

Little Rock Central High School

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Little Rock Central High School
National Historic Site



The Little Rock Nine



The Little Rock Nine in front of Central High School, September 25, 1997. The Nine are l to r: Thelma Mothershed Wair, Minnijean Brown Trickey, Jefferson Thomas, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, and Melba Pattillo Beals. Behind the Nine are, l to r: Little Rock Mayor Jim Dailey, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, and President William Jefferson Clinton. Photo by Isaiah Trickey.

Who Are The Little Rock Nine?

In 1957, nine ordinary teenagers walked out of their homes and stepped up to the front lines in the battle for civil rights for all Americans. The media coined the name "Little Rock Nine," to identify the first African-American students to desegregate Little Rock Central High School.

The End of Legal Segregation

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision outlawed segregation in public education. Little Rock School District Superintendent Virgil Blossom devised a plan of gradual integration that would begin at Central High School in 1957. The school board called for volunteers from all-black Dunbar Junior High and Horace Mann High School to attend Central.

Prospective students were told they would not be able to participate in extracurricular activities if they transferred to Central—such as football, basketball, or choir. Many of their parents were threatened with losing their jobs, and some students decided to stay at their own schools.

"[Blossom said] you're not going to be able to go to the football games or basketball games. You're not going to be able to participate in the choir or drama club, or be on the track team. You can't go to the prom. There were more cannots..."

Carlotta Walls LaNier

"When my tenth-grade teacher in our Negro school said there was a possibility of integration, I signed up. We all felt good. We knew that Central High School had so many more courses, and dramatics and speech and tennis courts and a big, beautiful stadium."

Minnijean Brown to *Look Magazine*, June 24, 1958.

The First Day of School

I was not prepared for what actually happened.

Elizabeth Eckford

On September 3, 1957, the Little Rock Nine arrived to enter Central High School, but they were turned away by the Arkansas National Guard. Governor Orval Faubus called out the Arkansas National Guard the night before to, as he put it, "maintain and restore order..." The soldiers barred the African American students from entering.

"I thought he [Faubus] was there to protect me. How wrong I was."

Thelma Mothershed Wair

The students arrived at Central alone on the first day. By prior arrangement, they gathered at the 16th Street entrance with several local ministers who accompanied them. Elizabeth Eckford arrived at

the other end of the block by herself. She was met by a mob screaming obscenities and threats, chanting, "Two, four, six, eight, we ain't gonna integrate!"

"We didn't know that his [Faubus'] idea of keeping the peace was keeping the blacks out."

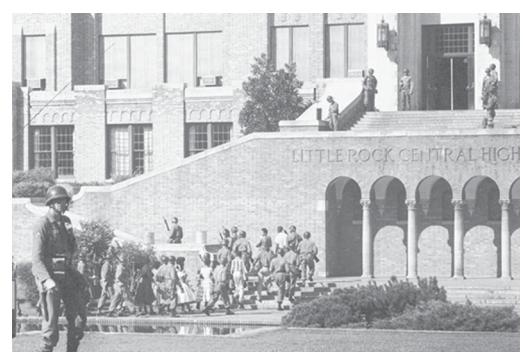
Jefferson Thomas

More than two weeks went by before the Little Rock Nine again attempted to enter Central High School. On September 23, 1957, the Little Rock Nine entered the school. Outside, rioting broke out and the Little Rock police removed the Nine for their safety.

The President Becomes Involved

On September 24, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered units of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division—the "Screaming Eagles"—into Little Rock and federalized the Arkansas National Guard. In a televised speech delivered to the nation, President Eisenhower stated, "Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of the courts."

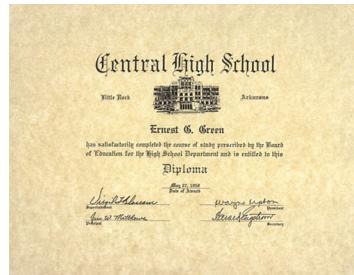
On September 25, 1957, under federal troop escort, the Little Rock Nine made it inside for their first full day of school. The 101st Airborne left in October and the federalized Arkansas National Guard troops remained throughout the year.



The Little Rock Nine are escorted into Central High School by 101st Airborne troops, Sept. 25, 1957. Photo by Will Counts.

Inside the School

Ernest Green's diploma from Little Rock Central High School.



The Little Rock Nine had assigned guards to walk them from class to class. The guards could not accompany the students inside the classrooms, bathrooms, or locker rooms. They would stand outside the classrooms during class time. In spite of this, the Little Rock Nine endured verbal and physical attacks from some of their classmates throughout the school year. Although some white students tried to help, few white students befriended any of the Nine. Those who did received similar treatment as the Nine, such as hate mail and threats.

One of the Little Rock Nine, Minnijean Brown, was suspended in December for dropping chili on some boys after they refused to let her pass to her seat in the cafeteria. She was later expelled in February 1958 for calling a girl who had hit her with a purse "white trash."

