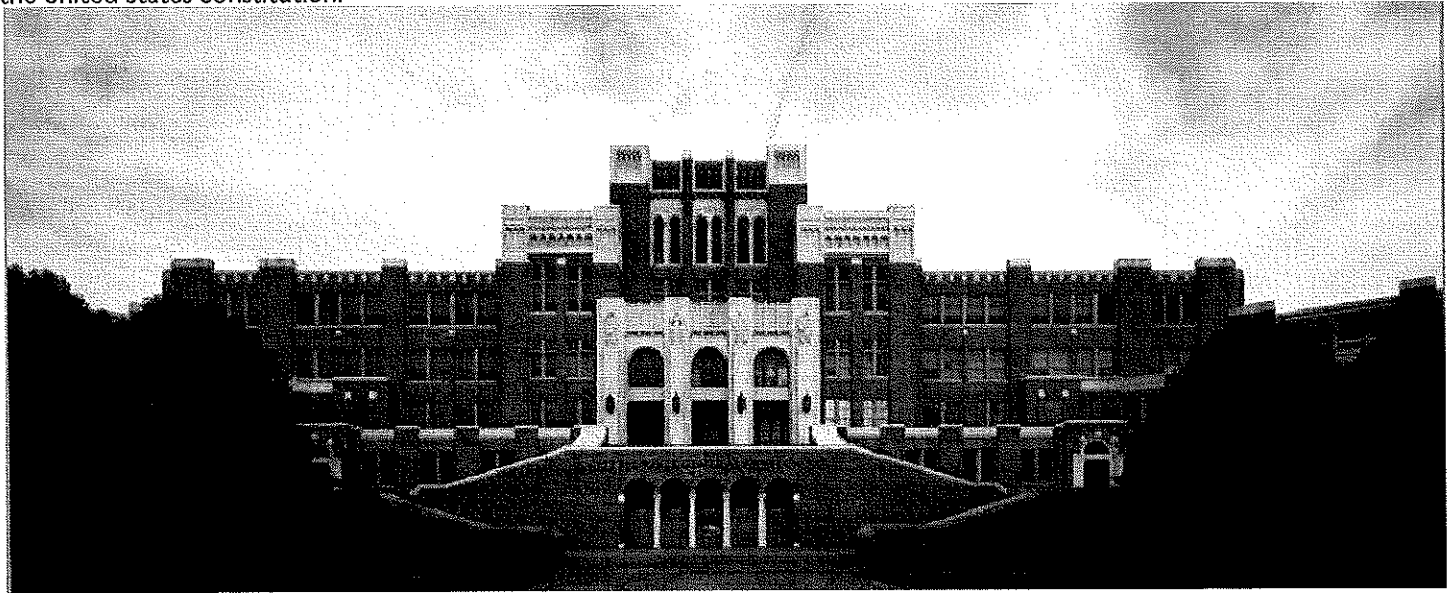


Little Rock Central High School, the symbol of the end of racially segregated public schools in the United States, was the site of the first important test for the implementation of the United States Supreme Court's historic ***Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*** decision of May 17, 1954. This decision declared that **segregation** in public education was an **unconstitutional** violation of the "equal protection of the laws" clause in the **Fourteenth Amendment**.

"All the World is Watching Us":

The Crisis at Little Rock Central High School, 1954-1957

** *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* was a reversal of the 1896 *Plessy v Ferguson* ruling that "separate but equal" was acceptable for African Americans (mostly in the areas of interstate transportation) who were guaranteed equal protection under the United States Constitution.



Events in the fall of 1957 drew international attention as Little Rock became the epitome of state resistance when Arkansas **Governor Orval E. Faubus** directly questioned the sanctity of the federal court system and the authority of the Supreme Court's desegregation ruling when nine African-American high school students sought an education at Little Rock Central High School.

The controversy in Little Rock was the first fundamental test of the United State's resolve to enforce African-American **civil rights** in the face of massive southern defiance during the period following the *Brown* decisions. When **President Dwight D. Eisenhower** was compelled by white mob violence to use federal troops to ensure the rights of African-American children to attend the previously all-white Little Rock Central High School, he became the first president since the post-Civil War Reconstruction period to use federal troops in support of African-American civil rights. As a result, the eyes of the world were focused on Little Rock in 1957 and the struggle became a symbol of southern racist reaction, as Governor Faubus created a constitutional crisis.

