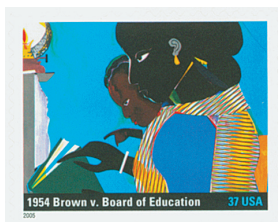


This Day in History... September 25, 1957

The Little Rock Nine

After being initially denied entrance to their school, the Little Rock Nine were escorted in by federal troops on September 25, 1957 — a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement and a dramatic test of federal authority over states.

The struggle for school desegregation had begun three years earlier. On May 17, 1954, the US Supreme Court handed down its unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, declaring that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” This landmark ruling struck down decades of legal segregation under the *Plessy v. Ferguson* precedent and declared that state laws establishing separate schools for Black and white children were unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. For civil rights advocates, it was a monumental victory that promised to dismantle one of the pillars of institutionalized racism in America. But in many parts of the South, including Little Rock, Arkansas, resistance to integration was fierce and immediate.



On May 17, 1954, the US Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of schools as a result of the case of Brown vs. Board of Education.

When the 1957–58 school year approached, Little Rock’s school board announced that Central High School — one of the most prestigious schools in the state — would begin the process of integration. Roughly 75 African American students applied to transfer to the previously all-white school. After careful screening, only nine were selected for their academic strength and resilience. These students would become known as the Little Rock Nine: Melba Pattillo, Minnijean Brown, Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Gloria Ray, Jefferson Thomas, Carlotta Walls, Terrence Roberts, and Thelma Mothershed.

But not everyone welcomed this step toward equality. Governor Orval Faubus openly opposed integration and, in a highly publicized move, called out the Arkansas National Guard to surround Central High and prevent the Black students from entering. Faubus justified his actions by claiming that violence would erupt if the students tried to attend, famously warning that “blood would run in the streets.” This confrontation set the stage for one of the most dramatic showdowns of the civil rights era.

On September 4, 1957, Elizabeth Eckford arrived alone at the school — unaware that plans had changed to have the students arrive together — and faced a screaming mob. Television cameras and newspapers captured the jeers, racial slurs, and threats shouted at the young girl as she stoically walked toward the school, only to be turned away by the Guard. These images shocked the nation and drew international attention.

After federal courts ordered Faubus to stop using the Guard to block the students, the Little Rock Nine made another attempt to attend school on September 23. This time, they made it through the doors, but they were met with hostility inside the building. White students spit on them, tripped them, and shouted insults. Outside, the mob became more aggressive and threatened to storm the school. Fearing for the students’ lives, school officials removed them through a side door.



Daisy Bates was head of the NAACP chapter in Little Rock and put herself in harm’s way to protect the students’ rights.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, seeing the crisis escalate into a direct challenge to federal authority, acted decisively. He federalized the Arkansas National Guard and dispatched 1,200 troops of the US Army’s 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock. On September 25, under the protection of soldiers with bayonets fixed, the Little Rock Nine entered Central High School together and began what would be a grueling school year. The 101st patrolled outside the school and escorted the students through the hallways. In November, a task force of Arkansas guardsmen took over the duty, continuing to protect them until the end of the year.

Eight of the nine students persevered and completed the historic year, enduring relentless harassment but proving that desegregation could succeed under federal protection. Ernest Green became the first Black graduate of Central High School in May 1958, marking another symbolic victory.

Throughout this ordeal, the students had the steadfast support of Daisy Bates, president of the Arkansas NAACP. Bates offered her home as a safe meeting place and headquarters, even as she faced constant threats. Rocks were thrown through her windows, accompanied by menacing notes that read, “Stone this time. Dynamite next.” Despite the danger, Bates continued to encourage the students and advocate for their right to an equal education.

The Little Rock Crisis became a defining moment in the civil rights struggle. It demonstrated the federal government’s willingness to intervene when states defied court orders, and it inspired other communities to continue the fight for equality.



Today, Little Rock Central School is a National Historic Site that’s home to a Civil Rights Museum.



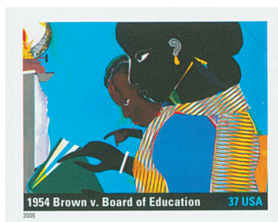
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