

# LITTLE ROCK INTEGRATION CRISIS



Photo by Will Counts courtesy of Vivian Counts and Indiana University Archives.

## INTRODUCTION

May 17, 1954 marked a turning point in U.S. history as the Supreme Court issued a unanimous opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* declaring segregated public education unconstitutional. Striking down this deeply rooted tradition in communities like Little Rock, Arkansas, was a major victory for the civil rights movement, but it would be met with a combined resistance of angry mobs and state troops, despite efforts from the courts. A year after publishing the decision known as *Brown I*, the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Brown II* in 1955, which required public schools to begin integration “with all deliberate speed.” This ambiguous phrase allowed school districts to do anything but enforce immediate integration.

Nevertheless, Virgil Blossom, the superintendent of schools in the Little Rock school district, came up with a gradual integration plan, and the school board set the date for integration to begin in the 1957-58 school year at the high school level. Nine African American students were carefully chosen to become part of a previously all-white student body at Central High School.

It would take court orders from the 8<sup>th</sup> Circuit’s U.S. District Court Judge Ronald N. Davies, federal troops sent by President Eisenhower, and nearly a month of attempts for these nine teenagers to become the first African American students to attend Central High. September 1957 was undoubtedly a time of crisis for Little Rock, Arkansas, but more importantly, it was a time of triumph for all Americans. The federal courts’ finding and enforcing that separate was not equal proved the United States to be a government for its people.

## LITTLE ROCK NINE

These are the Little Rock Nine who, with the support of their families, embraced personal sacrifice in desegregating Central High School so that African Americans could have improved educational opportunities.

**Minnijean Brown:** Junior, age 16. Characterized by other students as hot-tempered, she was suspended and later expelled from Central when she spilled chili on students who harrassed her in the cafeteria. Now Minnijean Brown Trickey, she finished high school in New York City and eventually earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work. After living in Canada for some time with her husband, she came back in 1999 to act as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Workforce Diversity under the Clinton administration. She has received numerous awards for her activism.

**Elizabeth Eckford:** Junior, age 15. Perhaps the most recognizable of the Nine because of the photographs taken by Will Counts on September 4, 1957 of her bravely facing the angry mob and troops alone. Elizabeth left Little Rock for a short time to earn degrees and enter the army. Currently she is employed by the Pulaski County District Court as a probation officer. Of the nine students, Elizabeth is the only one who has spent much of her adult life in Little Rock.

**Ernest Green:** Senior, age 16. Central Class of 1958. Ernest was an Eagle Scout and had met some white Central High students while working as a locker-room attendant at a country club. He made history in May 1958 by being the first African American to graduate from the formerly all-white Central High School. Through a scholarship provided by an anonymous donor, Ernest received bachelor's and master's degrees from Michigan State University. He served as the Assistant Secretary of Labor during the Carter administration and has been a board member of several organizations, including the NAACP.

**Thelma Mothershed:** Junior, age 16. Graduated from Central by mail. Thelma had a congenital heart condition, and her parents worried that the stress of integrating Central would be too much for her. Since the Little Rock schools were closed during Thelma's senior year, she earned her degree from Central through correspondence courses and summer school in St. Louis, Missouri. She later earned a master's degree in guidance and counseling and taught in the East St. Louis school system for 28 years. In retirement, Thelma Mothershed Wair served as a counselor in the St. Clair County Juvenile Detention Center and an instructor of survival skills for abused women.

**Melba Pattillo:** Junior, age 15. Melba's parents disagreed about whether she should attend Central, but her grandmother supported her decision. An outgoing student, Melba wanted to become an actress. Perhaps as a result of the media's role in the crisis, Melba Pattillo Beals became interested in journalism and began writing for major magazines at 17. She wrote an acclaimed memoir about her experience as one of the Little Rock Nine, *Warriors Don't Cry*.

**Gloria Ray:** Sophomore, age 14. Gloria enrolled in Central to receive a better education; she wanted to become an atomic scientist. Her mother, a sociologist working for the state of Arkansas, lost her job and was barred from state employment when she refused to withdraw her daughter from Central. Now retired, she has worked as a mathematician, technical writer, and patent attorney. She founded the international journal *Computers in Industry*.