After Brown's expulsion, students passed around cards that read, "One Down, Eight to Go." Brown finished high school at New Lincoln School in New York City, while living with Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark. The Clarks were the social psychologists whose "doll test" work demonstrated for the Supreme Court in *Brown* that racial

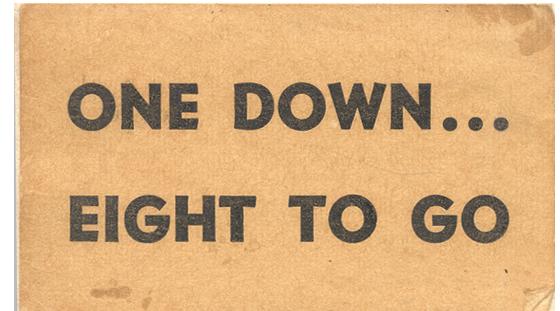
prejudice and segregation caused African-American children to develop a sense of inferiority.

The remaining eight students completed the school year at Central. Senior Ernest Green was the first African American student to graduate from Central High School.

"It's been an interesting year. I've had a course in human relations first hand."

Ernest Green, *Life Magazine*, June, 1958

Segregationist card distributed by Central High students after Minnijean Brown's expulsion in 1958.



The Aftermath

The following year, the city's high schools were closed to prevent further desegregation while the NAACP continued to pursue the legal case to integrate Little Rock's schools.

When the schools reopened, Carlotta Walls and Jefferson Thomas returned to Central and graduated in 1960. Thelma Mothershed received her diploma from Central High School by taking correspondence courses to complete her studies.

The rest of the Little Rock Nine completed their high school educations at different schools.

The Little Rock Nine have received numerous accolades and awards, from the renowned NAACP Spingarn Medal to the nation's highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal.

Little Rock Nine Biographies



Congressional Gold Medals of the Little Rock Nine. Photo by Isaiah Trickey.

Minnijean Brown Trickey

Brown Trickey attended Southern Illinois University and majored in journalism. She later moved to Canada, where she received a Bachelor of Social Work in Native Human Services from Laurentian University and a Master of Social Work from Carleton University in Ontario, Canada. Brown Trickey is a social activist and has worked on behalf of peacemaking, environmental issues, developing youth leadership, diversity education and training, cross-cultural communication, and gender and social justice advocacy.

Elizabeth Eckford

Eckford joined the U.S. Army and earned her G.E.D. before returning to Little Rock in the 1960s. She attended Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. Eckford has held various jobs throughout her life. She has been a waitress, history teacher, welfare worker, unemployment and employment interviewer, and a military reporter.

Ernest Green

After graduating from high school, Green attended Michigan State University, earning a bachelor's degree in 1962 and a master's degree in 1964 in sociology. President Jimmy Carter appointed Green as an assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Affairs in 1977. He is currently an executive with a Washington, DC investment firm.

Thelma Mothershed Wair

Wair graduated from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale in 1964 and earned her master's degree in Guidance and Counseling, as well as an Administrative Certificate in Education from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. Wair taught home economics in the East St. Louis school system for 28 years before retiring in 1994.

Melba Pattillo Beals

Melba Pattillo Beals earned her bachelor's degree from San Francisco State University. She then graduated from Columbia University with an advanced degree in communications. Beals has worked as a reporter for NBC, and has served as a communications consultant. Beals is the only one of the Little Rock Nine to have written a book based on her experiences at Central High School entitled, *Warrior's Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High*.

Carlotta Walls LaNier

LaNier attended Michigan State University for two years before moving with her family to Denver. In 1968, she earned a Bachelor of Science from Colorado State College (now the University of Northern Colorado.) In 1977, she founded LaNier and Company, a real estate brokerage firm.

Terrence Roberts

Terrence Roberts moved to Los Angeles, California, and graduated from Los Angeles High School in 1959. He received a bachelor's degree in sociology from California State University in 1967, and he attended the University of California at Los Angeles, receiving a master's degree in social welfare in 1970. In 1976, Roberts was awarded a Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University in psychology. In 1994 he became department chair of the psychology program at Antioch University, Los Angeles. Currently, he is a faculty member at Antioch and travels widely as a speaker and consultant.

Jefferson Thomas

Jefferson Thomas was a track athlete at Horace Mann High School when he chose to volunteer to integrate all-white Central High School for the 1957-58 school year as a sophomore. He graduated from Central high School in 1960 and eventually became an accountant for the United States Department of Defense. Thomas is now retired.

Gloria Ray Karlmark

Gloria Ray Karlmark moved to Missouri and attended the newly integrated Kansas City Central High School. She graduated from the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), in Chicago in 1965 with a bachelor's degree in Chemistry and Mathematics. Ray Karlmark has served as a teacher, mathematician, systems analyst, and technical writer. In addition, she founded and served as Editor-in-Chief of *Computers in Industry*, an international journal of practice and experience of computer applications in industry. From 1982 to 1994, she entered into early retirement before going back to work in the Netherlands - first for Philips Telecommunications in Hilversum, later for Philips Lighting in Eindhoven.