

Who was ... Charles Hamilton Houston?

Charles Hamilton Houston: attorney, educator

Born: 1895 in Washington, DC

Died: 1950 in Washington, DC

Why is he important?

Charles Hamilton Houston is often to as “the man who killed Jim Crow.” Working as the first special counsel for the NAACP, Mr. Houston devised the legal strategy to directly challenge the “separate but equal” principle, articulated in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision by the US Supreme Court. Beginning in 1938, Mr. Houston won a series of lawsuits, arguing that segregation “imported” inequality and was, therefore, unconstitutional. One idea behind this strategy was to demand that schools provide



clearly equal pay for faculty members and equal facilities with the goal of making “separate but equal” so costly that universities would abandon their efforts to maintain segregation. This strategy eventually resulted in the 1954 *Brown V. Board of Education* case, argued in the US Supreme Court by Thurgood Marshall (one of Mr. Houston’s students at the Howard University School of Law), that effectively ended legal segregation in public schools. Unfortunately, this came four years after Mr. Houston’s death. In addition to education, Mr. Houston won antidiscrimination lawsuits in areas including jury selection, union membership, and restrictive covenants in housing.

Prior to joining the NAACP in 1935, Mr. Houston was the Vice-Dean and then Dean of the Howard University School of Law and worked to rebuild the school as a training center for black lawyers who would fight segregation and discrimination in the courts. He raised the admission requirements, extended the curriculum from part-time to full-time, and mentored a generation of students.

Highlights and Honors

- 1919: Admitted to the Harvard University Law School and later elected as the first black student editor for the *Harvard Law Review*.
- 1929-1935: Vice-Dean and then Dean of the Howard University School of Law.
- 1935-1940: Special Counsel for the NAACP.
- 1950: Posthumously awarded the NAACP’s Springarn Medal, awarded annually for high achievement with the goals of calling attention to distinguished achievement among African Americans and stimulating the ambition of African American youth.
- 1958: The Howard University School of Law main building was dedicated as the Charles Hamilton Houston Hall.
- Harvard University Law School has established the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice. <https://charleshamiltonhouston.org/>

- The Washington Bar Association annually awards the Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit to individuals “who have embodied Houstonian principles through leadership and service.” <https://washingtonbar.org/signature-events/>

To learn more about Charles Hamilton Houston

Here are links to biographies from 3 different sources, all with slightly different perspectives on his life and work.

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Hamilton_Houston
- <https://blackhistorynow.com/charles-hamilton-houston/>
- <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/social-sciences-and-law/social-reformers/charles-hamilton-houston>

In addition, here is a video that describes the path from *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the pivotal role played by Charles Hamilton Houston.

- The Road to Brown (1989, video – 47:37). University of Virginia in association with California Newsreel and Kinocraft. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Upw5T06T04>