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

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.

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.
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.*