

1954 Decision on Education was first argued in 1849 in the case of Sarah C. Roberts vs. The City of Boston

To acquire an education was the burning desire of most free Negroes, especially those who had formerly been slaves. Only a few Northern communities, and no Southern ones had free public schools open to Negroes. Ohio, from 1829 to 1849, excluded Negroes from the public schools and most of the other western states made little or no provision for them. In 1824 the City of New York took over the support of its seven African Free Schools. The first of these schools had been founded by the Manumission Society in 1787, with a white teacher, Cornelia Davis. Thus colored children had free education available to them in New York years before there were similar public schools for white children. And the African Free School became the precursor of the New York free public school system. Later, Manhattan's African Schools had Negro men and women teachers, and many distinguished persons were graduated from them, including Patrick Reason, Henry Highland Garnet and the actor Ira Aldridge.

In 1849 Sarah C. Roberts sued the city of Boston for its discrimination in refusing to admit a colored child to its school. Her lawyer was Charles Sumner, who was to become a noted abolitionist Senator, and Sumner's assistant was a young Negro attorney, Robert Morris. Their case was lost, but in 1855 the Massachusetts legislature declared that "no person shall be excluded from a Public School on account of race, color or religious opinions." In the South, of course, the few educational facilities which ex-

isted for free Negroes were entirely separate and often the teaching of Negroes had to be clandestine. But for almost thirty years prior to 1831 a Negro, John Chavis, conducted an excellent school in Raleigh, North Carolina, for white students by day and for Negroes by night. He had to dismiss his Negro students after 1831.

In the realm of higher education, the first colored student to graduate from an American college was John Russwurm, who received a degree from Bowdoin College in Maine in 1826. Oberlin in 1834 put to its white students a questionnaire "as to the practicability of admitting persons of color," and was one of the first colleges in the West to enroll not only Negroes, but women. It had been established by abolitionists who had withdrawn from Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati after free discussions of the evils of slavery had been curtailed there. In Kentucky an anti-slavery editor and an abolitionist minister in 1855 established Berea College, which freely admitted Negroes as well as whites. Its charter began with the phrase: "God hath made of one blood all nations that dwell upon the face of the earth." But, because many institutions of higher learning still had no place for free Negroes, colleges such as Wilberforce in Ohio (1856) and Ashmun Institute (later renamed Lincoln University) in Pennsylvania (1854) came into being especially for the education of Negro youth. Wilberforce was supported by the Methodist Episcopal Church and Lincoln by the Presbyterians.



The original building of the Wilberforce University.



Negro children being denied entrance to a school.