



Foundation Document Overview

Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site

Arkansas



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of LITTLE ROCK CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE is to preserve, protect, and interpret for the benefit, education, and inspiration of present and future generations, Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and its role in the integration of public schools and the development of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The site serves as a common ground to provoke shared dialogue for public awareness of our nation's transformative struggle towards equality.



Significance

Significance statements express why Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- **State versus Federal Authority:** The defiance of the Arkansas state government in barring the entry of the Little Rock Nine made Central High School the test case for federal enforcement of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision.
- **Media Spotlight:** International media coverage of the 1957 crisis at Little Rock Central High School elevated the local events to a commentary on American ideals of equality, making it the most prominent implementation of school desegregation.
- **Values and Conflicts:** Central High School is an outstanding representation of how schools reflect the values and conflicts within a community. “The most beautiful high school in America” represented the pride of the white community as a premier academic public school in the nation until it became the symbol of the loss of privilege. To the African American community, Central High School represented equal opportunity through education. It was also a symbol of hope, determination, and courage.
- **Consequences:** Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site reflects the consequences, both good and bad, for a community that attempted to implement legally mandated social change through integration and equal access to education. Those consequences were typified by the “lost year,” the rise of civic action, and the underscoring of the importance of education.
- **Civil Rights Legacy:** Little Rock Central High School served as a significant case study and reference point for African Americans’ ongoing civil rights challenges to Jim Crow segregation, and the role of these events as a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement, emphasizing the stories of citizens exercising their fundamental human rights in pursuance of justice and equality in a land of promise and democracy that remain as valid today as they were in 1957; and to preserve and protect the tangible resources associated with those stories.

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **The Event:** The integration of Little Rock Central High School was a landmark battle in the struggle for civil rights. It forced the people of a city and a nation to confront their own situations and issues of racial discrimination, created an international problem for the country by exposing racism in American society, pitted federal upholding of constitutional civil rights against states' rights of self-governance, and provided a foundation for supporting and forging new attitudes of racial tolerance.
- **Civil Rights Movement:** The 1957-58 events at Little Rock Central High School constituted one of many battles in the ongoing struggle for equal rights for all. The integration of Central High School was the first prominent implementation of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court. Subsequent events have demonstrated that racial discrimination would not be obliterated quickly or easily.
- **Use of Executive Power:** President Eisenhower's issuance of Executive Order 10730, which provided "Assistance for the Removal of an Obstruction of Justice within the state of Arkansas," represented a national commitment to enforce civil rights. It was one of the few times that a president has exercised his right to use executive power to contravene state authority on behalf of civil rights for African Americans.
- **The School:** Little Rock Central High School is more than a building. It is a symbol of excellence in education, an architectural achievement, the end of a segregated school system, and humanity at its best and worst.
- **A Moment of Courage:** The practical implementation of our nation's idealized values tests public tolerance for progressive change. After *Brown v. Board of Education*, Little Rock began integrating institutions impacted by Jim Crow laws, providing the impetus for the NAACP to demand integration of Little Rock Central High School. This choice of action exposed deep resentment and fear of desegregation—fear that became highly politicized leading to civil unrest.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- Little Rock Central High School Campus
- Magnolia Mobil Service Station
- Museum Collections
- Streetscape
- Ponder's Drug Store



Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.



- Commemorative Garden

- **Equal Rights:** Little Rock Central High School emphasizes the struggle of civil rights groups to bridge the gap between the amendments to the Constitution guaranteeing equal protection under the law and the enforcement of those laws.
- **Actions Speak:** The stories of individual actions and choices surrounding the crisis at Little Rock Central High School allow the events of 1957 to be personalized and underscore the power of the individual.

Description

Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site in Little Rock, Arkansas, was established in 1998. Little Rock Central High School, its 21-acre campus, the former Magnolia Mobil service station, commemorative garden, National Park Service visitor center, and the former Ponder's Drug Store are included within the park boundary. Little Rock Central High School is still an operating high school and owned, operated, and maintained by the Little Rock School District. Current enrollment is about 2,500 students. General public access to the interior of the school is restricted to ranger-led tours. The Magnolia Mobil service station, visitor center, and commemorative garden are owned and managed by the National Park Service. The total park acreage is 27 acres.

From its dedication in 1927, Little Rock Central High School was recognized as more than the typical American high school. It was a focus of pride and a cultural symbol of the white community— which became the focus of national attention and a battleground of the Civil Rights Movement.

On September 4, 1957, desegregation of Little Rock Central High School began when the first African American students enrolled in the all-white high school. Those nine students became known as the “Little Rock Nine.” The students attempted to enter the school but were refused admittance by the National Guard, as ordered by the Arkansas Governor. Segregationist protesters had gathered on South Park Street to chant, pray, and demonstrate against integration. When the African American students arrived, the protesters threatened, heckled, jeered, and spat on the students. Reporters and photographers documented the action. African American reporters became another target of violent protesters. The events of the fall of 1957, from violence in the street in Little Rock to the involvement of the president of the United States and U.S. armed forces, have become known as the “Central High Crisis.”

The “Central High Crisis” 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.” Even more significant, the crisis was the first test of the national resolve to enforce African American civil rights in the face of southern defiance during the period following the *Brown v. Board* decisions. The crisis drew international attention as Little Rock became the epitome of state resistance when the governor directly

questioned the sanctity of the federal court system and the validity of the Supreme Court’s desegregation ruling. When President Eisenhower was compelled by the magnitude of white mob violence to use federal marshals and troops to uphold the federal court order allowing African American children to attend the previously all-white Little Rock Central High School, it was the first time since the post-Civil War Reconstruction period that federal troops were used in support of African American civil rights.

The National Park Service visitor center is open year round except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day. It includes multimedia exhibits providing visitors archival television footage, photographs and audio from the crisis, its prelude and aftermath, as well as oral histories recorded with the Little Rock Nine, white students, soldiers, educators, and others who were part of the historic events. The site interpretation places the events at Little Rock Central High School in context with other civil and human rights struggles. The National Park Service works with partners in the community for park operations. To afford NPS access to the school and for special programs, the National Park Service partners with the Little Rock School District.

