

Professor William Howard Day and the effort to desegregate Pennsylvania's public schools in the post Civil War Era

Importance of *Allen v. Meadville School Board of Directors* (1880-1881)

Judge Pearson Church of the Crawford County Court found that racial segregation in the Meadville public school system was operating in violation of an 1854 statute that originally allowed for separate schools based on race. Church ruled that racially segregated schools are in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The opinion set the stage for William Howard Day's grassroots initiative to align state law with federal law.

The Plaintiff

Elias H. Allen tried to enroll his daughter, Mary Ellen, 8, and son, Charles, 6, in Huldekoper Grammar School (South Ward) but was turned away. Allen's children were expected to attend the all black Park Avenue School. Thomas Roddy, a Crawford County lawyer, Republican, and city councilman, argued the case for Allen.

The Defendant

Meadville School Board of Directors was represented by W. R. Bole, a lawyer and lifelong resident of Meadville. Bole, a Democrat, was admitted to the Crawford County bar in 1868.



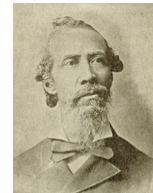
The Judge



Pearson Church a registered Democrat, Grand Master Mason, delegate of the 1874-75 Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention, was the trial's wildcard.

The Agitator

William Howard Day's "Pressure the Assembly" effort as a longtime member of the state's reputable civil rights organization (Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League) influenced Judge Church's verdict and the subsequent legislation that desegregated Pennsylvania's schools in 1881.



Wm. Howard Day's Statements on School Desegregation

Day's reaction to the phrase "white freemen" in the 1838 PA Constitution

"We are thus by this one word, strange and inconsistent as it may seem, deprived of all the blessings which flow out from the 'free consent of the governed . . . Law finds its home and its definition nowhere but in the bonds of universal brotherhood, the claims of equality or equity, the demands of inherent and inalienable rights, identical with the principles of democracy and the genius of the Christian religion. We have been taught by you to believe that the Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the land . . . The Constitution of the United States makes no distinction of color."

Day's memorandum sent to PA State Constitutional Convention, Jan. 16, 1873

"To the Honorable, the members of the Constitutional Convention assembled: We, the undersigned, citizens of Pennsylvania, being discriminated against by the word "white" in the Constitution of the State, do most earnestly memorialize your honorable body to remove such discrimination, and your memorialists will ever pray."

Day's People's League, Education Committee Resolution, October 1878

"[I move] that the Legislature abolish all laws making discrimination on account of color, and that whatever separate schools are forced upon the colored people, by reason of the prejudice of a community, colored teachers have the preference. . . [our] resolutions also direct attention to the imperfect school buildings for the colored people, and if the same is not improved by the [school] directors, I recommend an appeal to the State Superintendent, and that if separate schools be insisted on in their appointments and surroundings they shall be [the] very best that can be furnished, cost what they may. Where the highest grades are not provided in the city schools, the doors of existing high grade schools shall be thrown open to the qualified youth of the State, even if these doors have to be forced by the decision of a court of law. A protest to colored children having to traverse long distance to school, and also to whole cities being regarded as one district. . ."

ANNOUNCEMENT IN LANCASTER DAILY INTELLIGENCER: May 17, 1881

"A Committee of PA Equal Rights League [led by Wm. Howard Day] appointed at its sixth annual meeting ... to secure a repeal of the act of ... 1854, creating separate schools in this state for colored children . . . [this committee] has issued a circular to members of the Legislature asking for its repeal . . . Judge Church of Crawford County, a Democratic judge, has pronounced this law unconstitutional."

"People's College" Speech, June 20, 1888

"Knowledge of the work in this high school . . . impress upon me with renewed force the idea which is growing in the [Harrisburg] community, and which has been recently voiced more than formerly, that this is the people's college. It is mainly because [public school] belongs to the people, and is for the benefit of the people.

"[Segregationists'] objections were based either upon ignorance, prejudice, or cynicism. Indeed, no man is born into knowledge and training for duty, for every duty is essential. [High schools] lays no claim to aristocratic distinction. It is simply the crowning point, the apex of the common school. It borrows its eminence not simply from its curriculum, but from the usefulness with which it is intended to serve the whole people, high or low, rich or poor, in the graded and necessary preparation for American duties."

"Your diploma to be received is not simply your parchment, paper, speaking of you; your diploma, for the world to read, is yourself-your thought, your conduct, your life-work. OUR LIFE!"

Negative reactions to the June 8, 1881 desegregation statute

(Clearfield Republican, June 29, 1881)

"Next Winter the public schools will be obliged to receive colored children, as well as white, under the new law of the State . . . repealing the old law which provides for the establishment of separate schools for whites and blacks. This will do away with the necessity for the colored school building in Bellefonte and also with the necessity for a colored school teacher. We don't believe our colored citizens will like this better than the whites will."

(Lancaster Intelligencer, Sept. 12, 1881)

"The admission of two colored children last week to the Thaddeus Stevens school, Philadelphia, created such a disturbance among the other pupils that policeman had to be called to restore order."