Integration of Central High School

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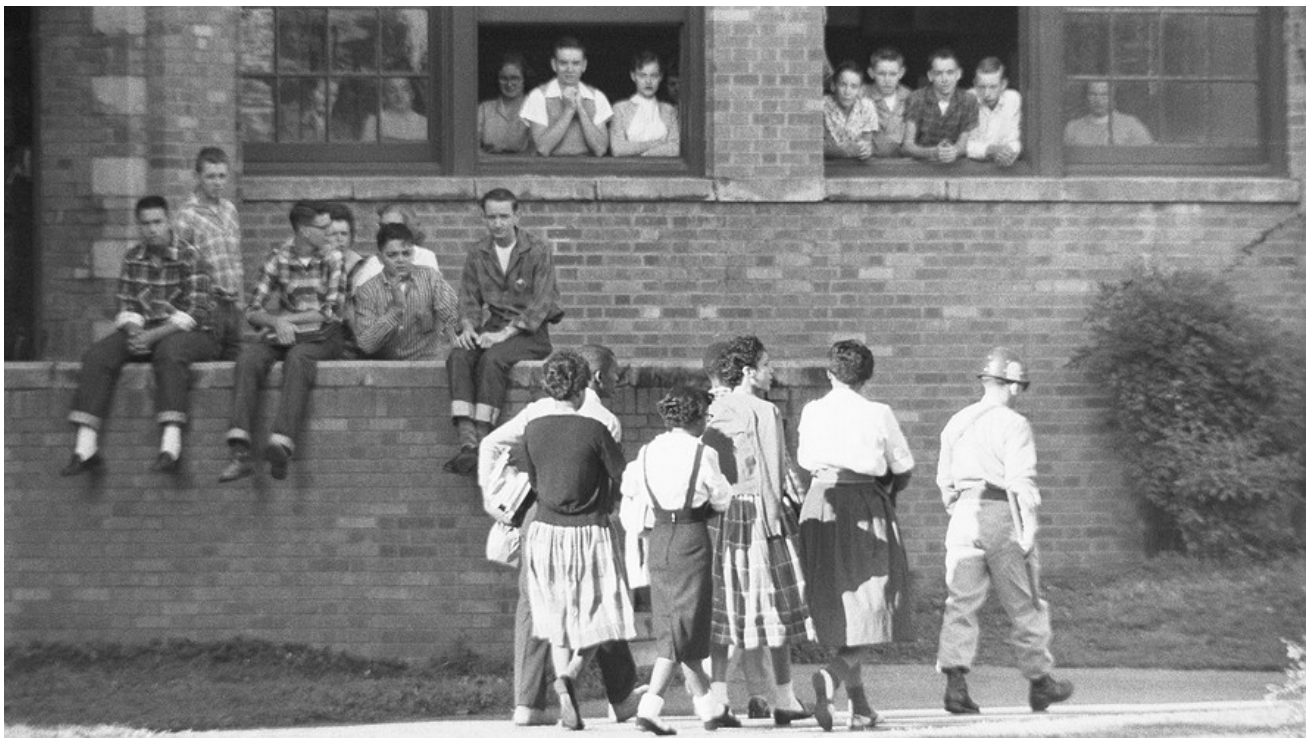

A few weeks after the desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School, only six of the nine African-American students were escorted into the school, the other three reporting in sick. The following year Little Rock closed all of its public schools for a year. Bettman

In September 1957, nine black students enrolled at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was an important moment in the civil rights movement. The students were testing a ruling by the Supreme Court, the highest court in the nation. The ruling said that all public schools had to be integrated. This meant that schools that did not allow black students had to open their doors to them. Many people resisted the ruling. On the first day of classes at Central High, Governor Orval Faubus called in the state National Guard. He told the troops to stop the black students from entering the school. Later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in national troops to walk the students into the school. The students became known as the "Little Rock Nine."

History of school integration in the U.S.

In its Brown v. Board of Education decision, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was unconstitutional. Until then, many states had segregation laws. The laws said that African-American and white children had to go to different schools. Some places did not follow the ruling. As a result, the court made a second decision in 1955. Known as Brown II, it ordered schools to move ahead with integration.

The Little Rock school board faced pressure from the court. It also faced pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a group that fights for equal rights for African-Americans. Eventually the board made a plan to integrate its schools. The first to integrate would be the high schools, beginning in September 1957.

Little Rock Nine recruited

Nine students signed up to be the first African-Americans to attend Central High School. They knew some people did not want them to go there. Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Patillo, Gloria Ray, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas and Carlotta Walls had been picked by Daisy Gaston Bates. She was president of the Arkansas NAACP.

On September 2, 1957, Governor Faubus announced that he would call in the Arkansas National Guard to keep the black students out of Central High. He said this was for the students' own protection. On television, Faubus said that fights might break out if black students were allowed in. However, Judge Richard Davies said that integration would continue.

Students turned away by state troops

The Little Rock Nine arrived for the first day of school on September 4. A crowd of angry, screaming white people gathered around them. Eckford later said that a woman spat on her. The National Guard kept the nine students from entering the school.

Davies ordered the National Guard removed, and the Little Rock Police Department took over to keep order. The police took the nine African-American students into the school on September 23, through an angry crowd of white protesters. As fights began outside, the police removed the nine students.

The next day, Eisenhower sent in 1,200 members of the U.S. Army and placed them in charge of the 10,000 National Guardsmen. With protection from the troops, the Little Rock Nine attended their first full day of classes on September 25. Although several of the black students had good experiences on their first day, they faced many challenges later. Patillo was kicked and beaten, while Ray was pushed down the stairs. The troops stayed at the school for the rest of the year.

Green was the only 12th-grader among the nine students. On May 25, 1958, he became the first African-American to graduate from Central High.

Aftermath

Several of the nine students went on to do important work later. Green worked in the Department of Labor under President Jimmy Carter. Brown worked in the Department of the Interior under President Bill Clinton. Patillo worked as a reporter for NBC. In 1999, Clinton gave all nine the Congressional Gold Medal. They also received invitations to President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009.