**Terrence Roberts:** Junior, age 15. Terrence was an "A" student who wanted to become a doctor. Melba Pattillo Beals described him as "a very verbal person who could be counted on to give the funniest, most intelligent analysis of any situation." Terrence earned a Ph.D. in psychology. He has been the assistant dean of the School of Social Welfare at U.C.L.A. and chair of the Master of Arts in Psychology Program at Antioch University Los Angeles. In 1979, he met Governor Faubus on *Good Morning America* and said, "I really feel it was a violation of public trust to practice your own personal policies of racism in that position. You endangered not only my life, but the lives of hundreds of other people, both black and white."

**Jefferson Thomas:** Sophomore, age 15. Central Class of 1960. At Horace Mann, Jefferson had been a star track athlete and president of the student body, but at Central, like the rest of the Little Rock Nine, he was not allowed to participate in extracurriculars. In 1964, he narrated the Academy Award-winning film *Nine from Little Rock*. After college, he served as an infantry squad leader in Vietnam and later became an accountant for the U.S. Department of Defense.

**Carlotta Walls:** Sophomore, age 14. Central Class of 1960. Carlotta, the youngest of the Nine, was inspired by Rosa Parks to attend Central. She played baseball with her neighbors, black and white, and did not expect to encounter such trouble in integrating Central. Carlotta Walls LaNier is now a real estate broker and president of the Little Rock Nine Foundation.

## ENTRY DENIED

As the Little Rock Nine prepared to begin school at Central High on September 3, 1957, segregationists fought to halt integration through a series of lawsuits. Despite School Superintendent Virgil Blossom and Little Rock Mayor Woodrow Mann's support of integration, the politically-motivated Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus joined the majority of Arkansas voters in opposing it. He publicly warned that "white supremacist caravans" were on their way to Little Rock and that "blood will run in the streets" if federal authorities forced whites to go to school with blacks. Thereafter a series of unfortunate events unfolded that September, thrusting Little Rock into a glaring national spotlight.

### **Sept. 2      Faubus' Televised Announcement**

Governor Orval Faubus announces on TV that he will use the federalized Arkansas National guard to "protect the peace" by keeping black students from entering Central High.

### **Sept. 3      Judge Davies Orders Integration**

U.S. District Judge Ronald N. Davies, of the District of North Dakota sitting by assignment to ease the caseload in the Eastern District of Arkansas, orders the school to integrate according to the plan already approved by the court.

### **Sept. 4      National Guard Turn Little Rock Nine Away**

The Little Rock Nine make their first attempt to enter Central High but are turned away by the Arkansas National Guard by order of Governor Faubus.



Photo by Will Counts courtesy of Vivian Counts and Indiana University Archives.

Daisy Bates, the Arkansas NAACP Chapter President, had arranged for the Little Rock Nine to drive to school together, but because Elizabeth Eckford did not receive the message to meet, she endures a nightmarish walk, facing the armed troops and mob alone. Shouts of "Two, four, six, eight, we ain't gonna integrate!" and "Get her, get the nigger out of there. Hang her black ass!" rang in the air as Elizabeth marched bravely on.

## INTEGRATION BY ARMED ESCORT

Defiant attempts by Governor Faubus and Arkansas segregationists to block integration were countered by federal authority, as the events of September 1957 continued to unfold.

### **Sept. 9      NAACP Seek Removal of National Guard**

Backed by the Department of Justice, the NAACP asks the federal court to prohibit the Governor from using the National Guard to keep students away.



Judge Davies (Sept. 7, 1957  
Grand Forks Herald file photo)

### **Sept. 21      Judge Davies Orders Removal of National Guard**

Judge Davies orders Governor Faubus to remove the National Guard, ruling that Faubus exceeded his state authority in not carrying out the federally-approved integration plan.

### **Sept. 23      Little Rock Nine Must Leave School**

Escorted by Little Rock police, the Little Rock Nine enter Central High unnoticed. After word gets out that the Nine are in the school, an angry mob gathers, attacking photographers and journalists, and the black students are removed for fear that the mob will overrun the police.

### **Sept. 25      Army Troops Escort Little Rock Nine**

By order of President Eisenhower, the 101st Airborne Division, the “Screaming Eagles,” escorts the Nine into Central High, thereby enforcing the city’s desegregation plan.

