

Little Rock Central High School

Little Rock Central High School
National Historic Site
Arkansas

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Soldiers and guardsmen escorted the Little Rock Nine for the entire school year.



Students still attend Central High School, which is closed to park visitors except for organized tour groups.



Elizabeth Eckford walked a two-block-long gauntlet of threats and racial slurs.

Year of Reckoning

The school desegregation crisis at Little Rock Central High School put on trial America's commitment to its founding principles. It was the first significant test of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The successful outcome affirmed the basis of that ruling—the 14th Amendment's promise of "equal protection of the laws."

What became a defining moment in the South's "massive resistance" to school desegregation began quietly enough with a plan by Little Rock's school board to gradually integrate the city's schools. But Orval Faubus, the populist governor of Arkansas with a reputation for relative moderation on racial issues, undercut local officials. Race was playing an increasing role in Arkansas politics, and Faubus was looking ahead to running for reelection in 1958. His actions turned ordered desegregation into violent confrontation.

Crying "states' rights" and floating rumors about planned violence, Faubus justified calling out the National Guard to keep order—by blocking the entry of nine African American students. Faubus also cited concern for their safety, but before the eyes of guardsmen, mobs followed, spat on, and threatened violence to the students. Later,

after a court had ordered the National Guard withdrawn, and with only police to control the situation, an angry crowd beat both black and white journalists.

In the weeks before the students gained entry under the protection of U.S. Army troops, the governor's defiance and legal maneuvering stoked a constitutional crisis. A growing media presence made this an ongoing news event played out on the country's TV screens. But while Little Rock became the face of the nation's desegregation troubles of the 1950s and 60s, the struggle for equal rights enacted there transcended region, race, and historical period. The struggle continues, and the commitment and courage shown by the Little Rock students is still needed if history is not to be repeated.

Constitutional Struggle

Governor Faubus

Spurred by other southern politicians and his own constituents to take a stand against desegregation, Faubus insisted that in *Brown v. Board* the Supreme Court had overstepped its constitutional authority. He invoked what he called constitutionally guaranteed states' rights to back his use of the National Guard to bar African American students from Central High. By so doing he directly challenged the federal government.



President Eisenhower

Although not an aggressive enforcer of civil rights, Eisenhower believed deeply in the rule of law, the Constitution, and the appropriate use of military force. When Governor Faubus used armed guardsmen to defy a ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court, Eisenhower had no choice but to back constitutionally granted judicial and executive authority. He was the first president since Reconstruction to use federal troops to enforce civil rights.

"The only assurance I can give you is that the Federal Constitution will be upheld by me by every legal means at my command."

—President Dwight Eisenhower, in telegram to Governor Faubus

LITTLE ROCK, SEPTEMBER 1957



September 2

Governor Faubus orders National Guard to bar African Americans from school for their "safety."

3

On first day of school mob gathers (above). Little Rock Nine do not appear.

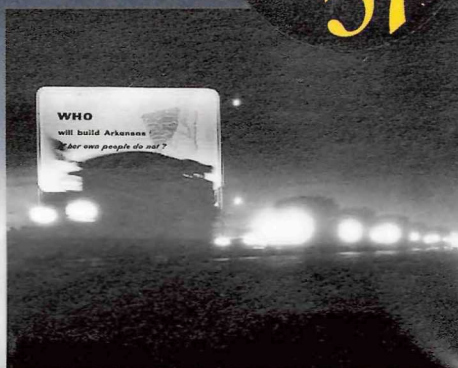


4

Guardsmen bar black students from entering school. Soon after Elizabeth Eckford is turned away (above) she is harassed by mob.

20

Federal judge rules against use of National Guard to block students. Little Rock police are given responsibility for protecting the students.



23

Little Rock Nine enter the school; police cannot maintain order. Riot ensues and the students leave from a side entrance in a police car.

24

President Eisenhower federalizes Arkansas National Guard and sends 1,200 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (above) to Little Rock.



25

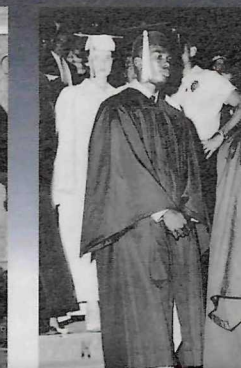
African American students enter Central High escorted by soldiers (above).

26

Faubus appears on television, saying "We are now an occupied territory." 101st Airborne Division leaves in

November. Little Rock Nine endure physical and verbal abuse throughout the year.

