

National Historic Landmarks of Arkansas

Little Rock Central High School



Main Entrance, Little Rock Central High School

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This volume is one of a series of historic contexts written by the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program to establish the national significance of Arkansas properties designated as National Historic Landmarks (NHL). NHL status is reserved for those properties possessing transcendent importance in United States history.

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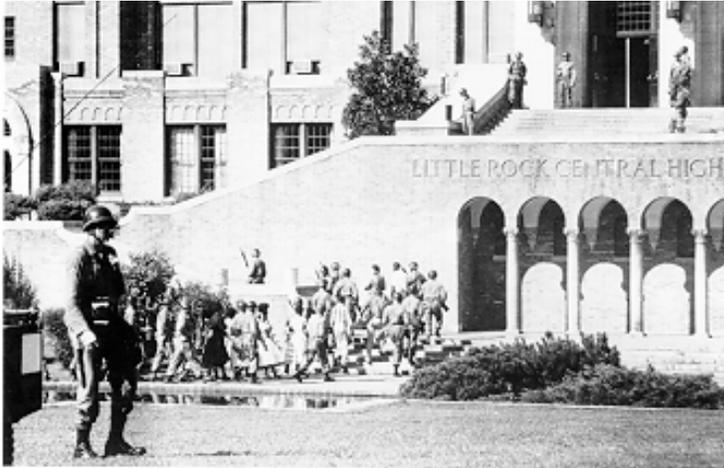
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The Crisis

At 12:22 p.m., Eastern Daylight Time, on September 24, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, at the time vacationing at Newport, Rhode Island, signed Executive Order (E.O.) 10730. The order federalized the Arkansas National Guard and ordered the Secretary of Defense to employ



U.S. Army troops escort black students into Little Rock Central High School, ending desegregation.

the Arkansas soldiers as well as federal troops to enforce a federal district court order in Little Rock, Arkansas. Nine hours and 49 minutes later, 1,000 soldiers of the crack 327th Airborne Battle Group of the 101st Airborne Division deployed in Little Rock.

The following morning, troops from the 327th surrounded a local high school while a small detachment went to the home of Mr. and Mrs. L. C. Bates, owners of a local newspaper and leaders of the Little Rock chapter of the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). At the Bates residence they picked up nine neatly dressed black teenagers. After a short drive, the soldiers and their charges reached the high school. Staring straight ahead the youngsters formed a single file and, surrounded by some of America's best fighting men carrying rifles with bayonets fixed, they marched through a jeering crowd into Little Rock Central High School to begin the fall term. As the nation and much of the world watched, Central High School became desegregated. The 14th amendment to the United States Constitution, which mandates that no American will be deprived of the equal protection of the laws, had been upheld.

Legal Background

I think that what he wants is equality, and I believe that he too knows that there is no such thing as equality per se, but only equality to: equal right and equal opportunity to make the best one can of one's life within one's capacity and capability without fear of injustice or oppression or threat of violence. If we had given him this equal right to opportunity 90 or 50 or even 10 years ago, there would have been no Supreme Court decision about how we run our schools.¹

So spoke William Faulkner on November 10, 1955, in an address to a meeting of the Southern

¹ William Faulkner, "American Segregation and the World Crisis," The Segregation of Decisions (Southern Regional Council, 1956), p. 11.

Historical Association.

The Nobel Prize-winning author, who in works such as As I Lay Dying and Intruder in the Dust had wrestled with the moral evil of racism, knew that a social revolution was imminent in the South. And he lamented that it would be imposed, as had happened some 90 years previously.