1 On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. In August of 1954, the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** petitioned the **Little Rock School Board** for immediate **integration** of the schools. In response, the school board stated that "until the 'Supreme Court of the United States makes its decision...more specific, Little Rock School District will continue with its present program." With this statement, the school board ensured that they would not desegregate the schools of the city quickly. The NAACP (led by lawyer Wiley Branton) petitioned the school board "to take immediate steps to reorganize the public schools under your jurisdiction in accordance with the constitutional principles enunciated by the Supreme Court."

2 In 1955, responding to further Supreme Court rulings and re-argument of the *Brown v. Board* case the Little Rock School Board adopted a plan of gradual integration called the **Blossom Plan** (named for the Little Rock School District superintendent, Virgil T. Blossom). It called for **desegregation** to begin at

the high school level in September of 1957. Lower grades would be gradually integrated over the following six years.

While the local, state, and federal governments were trying to figure out ways to desegregate schools, a group of segregationists formed and called themselves the **Capital Citizens Council**. Their goal was to keep the schools of Little Rock segregated. Another group, headed by several women, formed the **Mother's League of Central High School** to oppose desegregation.

- 3 The first test came in 1956, when 27 African-American students attempted to register in white Little Rock schools, but were turned down. Instead, they were told to attend school in the newly opened Horace Mann High School for black students at the former Dunbar High School building because construction was not yet completed. Superintendent Blossom assured the student's parents that he wanted to be "kind" to these students, but one NAACP representative said that the superintendent's actions were "more like the old run-around deception, than an honest and conscientious plan of the school board to integrate the schools." Next, the NAACP filed a lawsuit on behalf of 33 black students who were denied admittance to white Little Rock schools in 1956. In **Aaron v. Cooper**, the NAACP stated that their objective in filing the suit "was to secure the prompt and orderly end of segregation in the public schools. We want all children, regardless of race, to have the opportunity to go to the public schools nearest their homes"

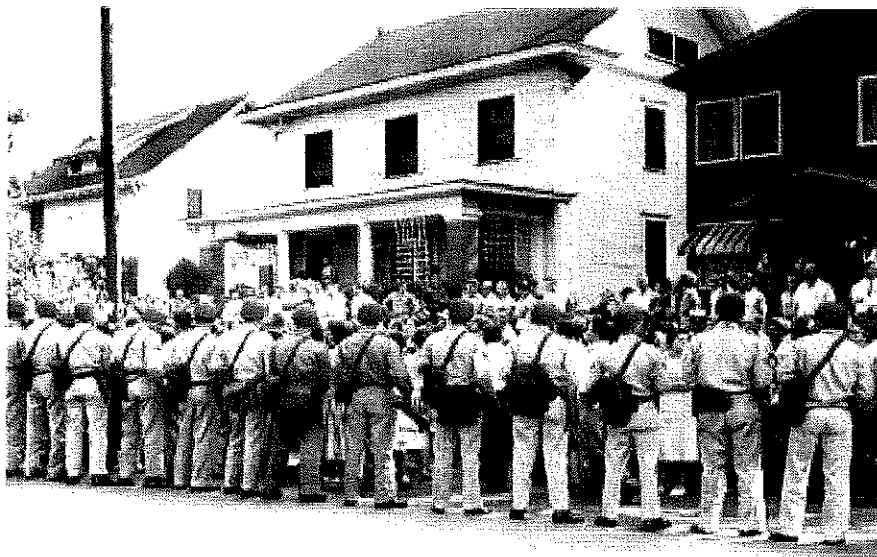
The suit was dismissed and a federal judge declared that the Little Rock school board acted in "good faith" but the judge retained jurisdiction over the case.

As desegregation of Little Rock schools grew closer, the **Arkansas State Legislature** approved four "segregation bills" in early 1957. These bills created the **State Sovereignty Committee** (House Bill 322) to investigate those encouraging integration, removed the mandatory school attendance requirement at all integrated schools (HB 323), required the registration of certain individuals and organizations such as the NAACP (HB 324), and authorized school boards to use school funds to fight integration (HB325). In addition, the legislature also placed a three percent sales tax on the election ballot to ensure that more money would be spent toward education and fighting desegregation.



The Little Rock Nine

Melba Pattillo Beals,
San Francisco, CA
Elizabeth Eckford,
Little Rock, Arkansas
Ernest Green,
Washington, D.C.
Gloria Ray Karlmark,
The Netherlands
Carlotta Walls Lanier,
Englewood, CO
Dr. Terrence Roberts,
Los Angeles, CA
Jefferson Thomas,
Grove Port, Ohio
Minnijean Brown
Little Rock, Arkansas
Thelma
Mothershed Wair,
Little Rock, Arkansas



The Arkansas National Guard standing watch on Park Street in front of Little Rock Central High School, September 1957. Courtesy of the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site, Little Rock, AR.

