



INTEGRATION OF CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

In a key event of the American Civil Rights Movement, nine black students enrolled at formerly all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957, testing a landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The court had mandated that all public schools in the country be integrated "with all deliberate speed" in its decision related to the ground breaking case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. On September 4, 1957, the first day of classes at Central High, Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas called in the state National Guard to bar the black students' entry into the school. Later in the month, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in federal troops to escort the "Little Rock Nine" into the school, and they started their first full day of classes on September 25.

- Contents
 - History of School Integration in the U.S.
 - Little Rock Nine Recruited
 - Students Turned Away by State Troops
 - Aftermath

HISTORY OF SCHOOL INTEGRATION IN THE U.S.

In its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, issued May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation of America's public schools was unconstitutional. Until the court's decision, many states across the nation had mandatory segregation laws, requiring African-American and Caucasian children to attend separate schools. Resistance to the ruling was so widespread that the court issued a second decision in 1955, known as *Brown II*, ordering school districts to integrate "with all deliberate speed."

DID YOU KNOW?

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. attended graduation ceremonies at Central High School in May 1958 to see Ernest Green, the only senior among the Little Rock Nine, receive his diploma.

In response to the Brown decisions and pressure from the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Little Rock, Arkansas, school board adopted a plan for gradual integration of its schools. The first institutions to integrate would be the high schools, beginning in September 1957. Two pro-segregation groups formed to oppose the plan: the Capital Citizens Council and the Mother's League of Central High School.

LITTLE ROCK NINE RECRUITED

Despite the opposition, nine students registered to be the first African Americans to attend Central High School, which opened in 1927 and was originally called Little Rock Senior High School. Minnijean Brown (1941-), Elizabeth Eckford (1941-), Ernest Green (1941-), Thelma Mothershed (1940-), Melba Patillo (1941-), Gloria Ray (1942-), Terrence Roberts (1941-), Jefferson Thomas (1942-2010) and Carlotta Walls (1942-) had been recruited by Daisy Gaston Bates (1914-99), president of the Arkansas NAACP and co-publisher, with her husband L.C. Bates, of the Arkansas State Press, an influential African-American newspaper. Daisy Bates and others from the Arkansas NAACP carefully vetted the group of students and determined they all possessed the strength and determination to face the resistance they would encounter. In the weeks prior to the start of the new school year, the students participated in intensive counseling sessions guiding them on what to expect once classes began and how to respond to anticipated hostile situations. The group came to be known as the Little Rock Nine.

On September 2, 1957, Governor Orval Faubus announced that he would call in the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the African-American students' entry to Central High, claiming this action was for the students' own protection. In a televised address, Faubus insisted that violence and bloodshed might break out if black students were allowed to enter the school. The following day, the Mother's League held a sunrise service at the school as a protest against integration. That same day, federal judge Richard Davies issued a ruling that desegregation would continue as planned the next day.

STUDENTS TURNED AWAY BY STATE TROOPS

The Little Rock Nine arrived for the first day of school at Central High on September 4, 1957. Eight arrived together, driven by Bates. Eckford's family, however, did not have a telephone, and Bates could not reach her to let her know of the carpool plans. Therefore, Eckford arrived alone. The Arkansas National Guard ultimately prevented any of the Little Rock Nine from entering Central High. One of the most enduring images from this day is a photograph of

Eckford, notebook in hand, stoically approaching the school as a crowd of hostile and screaming white students and adults surround her. Eckford later recalled that one of the women spat on her. The image was printed and broadcast widely, bringing the Little Rock controversy to national and international attention.

In the following weeks, Judge Davies began legal proceedings against Governor Faubus, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower attempted to persuade Faubus to remove the National Guard and let the Little Rock Nine enter the school. Davies ordered the Guard removed on September 20, and the Little Rock Police Department took over to maintain order. The police escorted the nine African-American students into the school on September 23, through an angry mob of some 1,000 white protesters gathered outside. Amidst ensuing rioting, the police removed the nine students. On September 24, President Eisenhower sent in 1,200 members of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and placed them in charge of the 10,000 National Guardsmen on duty. Escorted by the troops, the Little Rock Nine attended their first full day of classes on September 25.

Legal challenges to integration continued throughout the year, and Faubus publicly expressed his wish on numerous occasions that the Little Rock Nine be removed from Central High. Although several of the black students had positive experiences on their first day of school, according to a September 25, 1957, report in *The New York Times*, they experienced routine harassment and even violence throughout the rest of the year. Patillo, for instance, was kicked, beaten and had acid thrown in her face, and at one point white students burned an African-American effigy in a vacant lot across from the school. Ray was pushed down a flight of stairs, and the Little Rock Nine were barred from participating in extracurricular activities. Brown was expelled from Central High in February 1958 for retaliating against the attacks. And it was not only the students who faced harassment: Ray's mother was fired from her job with the State of Arkansas when she refused to remove her daughter from the school. The 101st Airborne and the National Guard remained at Central High for the duration of the year.

On May 25, 1958, Green, the only senior among the Little Rock Nine, became the first African-American graduate of Central High.

AFTERMATH

In September 1958, one year after Central High was integrated, Governor Faubus closed Little Rock's high schools for the entire year, pending a public vote, to prevent African-American attendance. Little Rock citizens voted 19,470 to 7,561 against integration and the schools remained closed. Other than Green, the rest of the Little Rock Nine completed their high school careers via correspondence or at other high schools across the country. Eckford joined the Army and later earned her General Education Equivalency diploma. Little Rock's high schools reopened in August 1959.

Several of the Little Rock Nine went on to distinguished careers. Green served as assistant secretary of the federal Department of Labor under President Jimmy Carter (1924-). Brown worked as deputy assistant secretary for work force diversity in the Department of the Interior under President Bill Clinton (1946-). Patillo worked as a reporter for NBC. The group has been widely recognized for their significant role in civil rights history. In 1999, President Clinton awarded each member of the group the Congressional Gold Medal. The nine also all received personal invitations to attend President Barack Obama's (1961-) inauguration in 2009.

Jefferson Thomas became the first of the Little Rock Nine to die when he succumbed to pancreatic cancer at the age of 67 on September 5, 2010. After graduating from Central High, Thomas served in the Army in Vietnam, earned a business degree and worked as an accountant for private companies and the Department of Defense.

Article Details:

Integration of Central High School

- **Author** History.com Staff
- **Website Name** History.com
- **Year Published** 2010
- **Title** Integration of Central High School
- **URL** <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/central-high-school-integration>
- **Publisher** A+E Networks

©2015, A&E Television Networks, LLC.

All Rights Reserved.