The Supreme Court decision to which Faulkner referred was, of course, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), or as legal scholars call it, Brown I. Faulkner exaggerated when he said that the Supreme Court had decided to tell the South or the State of Mississippi or even the local school board in his hometown of Oxford how to run the schools. The Court's nine judges were not interested in school curriculum, teachers' salaries, or the other routine concerns of a local school board. Rather, the Supreme Court had ruled on the constitutionality of laws in those states that stipulated that black and white students would attend different schools, i.e., that the young people of the two races would be segregated in dual school systems.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, segregation was regarded as not violating the Constitution of the United States. In the famous, or infamous, Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896, the Court had ruled that a Louisiana law segregating the races in railroad cars did not violate the 14th amendment to the Constitution so long as the separate facilities provided were equal. Speaking for the Court, Justice Henry Billings Brown said:

So far, then, as a conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment is concerned, the case reduces itself to the question whether the statute of Louisiana is a reasonable regulation, and with respect to this there must necessarily be a large discretion on the part of the legislature. In determining the question of reasonableness it is at liberty to act with reference to the established usages, customs and traditions of the people, and with a view to promotion of their comfort, and the preservation of the public peace and good order. Gauged by this standard, we cannot say that a law which authorizes or even requires the separation of the two races in public conveyances is unreasonable...²

Between 1896 and 1954 this "separate but equal" interpretation of the 14th Amendment was the law of the land. Based on Plessy v. Ferguson, several states, most of them southern, passed numerous laws that required a strict segregation of the races. A tortured social system of racial segregation called Jim Crow or white supremacy arose in the South, some border states, Oklahoma, Kansas, and the District of Columbia. In no other area of public life was segregation as assiduously guarded and practiced as in education.

Beginning in 1938 and continuing to 1950, the Supreme Court chipped away at school

² Richard Kluger, Simple Justice, The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality, (New York, 1976), p. 79.

segregation. In a series of decisions the Court found that in relation to professional schools and schools of higher learning it was impossible for certain states to provide separate and equal facilities to both races in areas such as law and medicine. The constitutionality of segregation was not challenged. The Court did not rule that "separate but equal" violated the 14th amendment, but only that black rights under the 14th amendment were violated when the facilities were either non-existent or were not equal. In its 1950 McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents decision, the Court inched beyond the "separate but equal" doctrine when it found that a segregated black law school not only did not provide an equal education, it also could not offer its students "those qualities which are impossible of objective measurement but which make for greatness in a law school." Thus, by the beginning of the 1950s, a small number of blacks had gained admission to professional and graduate schools, but the segregated school systems remained.

Brown I was the turning point. Although verging on hyperbole, it can be claimed that no other Supreme Court decision in this century so directly affected the hearts, minds, and daily lives of so many Americans. One of the characteristics of American society that fascinated Alexis de Tocqueville was the country's propensity to bring its most vexing social and political problems into court. As a result, the Supreme Court, the least democratic of the three branches of government, is called upon to rule on social, political, and economic questions that in other democratic countries are strictly the province of legislatures. The court can exercise "judicial restraint" and refuse to act on the issue claiming that it is a matter for the legislature to decide. This was the prevailing judicial philosophy of the liberal courts of the New Deal era and Justice Felix Frankfurter was its leading exponent. When the Supreme Court decides, however, that the time has come to act to curb rank injustices, it can practice a form of "judicial legislation" by invoking its right to judicial review and declaring a particular law that supports the injustice unconstitutional. The Court can also overturn one of its previous decisions. This is what happened in Brown I. The Court overturned Plessy v. Ferguson and declared that school segregation was unconstitutional. In the decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren, writing for a unanimous Court, wrote, among other things, "To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." As authority for this statement Warren in a footnote cited psychological and sociological studies. In overturning Plessy v. Ferguson, he wrote:

We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Warren Court realized full well that the Brown I decision called for nothing less than a social revolution. If "separate but equal" had no place in education, than it had no place at all. All the segregation laws based on the doctrine were by implication unconstitutional. Warren, therefore, delayed for a year decrees that would outline how Brown I was to be implemented.

The people in the affected states needed time to adjust psychologically to the coming change. School boards needed time to think about and plan for desegregation. The Court knew that it could rule, but compliance with the mere imposition of a distant will, especially when no supporting laws existed, was another matter. The Court could change the law, but it could not dictate change in tradition, customs, or hearts and minds nor decree an end to bigotry and racial prejudice. After carefully considering how the decision should be implemented, the Court on May 31, 1955, in Brown II stated that Federal District Courts would have jurisdiction over the desegregation plans of local school districts and that these plans should be formulated and put into effect "with all deliberate speed."