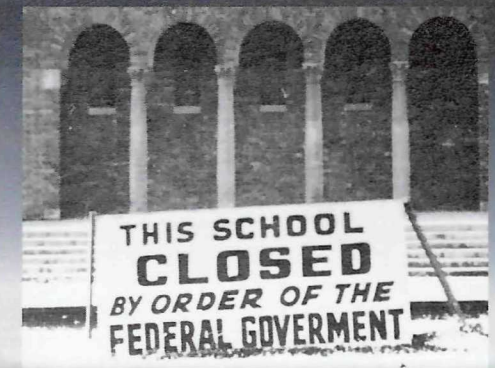
1958



May 25, 1958

Ernest Green (above) is the first African American to graduate from Central High School. Green says: "It's been an interesting year. I've had a course in human relations first hand."

1959



1958

Faubus temporarily closes schools, giving voters a choice: accept integration or reject it (which they do, thereby closing schools for the 1958–59 year). Sign erected by Little Rock citizens is shown above.

1959

Federal court declares closings unconstitutional. Schools reopen in August. Three African Americans attend Central High School, including Jefferson Thomas and Carlotta Walls.

U.S. SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

1849 *Roberts v. The City of Boston*

Supreme Court upholds segregated schools; provides precedent for *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

1881 Tuskegee Institute

Booker T. Washington founds school for African Americans. His emphasis on trades disturbs some African American leaders.

1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*

Supreme Court establishes "separate but equal" doctrine.

1909 Formation of NAACP

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) looks to courts to achieve equal rights.

1936 *Univ. of Maryland v. Murray*

Maryland supreme court orders university's law school to admit African American student.

1946 *Mendez v. Westminster*

Ends segregation of Latino students in Orange County, Calif., schools.

1950 *Sweatt v. Painter*

Supreme Court finds that "separate but equal" is unattainable in higher education.

1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*

Supreme Court overturns "separate but equal" doctrine. *Brown II* (1955) mandates—though ambiguously—desegregation with "all deliberate speed."

1960 Ruby Bridges

Six-year-old African American girl desegregates New Orleans elementary school, escorted through mob by federal marshals.

1972 Detroit Busing Plan

Busing plan is reversed in 1974 by Supreme Court (*Milliken v. Bradley*), affirming that courts could not remedy "white flight."

1976 Boston Anti-Busing Riots

Residents of South Boston riot in response to court-ordered busing.

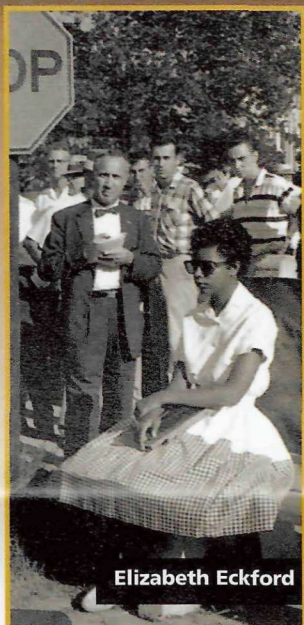
Players in a Public Drama

THE LITTLE ROCK NINE



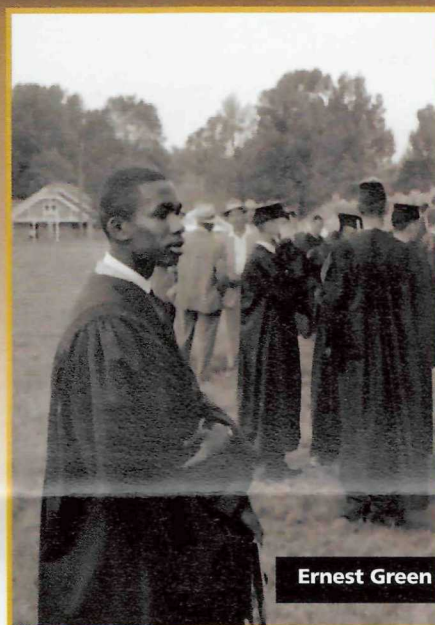
Terrence Roberts

TOMANO / UNIV. OF ARKANSAS LITTLE ROCK ARCHIVES



Elizabeth Eckford

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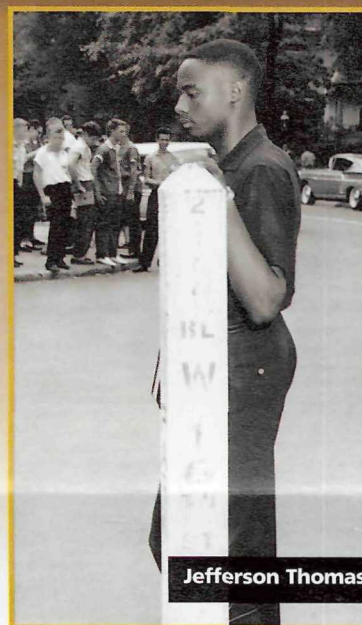
Ernest Green

