

# On September 4, 1957, nine African-American students took their first steps toward Central High School and began their walk into American history.

With books in hand, the bronze figures outside the State Capitol appear at a glance to be an ordinary group of friends on their way to school. But look closer. Rather than the youthful eagerness of the first day of class, you'll see something far more ominous. Trepidation. Defiance. Dignity. Courage. These conflicting emotions defined the nine students who bore the weight of desegregating Little Rock schools – Melba Pattillo, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Gloria Ray, Carlotta Walls, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, Minnijean Brown and Thelma Mothershed.

As a youth, God blessed me with the courage of men. As a man, He gave me the spirit of youth.

— Jefferson Thomas

In 1954, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* outlawed "separate but equal" schools in America. It sparked a radical change in society and the laws of the era that not only required race-divided schools, but also enforced separate facilities in theaters, buses, restaurants and even water fountains.

Facing its own court challenges from both sides, the Little Rock School Board planned a gradual integration beginning with high school students from all-black Dunbar and Horace Mann schools. Of the 80 eligible students who considered transferring, only nine came forward. Even though they would not be allowed to join extracurricular activities with their white schoolmates, they believed in the opportunities that an education at Central High would present.

On September 3, 1957, caravans of extremists made their way to the Central High campus to oppose the arrival of the African-American students. Governor Orval Faubus called in the Arkansas National Guard to "maintain ... the peace and good order of the community." While local ministers escorted most of the group to the school the next morning, Elizabeth Eckford found herself alone, facing a mob that chanted threats and spat obscenities at her. In that volatile moment, troops turned away the would-be students.

*The Little Rock Nine:* Elizabeth Eckford, Terrence Roberts, Melba Pattillo, Thelma Mothershed, Jefferson Thomas, Minnijean Brown, Carlotta Walls, Gloria Ray and Ernest Green

Over the next few weeks, intense media scrutiny drew the nation's attention to the crisis at Central High. President Dwight D. Eisenhower deployed the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division and federalized the National Guard. Troops escorted the Little Rock Nine into the school on September 25, 1957, and the Guard continued to escort students to each class

throughout the year. With the support of family and others in their community – led by newspaper publishers and advocates L.C. and Daisy Bates – eight of the students completed the year at Central, including the only senior of the group, Ernest Green, who became the first to graduate. Minnijean Brown was expelled after twice standing up to the taunting and abuse of white students.

Governor Faubus ordered the Little Rock high schools closed for the 1958-59 school year while the desegregation battle raged on, affecting 3,600 students. With civic and business leaders silenced by segregationist threats, 58 women formed the Women's Emergency Committee that fought to reopen the schools. Classes resumed in 1959 with limited integration.

I was only doing what was right.