Desegregation in Little Rock

In Little Rock, the local school board, Superintendent of Schools Virgil Blossom, and the local chapter of the NAACP and its leader Daisy Bates recognized immediately that Brown I called for an end to Little Rock's segregated school system. On May 20, 1954, a mere three days after the Brown I decision, the school board issued a statement saying, "It is our responsibility to



comply with the Federal Constitutional requirements and we intend to do so when the Supreme Court outlines the method to be followed."³

A year later on May 24, 1955, a week before Brown II, the school board presented its plan. Integration would be gradual. It would be conducted in three phases.

Arkansas National Guard troops turn student Elizabeth Eckford away from Central High School.

First, of the city's four high schools, Central would be the first to be desegregated beginning in school year 1957-58. The following year the junior high schools would be desegregated. Then, year by year, working down grade by grade, the elementary schools would be integrated. In Little Rock, "with all deliberate speed" could take as long as 11 years. The NAACP responded negatively to the plan, claiming that "with all deliberate speed" meant immediate desegregation of the entire school system.

When the plan was upheld by the federal courts, the NAACP was deeply disappointed, but it decided to support Superintendent Blossom. For the remainder of 1955, during all of 1956, and

³ Reed Sarratt, The Ordeal of Desegregation, The First Decade, (New York, 1966), p. 86.

into 1957 Superintendent Blossom met regularly with groups throughout the community explaining the plan and generally working for its trouble-free implementation at the beginning of the 1957-58 school year.

Little Rock's plan to desegregate Central High School seemed to be working smoothly at the beginning of summer in 1957. Nine blacks had exercised their right under the plan to attend previously all-white Central High School. Approximately 190 other black teenagers who lived in the Central High School area would remain at all-black Horace Mann. Whites living in the Horace Mann area could elect to attend Central High School, but blacks living in the Horace Mann neighborhood would remain at Mann. Integration would indeed be token during the first year.

The Little Rock School Board had every reason to think that it had complied with the law and also with the wishes of the white community, which was in spirit overwhelmingly opposed to school integration.



Arkansas National Guard troops turn student Elizabeth Eckford away from Central High School.

The Trouble Begins

In August 1957 the trouble began. The Capitol Citizens' Council, Little Rock's version of a white citizens' council, and a group calling itself the Mothers' League of Little Rock Central High School began agitating throughout the community against integration. On August 29, 1957, the Mother's League went into the Arkansas Chancery Court for Pulaski County seeking an injunction against the implementation of the plan on the grounds that it could lead to violence. The injunction was granted. The following day lawyers for the school board went before Ronald N. Davis, presiding judge of the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Arkansas. Judge Davis set aside the Chancery Court injunction and ruled that nobody could use the order to hinder directly or indirectly the implementation of the desegregation plan.

On September 2, Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus intervened in Little Rock. In 1954 Faubus had defeated an outspoken segregationist. By the fall of 1957 he had firmly placed himself on the side of segregation opinion. Claiming a potential for violence existed in Little Rock that the local authorities could not handle, Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard into the city. Woodrow Wilson Mann, mayor of Little Rock, disputed the Governor and said his action only increased tensions. On the same day, the school board asked the district court to clarify the situation. Judge Davis said that the Governor should be taken at his word, i.e., that he had sent in the National Guard to ensure that there would be no violence when Central High desegregated.

On September 4, by which time the events in Little Rock had attracted the attention of the nation's media, the nine black youths arrived at the high school to begin classes. The Arkansas National Guard turned them away. By this action, Governor Faubus defied the order of the Federal District Court. Arkansas refused to comply with the law of the land. Thoroughly alarmed, the school board backed off and asked the district court to delay the implementation of its order. Judge Davis refused. He asked the United States Attorney to investigate the matter. In Washington, Attorney General Herbert Brownell ordered the Federal Bureau of Investigation to assist.