## **UNWELCOME AND UNCERTAIN**

In 1957, as it is today, Central High was considered one of the finest high schools in the United States. During the crisis that unfolded that September, the Little Rock Nine’s goal was to enter the doors of Central High in order to receive an education that would provide opportunities for the future.

Once inside, however, their goal shifted to one of survival. They were cornered and threatened, tripped, spat upon, and when they reported incidents of attack, their claims were often dismissed. Some of the more vicious attacks included spraying acid in eyes, holding students under scalding water in the gym showers, throwing paper fire bombs into bathroom stalls, and jabbing with sharp objects. The Nine were advised not to come to the aid of each other, should they witness an attack, for fear a riot would ensue. While the black students learned to be warriors for their own survival, white students who favored integration often did not display their support for fear of retribution. The school itself was the target of bomb threats and other violence, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty not only for the Nine, but for the entire student body.

Fear for their personal safety followed the black students beyond the walls of Central High. Survival outside of school meant staying behind closed doors at home and a very limited social life. The Nine were excluded from social events, and their families were somewhat ostracized by the black community because they had brought unwanted attention to blacks as a whole. Among the brave souls that did stand behind the Nine was Daisy Bates. As Chapter President of the Arkansas NAACP, Bates was the prime advocate for the students. Her high profile made her the target of numerous threats, including shotgun shells fired at her home and a cross burned in her yard.

Not only did the Nine feel uncertain of their safety, but their future at Central. Throughout the year, the segregationists sought ways to remove the Nine. When Minnijean Brown threw chili on white students who were harassing her, she was suspended. After she was expelled, segregationists distributed posters and cards saying, "One nigger down and eight to go." The black students experienced increased attacks and worried they would not finish the school year at Central. The remaining eight did, however, and Ernest Green, the only black senior, graduated in the spring of 1958 with Martin Luther King, Jr. in attendance.

Although there are few photos depicting the atmosphere of threat within the walls of Central, the diary entries of Little Rock Nine member Melba Pattillo, reprinted in her 1994 memoir of Central High's integration, *Warriors Don't Cry*, paint a picture of what daily life was like during that school year.

*September 30, 1957*

*Each morning as I arrive, I look for the soldiers. I don't want to imagine what it would be like without them. Even inside the classroom where things should be safe and civilized, I am never able to be comfortable because the teachers are not in control. I can't even take pride in reciting. One boy in English class shouted "Don't let that nigger go to the blackboard."*

*October 15, 1957 Flu - absent*

*With my head under the covers so Grandmother could not hear or see me, I cried myself to sleep. I know I am fighting for a good cause - and I know if I trust God I shouldn't cry. I will keep going, but will it really make a difference.*

*I feel like something inside me has gone away. I am like a rag doll with no stuffing. I am growing up too fast. I'm not ready to go back to Central and be a warrior just yet. I don't have any more strength. I want to stay right here, listening to Nat King Cole.*

*February 18, 1958*

*A red-haired, freckle-faced girl, the one who taunts me in homeroom, keeps trailing me in the hallway between classes. Today she spit on me, then slapped me. Later in the day as I came around a corner, she tripped me so that I fell down a flight of stairs. I picked myself up to face a group of boys who then chased me up the stairs. When I told a school official about it, he said she was from a good family and would never do such a thing and I needed a teacher to witness these incidents if he were going to take any action. He asked me what did I expect when I came to a place where I knew I wasn't welcome. He warned me to keep Minnijean's expulsion in mind.*

## FEDERAL COURTS UPHOLD INTEGRATION

**Aug. 18, 1958**

**8<sup>th</sup> Circuit**

After the 1957-1958 school year ended, the Little Rock school board asked the court to delay its desegregation plan due to public opposition. On June 20, U.S. District Court Judge Harry J. Lemley approved the delay, but on August 18, 1958, the 8<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals overturned his decision, noting that although the board was acting in good faith, it must continue with integration: “*The time has not yet come in these United States when an order of a Federal Court must be whittled away, watered down, or shamefully withdrawn in the face of violent and unlawful acts of individual citizens in opposition thereto.*”

**Sept. 29, 1958**

**Supreme Court**

The school board then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, and for the third time in its history, the Court met in a special session to hear oral arguments on Aug. 28 and Sept. 11. Thurgood Marshall, NAACP Chief Counsel who argued *Brown v. Board* (1954) and later became the first African American Supreme Court Justice, represented the black students. Richard C. Butler represented the school board. On the following day, Sept. 12, the Supreme Court issued a simple order signed by all nine justices upholding continued integration so the school year could begin.