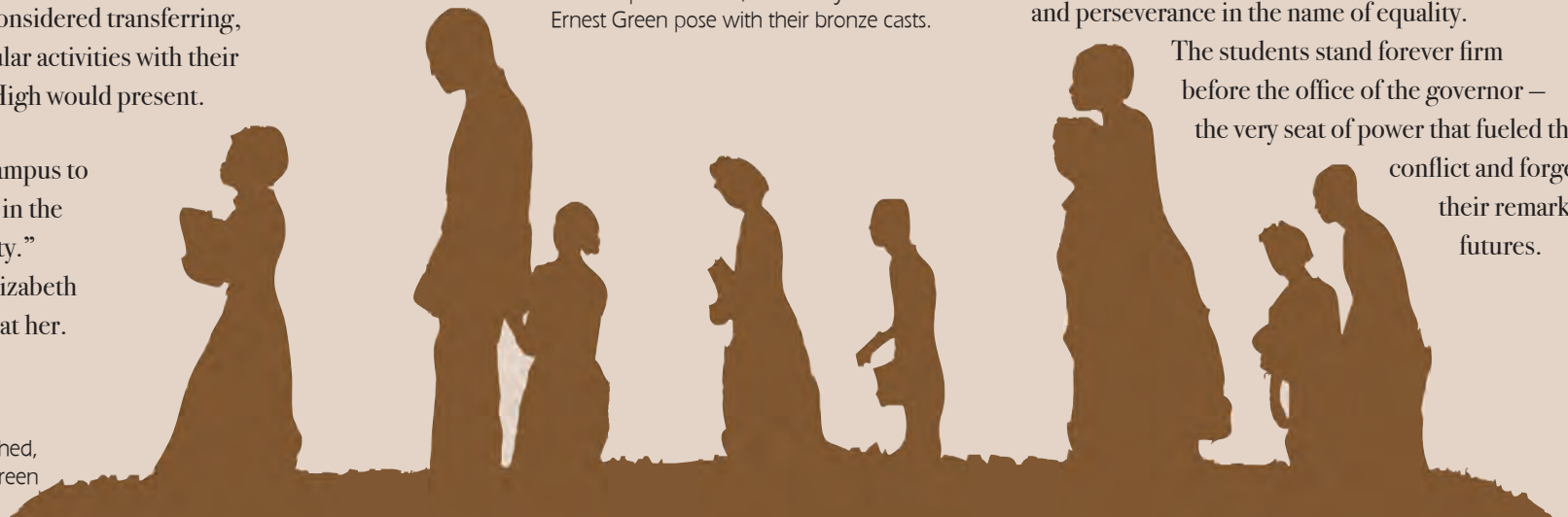
— Carlotta Walls LaNier



*Clockwise from top center:* The Little Rock Nine at the home of Daisy Bates; Elizabeth Eckford encounters soldiers outside Central High; the Little Rock Nine at the monument's unveiling ceremony; protestors march down Capitol Avenue; Gloria Ray Karlmark and Ernest Green pose with their bronze casts.

*Testament* stands as a lasting tribute to the Little Rock Nine for their strength and perseverance in the name of equality.

The students stand forever firm before the office of the governor – the very seat of power that fueled the conflict and forged their remarkable futures.





## About the Monument

It was a seven-year labor of love for John Deering. It was not only his artistry, but also his vision to honor the Little Rock Nine that gave birth to *Testament* on the grounds of the State Capitol.

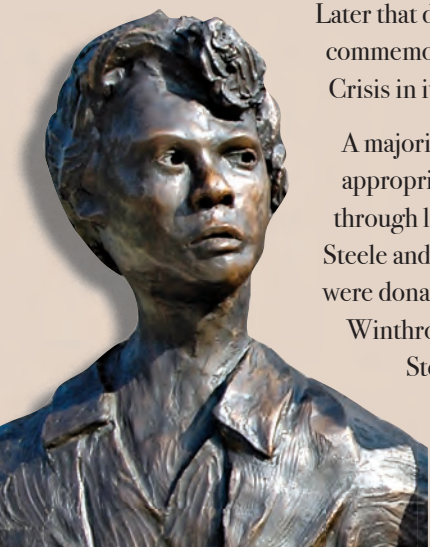
Deering, chief editorial cartoonist for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, campaigned to bring his concept to reality. Earning site approval from the Capitol Arts and Grounds Commission, Deering sculpted the statues along with his wife, Kathy Deering, and studio partner, Steve Scallion. The Shidoni Foundry in Santa Fe, New Mexico, poured the bronze castings.

The word “testament” implies several meanings about the sculptures. The figures themselves bear witness to the struggles that took place in 1957 and serve as a statement of the students’ perseverance. Deering intended for observers to become virtual witnesses, imagining themselves amid the blur of protestors, reporters and troops who surrounded the Little Rock Nine.

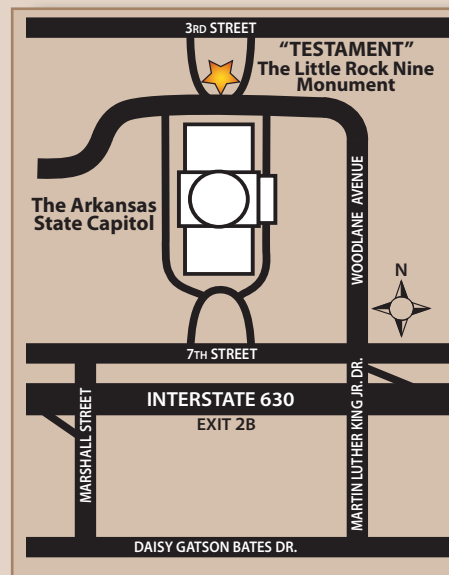
The hostility of 1957 stands in stark contrast to the spirit of celebration on August 30, 2005, when the sculptures were unveiled. More than 2,000 attended the event, including the guests of honor, the Little Rock Nine.

Later that day, the U.S. Postal Service unveiled a commemorative stamp depicting the Central High Crisis in its series of landmark civil rights events.

A majority of the monument’s funding was appropriated by the Arkansas General Assembly through legislation sponsored by Senators Tracy Steele and Irma Hunter Brown. Other funds were donated by private sources, including the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. As Senator Steele remarked, “We can honor them, but we can never repay them.”



Top photo: John Deering and Senator Tracy Steele. Left: Minnijean Brown



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To learn more about the Little Rock Nine, visit the Central High School National Historic Site, located at Daisy Gatson Bates Dr. and Park St.  
[www.nps.gov/chsc](http://www.nps.gov/chsc)

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Archival photos courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission.

# Testament

A monument honoring the Little Rock Nine



At the Arkansas State Capitol