The Capital Citizens Council issued a statement in mid-1957 that supported segregation: "The Negroes have ample and fine schools here and there is no need for this problem except to satisfy the aims of a few white and Negro revolutionaries in the local Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People."

Other members of the Capital Citizens Council gathered in the summer of 1957 to plan their fight against desegregation. They ran advertisements in newspapers that included the following questions: "At social functions would black males and white females dance together? Would black students join clubs and travel with whites? Would black and white students use the same rest rooms?"

In the midst of growing turmoil in August 1957, the governor of Georgia came to Arkansas and held a state-wide meeting to oppose desegregation. He praised the Arkansans who were fighting to preserve the right of the state to oppose the federal government (also called *state's rights*). He also met with the Capital Citizens Council and Governor Faubus to show his support for their efforts.

4 On the morning of September 2, 1957, Governor Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine African-American students from entering Little Rock Central High School. In a televised speech, he proclaimed that it was to prevent violence and protect the students. The nine students were told by the Little Rock school board members to stay away from school for their own safety because the governor had heard a rumor that white supremacists were headed toward Little Rock.

5 On September 3, 1957, the Mother's League held a sunrise service at Little Rock Central High School. It was attended by members of the Capital Citizens Council, angry parents of white students, and local religious figures. The crowd sang "Dixie," flew the Confederate battle flag, and praised Governor Faubus. Despite the protest, federal Judge Richard Davies issued his ruling that desegregation would continue the next day. In response, Governor Faubus ordered the National Guard to stay at the school.

"We are confident that the citizens of Little Rock will demonstrate on Tuesday for the world to see that we are a law abiding people."

—Arkansas Gazette
editorial,
September 1, 1957

“Any time it takes eleven thousand five hundred soldiers to assure nine Negro children their constitutional rights in a democratic society, I can’t be happy.”

-Daisy Bates

The nine black students attempted to enter Little Rock Central High School and were turned away by the National Guard on September 4. Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, and Terrence Roberts arrived at the school without their parents. Eckford found herself surrounded by an angry mob. She sat alone at on a bus stop bench and waited to go to her mother’s work. Later, Eckford remembered, “I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob – someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.” At least one sympathetic member of the crowd, Dr. Benjamin Fine, a white reporter from New York, sat down beside her and said, ‘Don’t let them see you cry.’” The following day, none of the nine students attempted to re-enter the school and the Little Rock School Board requested that desegregation be temporarily halted.

In the following days, Governor Faubus appeared on national television to reaffirm his belief in segregation. He also met with President Eisenhower and “assured the President of my desire to cooperate with him in carrying out the duties resting upon both of us under the Federal Constitution.” Meanwhile, Judge Davies began legal proceedings against the governor and several National Guardsmen for interfering with integration. Under federal court order, Governor Faubus removed the troops, left the state for a governor’s conference, and the city police had to try and keep order at the school .

6 Finally, on September 23, the nine African-American students (after facing a crowd of over 1,000 white protestors), entered Little Rock Central High School. An anonymous man commented, “They’ve gone in...Oh, God, [they] are in the school.” Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the nine, remembered the moment, “I had long dreamed of entering Central High. I could not have imagined what that privilege could cost me.”

White students had mixed reactions to the nine African-American students. Several jumped out of windows to avoid contact with the students. Others, like Robin Woods, said, “That was the first time I’d ever gone to school with a Negro, and it didn’t hurt a bit.”



Outside of the school, black journalists who covered the story were harassed and physically attacked. They ran from the mob and took refuge elsewhere in Little Rock. President Eisenhower was “disgusted” when he heard about the rioting and ordered in federal troops to contain the chaos. Over 1,000 members of the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division (“Screaming Eagles”) from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, came to Little Rock. The Arkansas National Guard troops at the school were then placed under their command. Observing the soldiers, activist and mentor to the nine students, Daisy Gatson Bates commented that “any time it takes eleven thousand five hundred soldiers to assure nine Negro children their constitutional rights in a democratic society, I can’t be happy.”

Daisy Bates, mentor to the Little Rock Nine during the crisis of 1957 (Binn Studio Photograph). Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR.

7 On September 25, the nine students were escorted back into Central High School after General Edwin Walker of the United States Army addressed the white students of Little Rock Central High School in the auditorium, "You have nothing to fear from my soldiers, and no one will interfere with your coming, going, or your peaceful pursuit of your studies." When they arrived, the student body reaction was once again mixed. One student commented that "if parents would just go home and let us alone, we'll be all right...we just want them to leave us be. We can do it."

