

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HEDGEPETH AND WILLIAMS DECISION

On January 31, 1944, the Supreme Court of New Jersey issued a ruling called Hedgepeth and Williams v. Board of Education, Trenton, NJ that proved to be a precedent-setting game-changer across the state and generated ripples of change felt across the nation. Consider the following:

BACKGROUND

- In 1896, the US Supreme Court issued a decision called Plessy v. Ferguson, the most discriminatory decision in the Nation's history. Better known as "Separate but Equal," this ill-advised decision authorized the separation of Americans by skin color and encouraged racism in every walk of life across the USA. Along with other states, NJ segregated its public schools despite a pre-existing state law (1881) that prohibited such racism.
- Before Hedgepeth and Williams, Black People were barred from hotels, restaurants and swimming pools. They were not allowed to use the public drinking fountains, toilets or movie theaters; most of them posted signs saying "WHITE ONLY." Lynchings, segregation, abuse and public humiliation were every-day experiences for People of Color.
- In Trenton, many people who worked in the factories lived in nearby neighborhoods. Since the factories employed whomever they needed, many such neighborhoods were racially diverse, as were the enrollments of the elementary schools which served them. And all students attended Trenton Central High School because of the cost of duplicating athletic fields, labs and swimming pools.

THE PROBLEM

- In grades 7-9, the policy of the Trenton Board of Education enrolled students in schools on the basis of skin color. The four middle schools (Junior #1 – Jr. #4), attended exclusively by white students, were spread across the city, while all Black students from all over town were admitted only to the Lincoln School, also known as Junior #5. They had to travel to and from home and school the best way they could. Because of poverty, most walked — in all kinds of weather.
- In 1939, a brand-new Jr. #2 was built in the neighborhood in which the Hedgepeth, the Williams and the Snyder families lived. Their children, Janet, Leon and Dolores, respectively, had been playmates and classmates thru 6th grades. In Fall of 1943, the rising 7th graders applied for admission to Jr. #2. Dolores, who was white, was admitted, but Janet and Leon, who were Black, were turned away by a school secretary. Their mothers appealed the decision, which was first ignored, then turned down by the school principal, then by the superintendent and finally by the Board.

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- Mrs. Hedgepeth and Mrs. Williams then petitioned the NAACP which assigned Mr. Robert Queen, a brilliant Black lawyer, to handle their suit to make the Board enroll their children in Jr. #2. When lawyer Queen discovered the NJ Law of 1881, which had never been enforced, he pursued the case all the way to the NJ Supreme Court. Dr. Paul Loser the superintendent, proudly testified that Jr. #2 had not been built for “Negroes,” and claimed that “Negroes” were actually better off when separated from whites. The NJ Supreme Court unanimously disagreed!!

IMMEDIATE RESULTS OF THE CASE

On January 31, 1944, the Court rendered its Hedgepeth and Williams v. Board of Education, Trenton, NJ decision which the Court:

- Ordered TBoE to immediately enroll Janet Hedgepeth and Leon Williams in Jr #2, and admit all Black students to all Trenton public schools by the end of the school year;
- Prohibited any NJ school districts from denying admission to students on the basis of race or skin color.

LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THE CASE (Examples)

Through its Hedgepeth and Williams decision, New Jersey:

- Required all of its public schools to admit African Americans and other children of color, thus neutralizing Plessy (“Separate but Equal”) in all NJ public schools; which
- Formed the basis of the US Supreme Court’s Brown decision 10 years later.

Hedgepeth and Williams also influenced the passage of the 1947 State Constitution outlawing discrimination in all public affairs; which

- Outlawed “Separate but Equal” (Plessy) in all government agencies and in the NJ National Guard - - 17 years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did the same thing for the rest of the Nation. The 1947 Constitution also
- Granted NJ citizens the right to a Thorough and Efficient educational system; and
- Generated the NJ Law Against Discrimination, arguably the strongest civil rights law in the Nation; which, in turn:
- Established the NJ Department of Civil Service and the NJ Division on Civil Rights; and
- Provided the basis for the Discrimination Prohibition Law of 1974, which established Equality in Educational Programs (Affirmative Action Programs) facilitating the elimination of discrimination among staff, students and educational programs in all of the State’s public schools.

Hedgepeth and Williams was pretty good work for two otherwise-ordinary mothers, which the Trenton NJ Board of Education honored by re-naming Jr. #2 the Hedgepeth-Williams Middle School in 1991.