A jeering mob of whites pursues Elizabeth Eckford after her unsuccessful attempt to enter Central High school.

On September 9, the United States Attorney acting as a "friend of the court" reported to Judge Davis that Governor Faubus and the Arkansas National Guard were obstructing the carrying out of the court's order. Judge Davis then ordered subpoenas issued to Governor Faubus and officers of the Arkansas National Guard and that they appear in his court on September 20. Faubus accepted his subpoena. On September 20, Judge Davis ordered Governor Faubus to remove the Arkansas Guard. Faubus, who on

September 14 had met with President Eisenhower in Newport hoping for relief, and who had been told that the law was the law, complied and ordered the Arkansas National Guard removed. On September 23, local police and state troopers escorted the "Little Rock Nine," as the media had named the black students, to school. By accident the crowd of jeering whites in front of the school were distracted by a group of black journalists, some of whom were assaulted, and the police were able to sneak the children into the school through a side door. The first day ended at noon and the police took the nine students home.

On September 24, Mayor Mann, alarmed by rumors that gun-bearing white supremacists were converging on Little Rock, appealed to President Eisenhower for federal assistance. The previous day, the President had issued a proclamation ordering all persons obstructing justice in Little Rock to cease and desist and disperse. Calling the events in Little Rock "disgraceful," Eisenhower said that he would use whatever force was necessary to uphold the law. When on September 24th Eisenhower received the mayor's message, he issued E.O. 10730 sending United States troops into Little Rock. He also federalized the Arkansas National Guard. For the first time since the Civil War, a president called up a state militia to cope with domestic violence. That evening the President returned to the White House and addressed the Nation. It was his duty and responsibility, Eisenhower said, to ensure that Supreme Court decisions are carried out.



Troops of the 101st Airborne Division deploy around Little Rock Central High School.

"The foundation of the American way of life," the President stated, "is respect for law."⁴ The President ended his address by calling on all men of good will throughout the South to uphold the law. Nowhere in his address did the President call on the people to be true to their ideals nor did he say that segregation, bigotry, and racism were moral evils. The following day, September 25, the Little Rock nine returned to school under the protection of federal troops.

The Aftermath

Federal troops in diminishing numbers remained on duty at Little Rock Central High School for the remainder of the 1957-58 school year. Although no violence took place at the school, peace did not return to Central High School. In January, the school board, saying that Little Rock needed more time to implement its desegregation plan, petitioned the Federal District Court to suspend the plan until January 1961. Judge Harry J. Lemley of the U.S. District Court for Western Arkansas, granted the requested stay, but the Court of Appeals for the Eighth District reversed his order and was upheld by the Supreme Court. Governor Faubus, acting under the authority of a state law that granted him the power to close schools, ordered the high schools in Little Rock closed for the school year 1958-59. Little Rock Central High School stood empty for a year. The black students who attended Central High School, one of whom had graduated, took correspondence courses or attended school elsewhere outside Arkansas.

When in November 1958, Dr. Dale Alford, the school board's most outspoken segregationist, defeated 16-year incumbent Brooks Hays for election to the U.S. House of Representatives, the other members of the school board resigned. Superintendent Blossom left Little Rock. A new school board was elected in December. All of the new members described themselves as segregationists during the campaign, but once in office the six-man board soon found itself split three to three on all questions about desegregation. One group, claiming that desegregated schools were better than no schools at all, wanted to work out a new plan. The other group wanted to maintain segregation no matter what. Governor Faubus suggested that Little Rock

⁴ Wilson and Jane Cassels Record, eds., Little Rock U.S.A. (San Francisco, 1960), p. 64.

should have two segregated and two desegregated high schools and the desegregated schools should be segregated by sex.