Governor Faubus, meanwhile, took a siege mentality to forced integration at Little Rock Central High School and said, "We are now in occupied territory. Evidence of the naked force of the federal government is here apparent, in these, unsheathed bayonets in the backs of schoolgirls." After less than a month at the school, most members of the 101st Airborne left Arkansas and turned their duties over to the Arkansas National Guard, which was now federalized. Discipline problems resurfaced at the school after the federal troops left and school records indicate that incidents of harassment of the nine students escalated.



Elizabeth Eckford waiting for the bus on the morning of September 4, 1957 while an angry mob surrounds her. Courtesy of the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site, Little Rock, AR. Top photo: Governor Orval Faubus, 1957. Courtesy of the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site, Little Rock, AR.

Local business leaders, who had called for peaceful compliance with court orders for school integration, were met with resistance. For instance, the Mother's League sought through the court system to have the federal troops removed from Central High School on the grounds that it violated federal and state constitutions (the action was dismissed) and Governor Faubus issued statements expressing his desire that the nine students be removed from the school. Religious congregations of all faiths gathered to pray for a peaceful end to the conflict and the NAACP fought the validity of the Sovereignty Commission and the forced registration of certain membership lists and organizations. One of those fined for not registering as a member of the NAACP was Daisy Bates, mentor to the nine students, who was fined \$100 for not complying with the State Sovereignty Commission regulations.

4 Throughout the school year, incidents of violence against the nine students grew. Verbal arguments and physical violence was common. The school received five bomb threats in a seven-day period in January 1958. That month, Minnijean Brown, one of the nine students, had chili dumped on her shoulders by a boy in the lunchroom. A month later, Brown called one of her tormenters "white trash" and was attacked by several bystanders. She said of the argument, "I just can't take everything they throw at me without fighting back..." Brown was expelled - along with several other white students who had cards that read, "One down...eight to go" (these cards were distributed to the school students). After these incidents, Minnijean Brown left the school and moved to New York. The violence was not limited to the nine students--a white boy who talked with Ernest Green was verbally threatened and his car was vandalized.

A

The crisis at the school spilled over into the city of Little Rock. Segregationists threatened to boycott businesses that advertised in the *Arkansas Gazette* (which they viewed as being pro-integration). A new African-American organization, the Greater Little Rock Improvement League formed to end the crisis without pursuing litigation (counter to the actions of the NAACP). Meanwhile, the Capital Citizens Council and other segregationists continue to file legal action against integration of the city's schools. Local businessmen proposed alternate plans for desegregation which were supported by both the *Arkansas Gazette* and the *Arkansas Democrat*, but opposed by the NAACP, the Capital Citizens Council, and the Mother's League (Governor Faubus remained non-committal), and Harry Ashmore, a journalist/editorialist for the *Arkansas Gazette*, received a Pulitzer Prize for his objectivity in covering the Little Rock Central High School Crisis.

By the time the first African-American student graduated from Little Rock Central High School in the spring of 1958, events had not calmed down. The only senior among the nine students, Ernest Green, was given his diploma while police and federal troops stood in attendance. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. attended the graduation ceremony virtually unnoticed. Green later commented, "It's been an interesting year. I've had a course in human relations first hand."

"Little Rock arose yesterday to gaze upon the incredible spectacle of an empty high school surrounded by National Guard troops called out by Governor Faubus to protect life and property against a mob that never materialized.

—*Arkansas Gazette* editorial,
September 4, 1957

Visit the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site!

Guided Group Visits (approximately 30-45 minutes long) are offered from 10:00 a.m. through 2:00 p.m. weekdays. Other times are available upon advance request.

Guided Group Visits for more than ten (10) persons or more are scheduled by reservation. Please call the Visitor Center at 501-374-1957 to schedule a tour (please have two dates and times in mind when calling).

A tour of specific areas of Little Rock Central High School must be arranged with the Interpretive Park Rangers in advance. These tours are done at strict times since the high school has students and classes between August and May. The schedule of tours will relate to the bell schedules.

Visitors may also engage in self-guided tours of the Visitor Center, the Commemorative Garden, and the historic district of Little Rock Central High School at any time (Little Rock Central High School, Magnolia Mobil Service Station Visitor Center, Ponder's Drug Store, Commemorative Garden, and Quigley Stadium). However, it is recommended that any group with ten (10) or more person call for a Guided Tour.