WILL COUNTS / COURTESY OF VIVIAN COUNTS AND INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



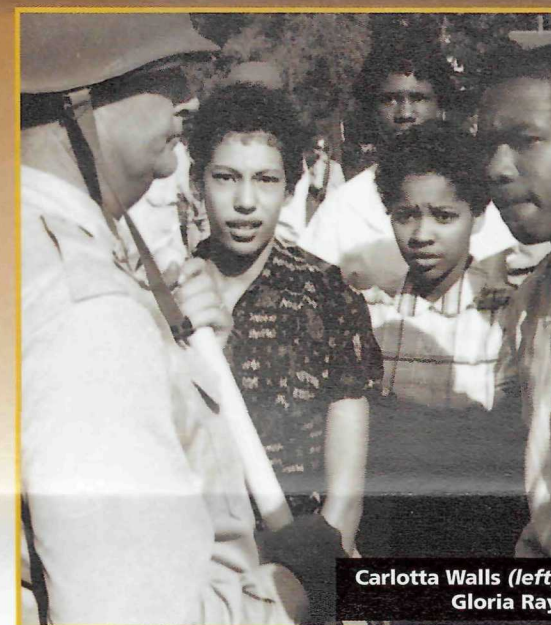
Thelma Mothershed (left)
Minnijean Brown

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE



Jefferson Thomas

CORBIS



Carlotta Walls (left)
Gloria Ray

WILL COUNTS / COURTESY OF VIVIAN COUNTS AND INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



Melba Pattillo (center)

TOMANO / UNIV. OF ARKANSAS LITTLE ROCK ARCHIVES

A Clash of Viewpoints

Some Little Rock citizens who opposed integration were ready to accept it to avoid disrupting their children's education and damaging the city's reputation as progressive—and thus its business prospects. (To most African Americans the city was progressive only in the eyes of the whites and only in relation to more racially intolerant southern cities.) Others dug in their heels against change, and both sides began marshalling their forces.



segregationist board members. They in turn organized the Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools (CROSS) to block the recall. The recall effort was successful and most of the teachers were rehired.



NPS; STOP BOTTOM: UNIV. OF ARKANSAS LITTLE ROCK ARCHIVES

Opponents of desegregation formed the Capital Citizens Council and the Mothers' League of Central High School, circulating flyers (right) and petitioning the courts to delay desegregation and remove federal troops. After an African American student was expelled, a group of students distributed anti-integration cards reading "One Down . . . Eight To Go."

When the divided school board fired 44 teachers and administrators suspected of supporting integration, the group Stop This Outrageous Purge (STOP), supported by the Women's Emergency Committee, demanded a special school board election to recall the

The Eyes of the World . . .

The Little Rock crisis occurred in the infancy of TV and was among the first news stories filmed as events unfolded. The Magnolia Mobil service station near the school became an impromptu press base from which reporters called in their stories.

One of the photographers on the scene was 26-year-old Will Counts. Working for the Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, Counts caught on film mobs screaming at Elizabeth Eckford and beating a black newsman (below). These powerful photographs helped spur President Eisenhower to act—



WILL COUNTS / COURTESY OF VIVIAN COUNTS AND INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

partly because during the Cold War battle for the moral high ground the nation was embarrassed by scenes casting American society in a negative light. These now-iconic images were among those published in *A Life Is More Than A Moment*, Counts' moving visual essay on the events in Little Rock.

The worldwide coverage, generating outrage at the violent denial of basic rights, became a model for the civil rights movement's use of the media over the next decade.

Women on the Front Lines

Women and female students played a leading role in the crisis. The Mothers' League (right) became the face of segregation. The Council of Church Women protested when Governor Faubus used the National Guard to bar the nine students. When civic and business leaders failed to protest the school closings, the Women's Emergency Committee took a strong stand in favor of opening the schools under the school board's desegregation plan (flyer at right).

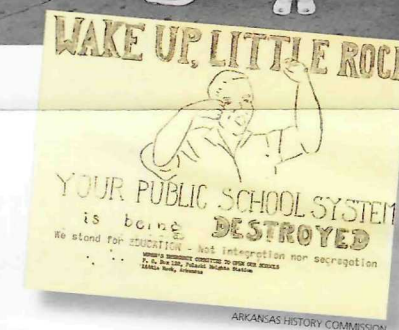
Daisy L. Gatson Bates (center in photo below), president of the state chapter of the NAACP, pressed for immediate rather than



ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE



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ARKANSAS HISTORY COMMISSION

gradual desegregation and during the crisis was spokesperson for the students. In response segregationists threw a rock through her window, fired shots at her home, and firebombed her lawn.

