, 1954 with a unanimous ruling from the Supreme Court.

The decision came from a group of five cases brought together by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, led by Thurgood Marshall, and marked a pivotal turning point in the civil rights movement. A key element of the case was social science evidence, especially the famous "[doll test](#)" by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark. In their study, BIPOC children were shown identical dolls (two with lighter skin, two with brown skin) and asked which they preferred. Most chose the dolls with lighter skin, associating them with positive traits, while rejecting the dolls with brown skin." The findings showed how segregation fostered a sense of inferiority in BIPOC children, and the Supreme Court cited this evidence in concluding that separate schooling harmed students in ways ["unlikely ever to be undone."](#) Though the ruling was historic, change did not come quickly. A year later, the Court issued *Brown II*, calling for desegregation with all deliberate speed, but many states resisted. It took additional court decisions in the 1960s and '70s to enforce real change. Brown remains a cornerstone of civil rights law, not only for dismantling legal segregation but also for acknowledging the deep psychological harm it inflicted.

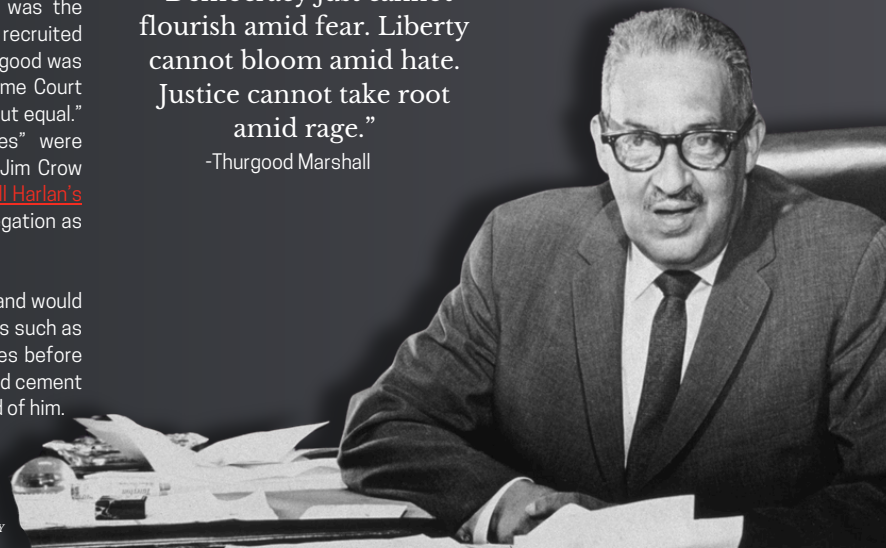
Elevation to the Supreme Court

The societal earthquake of this legal decision cemented Thurgood Marshall's reputation as a brilliant legal mind and a moral and fearless advocate for justice. This led to his appointment to the U.S. Court of Appeals in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson named him the first Black Solicitor General of the United States. Just two years later, Johnson nominated Marshall to the U.S. Supreme Court, where he was confirmed by the Senate and sworn in on October 2, 1967. He would become the first BIPOC person to serve as a Supreme Court Justice, the highest Judicial rank in the nation.

Marshall spent 24 years on the bench, consistently standing for individual rights, racial justice, and equal protection under the law. He retired in 1991 before passing away in 1993. His legacy is not only etched in legal history but in the lives of millions who saw the promise of justice a little more clearly because of his work.

"Democracy just cannot flourish amid fear. Liberty cannot bloom amid hate. Justice cannot take root amid rage."

-Thurgood Marshall



RIGHT: THURGOOD MARSHALL AT HIS DESK. IMAGE SOURCE: [HISTORY](#)