The situation remained stalemated until the spring of 1959. In May the three pro-Faubus members of the board voted to fire 45 Little Rock teachers for refusing to sign declarations that they were segregationists. The "moderates" in Little Rock became alarmed. A group of civic and business leaders, worried about the city's tarnished reputation, organized a committee called Stop This Outrageous Purge (STOP). STOP circulated a petition to recall the three pro-Faubus school board members. In the subsequent election they were recalled. Then, in June, a three-judge federal court declared the Arkansas school-closing law unconstitutional. The Pulaski County School Board of Education appointed three new school board members. The new board declared that the Little Rock high schools would be reopened in the fall of 1959. In August 1959, four of the original Little Rock nine, this time protected by the local police who quickly asserted their authority when challenged by a small crowd of demonstrators, returned to Central High School.

Lasting Significance

The events that centered on Little Rock Central High School in September 1957 attracted national and international attention. Little Rock was second only to the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik as the year's leading news story. Central High School became the symbol and focus for the ongoing controversy over school desegregation. James J. Kilpatrick, the nationally syndicated columnist who at the time was executive editor of the Richmond News-Leader, wrote, "The question raised so formidably at Little Rock is whether the rights of nine pupils override the rights of 1,900 pupils, whether admission to a desegregated school is a right superior to the right of a community to peace and order."⁵ Liberal historian Oscar Handlin, the chronicler of the American immigration experience, saw Little Rock as a failure of moderation and as a deliberate attempt on the part of extreme segregationists to provoke a confrontation that would rally support to their side. "This riposte of the extremists," Handlin wrote, "was the meaning of Little Rock."⁶

Harry Ashmore, the executive editor of the Arkansas Gazette, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his editorials during the crisis, and who was also the author of The Negro and the Schools, a book that influenced the "with all deliberate speed" of Brown II, criticized President Eisenhower for failing to use "the bully pulpit" to persuade Southerners of the justice of the course the Supreme Court required of them. "Little Rock," Ashmore wrote in The Saturday Evening Post in 1959, "was a temporary focus of a great, continuing, and unresolved American dilemma which touches upon fundamental concepts of morality, of social change, and of law."⁷ Little Rock Central High School's principal historical significance is, then, as a milestone on the indeed very rocky road to

⁵ Ibid., p. 236.

⁶ Ibid., p. 250.

⁷ Ibid., p. 364.

school desegregation and social justice for the African-American. The school is a symbol of just how hard that struggle has been.

The school is also historically significant because it was at Central High School that President Dwight D. Eisenhower demonstrated beyond question that the Executive Branch was determined to uphold a decision of the United States Supreme Court. Eisenhower thus reaffirmed that the United States is a country of law and that its citizens, no matter what their prejudices, traditions, and customs, are expected to obey the law.

Little Rock Central High School is also historically significant in a negative sense. President Eisenhower's use of United States troops in Little Rock was a dramatic demonstration that the Federal Government would use its full might to enforce the Brown decision. At the time many Americans, and especially black Americans, hoped that Eisenhower's action would break the back of Southern resistance to the Court's decision. It did not happen. Again in 1962, when James Meredith entered the University of Mississippi, and then again in 1963, when Alabama Gov. George Wallace stood in the door at the University of Alabama, President John F. Kennedy felt compelled to employ soldiers to enforce Brown. "Massive resistance" became the policy of the states of the Old Confederacy. "With all deliberate speed" was translated as "any conceivable delay." By means of a maze of state laws the state legislatures tried to interpose state laws between their citizens and the federal will. Speaking in 1963, Roy Wilkins, the leader of the NAACP, spoke of the hopes of black Americans that Brown would lead quickly to school desegregation. "Instead of that [compliance] resistance broke out--extreme resistance. Now the Negro sees--nine years after the Court decision, come May 17, 1963--still more than 2,000 Negro youngsters in segregated schools and school districts, having to fight every step of the way, county by county, and school district by school district."⁸