Any time it takes 11,500 soldiers to assure nine Negro children their constitutional rights in a democratic society, I can't be happy.

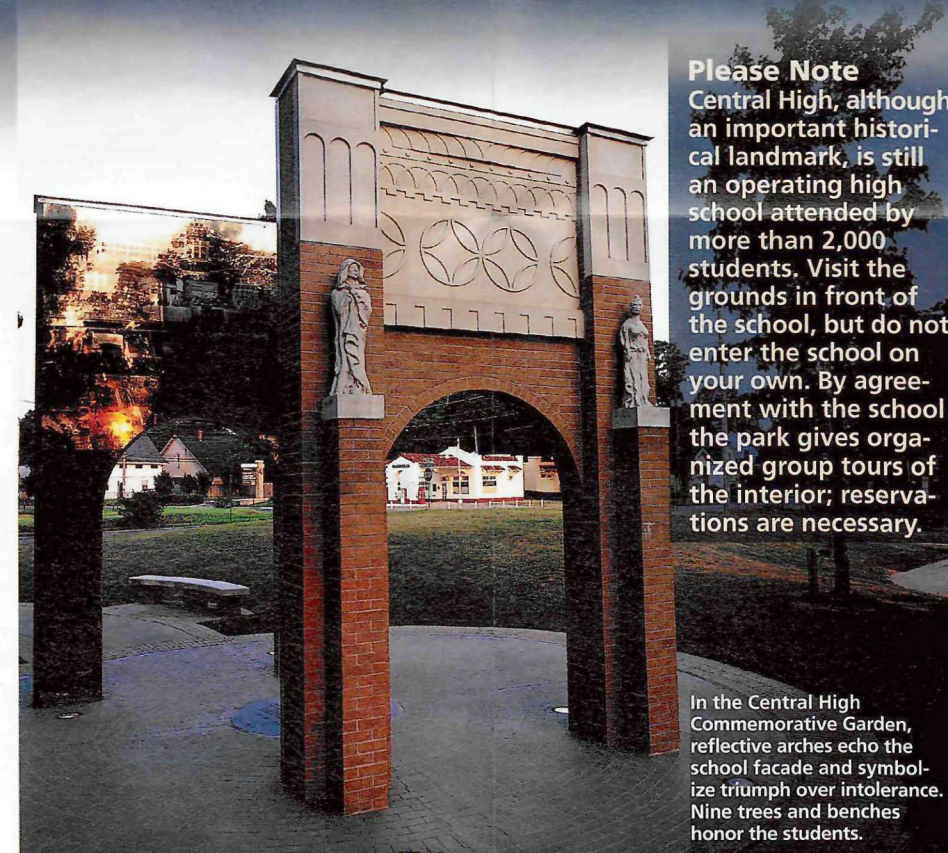
—Daisy L. Gatson Bates

HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL

From its dedication in 1927, Little Rock Senior High School (its name was changed to Little Rock Central High School in 1953) was recognized as more than a typical American school. The massive structure, a handsome blend of Art Deco and Gothic Revival

styles, was named by the American Institute of Architects "America's Most Beautiful High School." Central High was celebrated for its size (100 classrooms; capacity for more than 2,000 students; a huge auditorium and stage) and for its academic excellence. The

school also served as a civic center in Little Rock, hosting concerts, plays, and other events. It was a focus of community pride and a cultural symbol—perhaps one of the reasons so many fought so fiercely against change at the school.



Please Note Central High, although an important historical landmark, is still an operating high school attended by more than 2,000 students. Visit the grounds in front of the school, but do not enter the school on your own. By agreement with the school the park gives organized group tours of the interior; reservations are necessary.

In the Central High Commemorative Garden, reflective arches echo the school facade and symbolize triumph over intolerance. Nine trees and benches honor the students.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The **Visitor Center** is open daily from 9:00 am to 4:30 pm. It is open year-round except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. We suggest you start with the exhibits in the visitor center. Call ahead to arrange for group tours of park sites.

Accessibility The visitor center and the Commemorative Garden are accessible. With prior notice, accessible group tours of Little Rock Central High School are available. The interpretive exhibits include several captioned audio-visual programs. Service animals are welcome.

Directions From I-630 exit on Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive (Exit 2B). Take a right on Daisy L. Gatson Bates Drive. Little Rock Central High School is at the intersection of Bates Drive and Park Street. Parking is available at the visitor center.

More Information Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site 2120 Daisy L. Gatson Bates Drive Little Rock, AR 72202 501-374-1957 www.nps.gov/chsc Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about your national parks.