Then on Sept. 29, 1958, the Court issued a unanimous, per curiam (unsigned) opinion, *Cooper v. Aaron*, 358 U.S. 1, upholding the African American students’ constitutional rights under the Fourteenth Amendment to equal protection of the law. The opinion noted that three justices new to the Court since *Brown* were “at one with the Justices” who decided *Brown*, reaffirming that “[t]he principles announced in that decision and the obedience of the States to them, according to the command of the Constitution, are indispensable for the protection of the freedoms guaranteed by our fundamental charter for all of us.” With this landmark case, the Supreme Court ruled that state resistance to comply with desegregation under *Brown v. Board* and the Fourteenth Amendment would not be tolerated.

**1958-59**

**Faubus Closes Schools**

Governor Faubus again resisted federal order, calling for a special election in Little Rock to vote down the segregation plan. It passed, and by executive order, Faubus closed all Little Rock high schools for the 1958-59 school year, forcing the black students to take correspondence courses or go to out-of-state schools.

**1959-60**

**Central High Reopens With Black Students**

By the spring of 1959, however, local opinion began to turn out of concern for public opinion outside Little Rock, and the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce issued a resolution not necessarily agreeing with the Court’s opinion but urging Little Rock to reopen its schools and comply with *Brown*. Faubus’ act was declared unconstitutional, and the board opened school early on August 12 to circumvent Faubus’ new legislative attempt to close the schools.

In the fall of 1959, the only two black students to attend Central High were Jefferson Thomas and Carlotta Walls, both of the original Little Rock Nine. They graduated in the spring.

## RECONCILIATION AND RECOGNITION

The steps that the Little Rock Nine took toward integration were arguably some of the most difficult of any taken during the civil rights movement. Since 1957, the Nine have gathered many times to celebrate their efforts. In 1997, President Clinton ceremoniously welcomed the Little Rock Nine through the front doors of Central High to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their first successful entrance into the school. Before a crowd of 7,500 spectators, President Clinton

said, "Forty years ago today, they climbed these steps, passed through this door, and moved our nation."



The Little Rock Nine and Mrs. Bates were awarded the NAACP's Spingarn Medals in 1958. Standing: Thelma Mothershed, Elizabeth Eckford, Gloria Ray, Jefferson Thomas, Melba Pattillo, Ernest Green, Carlotta Walls, Minnijean Brown, and Terrence Roberts. Sitting: Mrs. Bates. (Daisy Bates Papers (MC 582), series 4, subseries 3, box 9, photograph number 24. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.)

Since 1957, others have been moved to a change of heart. On what should have been the first day for African American students at Central High, a white girl named Hazel Bryan was captured by Will Counts' camera as an active participant in the mob that followed the lone Elizabeth Eckford, shouting obscenities at her. By 1997 Hazel Bryan-Massery's views had drastically changed. The self-described "poster child of the hate generation" gladly agreed to meet and be photographed with Elizabeth Eckford. The two have since appeared together at university presentations, signed posters of their reconciliation, and gotten together for "girl talk."

In 1999, the Little Rock Nine were honored with the most prestigious award bestowed upon American civilians when they were presented with the Congressional Gold Medal by President Clinton. This highly-regarded award recognized the Nine for their significant role in the integration process, and for their continued efforts as heroes of the civil rights movement.

2007 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of integration at Central High. Little Rock hosted over forty events dedicated to the anniversary, including a commemoration ceremony on the front lawn of Central High and the Little Rock Nine 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and Scholarship Awards Gala. The Clinton Presidential Library exhibited the Emancipation Proclamation, on loan from the National Archives.

The Little Rock Nine, along with their supporters and their adversaries, made history in 1957. The Nine chose to endure hardship in order to integrate Little Rock's schools. By opposing federally mandated integration, Governor Faubus and the segregationists caused an escalation of events in Little Rock that brought Army troops, national media attention, and Supreme Court affirmation of integration as a form of equal protection of the law. While desegregation efforts have been carried forth throughout the nation, the issues surrounding *Brown v. Board of Education* remain active in the courts today.