It was not until 1964 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the following year the passage of the Educational Opportunity Act of 1965 that progress in school desegregation in the South quickened. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 for the first time brought the power of the federal government in the form of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department into school desegregation cases. The Justice Department helped break down the pupil placement, "freedom of choice," and open enrollment laws used to delay integration. The Educational Opportunity Act of 1965 provided a carrot to go with the federal stick. Money for various school programs became available, but only to those school districts that complied with court orders to desegregate. And still it was a rocky road. In 1971 in the Swann v. Board of Education decision in which the Supreme Court laid down guidelines to be used in school desegregation plans, Chief Justice Warren Burger reflected:

Over the 16 years since Brown II many difficulties were encountered in the implementation of the basic constitutional requirement that the State not discriminate between public school children on the basis of their race. Nothing in our national experience prior to 1955 prepared anyone for dealing with changes

⁸ Sarratt, The Ordeal of Desegregation, p. 323.

and adjustments of the magnitude and complexity encountered since then. Deliberate resistance of some to the Court's mandates has impeded the good-faith efforts of others to bring school systems into compliance. The detail and nature of these dilatory tactics have been noted frequently by this Court and other courts.⁹

By the middle of the 1970s progress in school desegregation in the South emerged in the statistics. One-half of all black children in the South attended schools in which a majority were white students. Fewer than 10 percent attended schools with no whites. In 1973, the University of Alabama elected a black girl its homecoming queen, while on the playing field one-half of Bear Bryant's Crimson Tide could not have entered the school 10 years previously. While the South was making progress, the focus of school desegregation shifted to the large urban areas of the North. Bussing became an instrument to achieve racial balance and disturbances erupted in northern areas like South Boston. No Federal troops were sent, but the Boston crowds outside South Boston High School reminded many of the days of Little Rock.

Little Rock Central High School was a milestone. It did not influence the course of events in the sense of leading to an immediate end of resistance to school desegregation. Massive resistance, that took almost a generation to overcome, replaced open defiance. By the beginning of the 1980s, however, it was possible to think that, although America has not yet solved the dilemma of racial equality, it would never again be necessary to send elite units of the United States Army into a community to escort nine black teenagers to school.

The Building

Little Rock Central High School, originally Little Rock High School, was designed in the Gothic Revival style of architecture by associated architects George R. Mann, Eugene John Stern, John Parks Almand, George E. Wittenberg, and Lawson L. Delony. The four-story building with its irregular but generally Y-shaped plan was completed in 1927. The plan can be divided into five distinct sections; a dominant central portion containing a 2,000-seat auditorium, and four classroom wings, two per side, wrapping around a central reflecting pool in the building's foreground. The school's plan and elevation are symmetrical about this central axis, which bisects the pool and central section.

The structure, of brick, load-bearing walls and steel frame, is faced with tan or buff brick. The high school's elevations consist of systems of brick pilasters and spandrels of varying vertical scale separated by horizontal bands of paired window openings. Window frames are double-hung with 12 lights per sash. All pilasters rise above the parapet level and are capped with cut stone. Parapets of the main section are lined with medieval shields and crests of cut stone. Gothic arches of cut stone span between broad pilasters at the facade's pinnacle and round arched colonnades of cut stone decorate the next lower level.

⁹ Edward S. Corwin, The Constitution and What It Means Today (Princeton, 1978), p. 503.

From the main entry esplanade, at ground level, double steps rise at either side in two flights to a terrace at main entry on the second floor. This terrace is supported by a round arched colonnade, with masonry arches springing from stone Corinthian columns.

The main entry consists of three pairs of doors set between four broad pilasters with tall, round-arched, glazed openings above. Each of the pilasters is decorated with female statuary depicting educational themes. Large iron Gothic lanterns on the pilasters illuminate the entry.

The interior corridors are arched at bearing walls and are finished with a glazed ceramic floor and wainscot. Walls and ceilings of corridors, as well as walls and ceilings of other areas, are plaster. All other floors are wooden with the exception of finished concrete in shop areas.

Little Rock Central High School appears today much as it was originally designed, still serving its original purpose as a large urban high school. The building is a testament to its functional design and the strengths of its materials and construction. However, it has suffered deterioration in the 70 years since it opened and was included in the 1996 list of the country's 11 Most-Endangered Historic Places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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