

Little Rock Nine



Few people know their names, but the **nine** black students who became known as the **Little Rock Nine** helped to bring widespread integration to public schools in the United States. In the fall of 1957, Americans who were impressed with their courage and curious about the confrontations they caused watched as these **nine** students braved repeated threats and other indignities from segregationists as they tried to attend classes at the all-white **Little Rock** Central High School. The determination of the **Little Rock Nine** in challenging Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, who used armed troops to bar the **nine** students from entering the school, is legendary. Despite the obstacles they faced, the **Little Rock Nine** eventually entered the school and were able to attend classes, and as they did, their experiences continued to be documented and preserved as a testament to their characters.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and that school systems should begin plans to

desegregate. However, during the early years of his administration, President Dwight D. Eisenhower did not focus on education and, therefore, many states were slow to implement plans for or actively to pursue desegregation. Civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) continued to pressure state and federal officials about integration while implementing their own plans to facilitate the process. The Arkansas state president of the NAACP, Daisy Bates (who was elected in 1952), organized a youth council that included the first **nine** students to desegregate **Little Rock** Central High. Bates visited seventeen homes of black students selected by public school officials for their scholastic achievement and emotional stability to ask their parents whether they would allow their children to be assigned to Central High. The parents of **nine** of these students—Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Gloria Ray, Melba Patillo, Carlotta Walls, Terrance Roberts, Thelma Mothershed, Minnijean Brown, and Jefferson Thomas—agreed to enroll their children in Central High. The **Little Rock Nine**, as they became known, were to start school at Central High in September 1957.

Along with the worries of attending a new school, the **Little Rock Nine** also faced threats from Governor Faubus that he would take action to block integration of Arkansas schools and that he would use National Guard troops if necessary. On September 2, 1957, Faubus kept his promise and ordered units of the National Guard to bar the **nine** black students from entering Central High. Later that evening the school board issued a statement asking black students not to attempt to enroll at any of the white public schools. Faubus's action and others made by Arkansas officials (including an August 29 injunction against integration granted by Judge Murray Reed) were flagrant violations of the Supreme Court's decision, prompting a response from President Eisenhower. The **Nine** were now in the midst of a state/federal confrontation, with Faubus on one side claiming states rights and Eisenhower on the other side issuing a petition for "preliminary injunction against further interference with integration" and ordering Faubus to remove his troops.

Members of the black community in **Little Rock** also took action to counteract Faubus's actions. In response to Faubus's order to block the entrance with troops on September 2, Bates organized a group of ministers to escort the students from her house to Central the next day. She called the parents of all the students except Elizabeth Eckford to alert them of the change in plans. Too tired to drive to the Eckfords' (who had no phone), Bates retired for the evening. The next morning, Elizabeth went to Central High alone and was taunted and berated by hundreds of white students and citizens in front of cameras, reporters, and photographers from around the world.

National Guard troops were not the only hindrances to the **Nine**'s entrance to Central High. On September 24, 1957, the day after Faubus withdrew the Guard in order to allow the students to enter Central, the **Nine** and their police escorts attempted unsuccessfully to enter the school. This time, they were forced to retreat by an angry mob consisting primarily of white students, their parents, and members of the local community. As the **Nine** approached the school's entrance, the mob became more violent and the situation more chaotic; both black and white newsmen were injured by mobsters trying to curtail the publicity the incident was receiving. Several white

students protested by boycotting their classes. Virgil Blossom, the district's superintendent and the spearhead for the "Blossom Plan," which called for phased integration, expressed doubts that the **Nine** would attempt or even be able to attend classes the next day. Blossom underestimated the **Nine**'s determination and persistence, and the next day (September 25), the **Nine** once again tried to enter the school. They succeeded with the assistance of National Guard troops, who had been federalized by President Eisenhower.

All but one of the **Little Rock Nine** stayed in school for the rest of the year, but they were continually harassed by groups of white students inside the school. Nevertheless, they had attempted to provide "a model of orderly transition for the thousands of other school districts across the South" who were "just beginning to face up to the reality of the mandate the United States Supreme Court had handed down." These "likeable, admirable young people," as they were called by Elizabeth Huckaby, a former teacher at Central High who taught the **Nine**, had changed the policy of a nation and triumphed over bigotry.

A term referring to the **nine** high school students who successfully integrated Central High School in **Little Rock**, Arkansas, in 1957. The **Little Rock** school board had decided to begin the integration process at Central High School. Initially, 75 African-American students signed up to attend the school. The board of education cut this number to 25. In the end, only **nine** enrolled. Opposition surfaced immediately, much of it directed against Daisy Bates, president of the Arkansas National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

On September 2, the day before school was scheduled to open, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus announced that "blood will run in the streets" if Central High were integrated and that he would use National Guard troops "to protect lives and property." The next day, 250 National Guardsmen were stationed around the school to prevent the **nine** black students from entering. Faced with this situation, the NAACP turned to the federal district court, where Judge Ronald Davies ordered that the integration of Central High proceed as planned.

On September 4, Daisy Bates made arrangements to have the **nine** students driven to school in two police cars. Eight of them got the message. Fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, who had no phone, did not. When she arrived at school, she was met by a National Guardsman, who refused to let her pass. She was forced to walk 100 yards, alone, to a bus stop while a vicious mob followed, cursing and threatening to kill her. The other black students had also been refused admittance but had returned home safely.

Three weeks later, the **Little Rock Nine**, armed with a federal court order, tried again. As word that they had arrived spread, a mob of about 1,000 people formed outside the school. Police managed to get the students home safely, but mob violence was evident elsewhere, as rioters attacked news reporters and various African-American adults. Harry Ashmore, editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, when asked to describe the situation, said, "I'll give it to you in one sentence. The police have been routed, the mob is in the

streets, and we're close to a reign of terror." That night, police stopped a motorcade of approximately 100 cars filled with dynamite, guns, and other weapons two blocks from the Bates house.

The next day, **Little Rock** mayor Woodrow Mann requested that federal troops be sent in. President Eisenhower agreed, and, on September 25, the **nine** students were escorted from Bates' house to the school in a convoy that included armed soldiers and jeeps with machine gun mounts. A helicopter and 350 paratroopers from the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division met them at the school. For the rest of the year, the **nine** attended school under military protection. But while army troops protected them from outside mobs, they were repeatedly attacked, both physically and verbally, by other students. One of them, Minnijean Brown, was expelled after she dumped a bowl of chili on some boys who had harassed her. Finally, two soldiers from the 101st Airborne were assigned to each of the students.

That spring, the **Little Rock** school board, citing continuing tension, petitioned the courts, asking that all further integration be delayed until 1961. The Eighth U.S. Circuit Court refused the request, and its decision was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. Several months later, Governor Faubus ordered all four public high schools in **LittleRock** closed. They remained closed for a year, until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the action unconstitutional.

The **nine** students were Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Jefferson Thomas, Carlotta Walls, Thelma Mothershed, Terrance Roberts, Melba Pattillo, and Gloria Ray.

References and Further Information

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