

# A YOUNG WOMAN ON A BENCH



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS  
HISTORY AND CULTURE  
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

## A Young Woman on a Bench

### Introduction

In 1955, following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Little Rock school board accepted a plan of gradual integration presented by superintendent Virgil Blossom. According to the plan, Little Rock schools were to begin integration process in the fall 1957. However, when nine African American students enrolled in previously all white Little Rock Central High School appeared in front of their new school on September 4, 1957, they were met by a white angry mob and the Arkansas National Guard. Governor of Arkansas Orval Faubus called the latter not to protect the black students' right to equal education but to block them from entering the school building.

On September 4, all black students enrolled in Central High planned to meet near the school at 8:30 AM to walk to the school building together. However, one of them, Elizabeth Eckford, did not receive a message about the plan and arrived alone around 8:00 AM. The National Park Service describes Eckford's experience from that morning, "Elizabeth rides a bus to Central, approaches the school just before 8:00 a.m. and sees the soldiers of the Arkansas National Guard surrounding the school. Barred by the soldiers in several failed attempts to be allowed past their ranks, Elizabeth finds herself in the throes of an angry mob of protesters numbering over 300+ on Park Street. Chants ["Two, four, six, eight! We don't want to integrate!"], racial epithets, terroristic threats and spit descend down on this fifteen-year old student as she attempts to make her way to the end of Park Street where perceived safety awaits her at another bus stop. After arriving at the bus stop, Elizabeth waits for 35 minutes."

In this activity, you will examine and compare two photos that document these moments in Eckford's life.

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Elizabeth Eckford waiting for bus accompanied by L.C. Bates during Little Rock Central High School desegregation crisis, September 4, 1957 (Raymond Preddy Photographs on the Little Rock Central High School Crisis)



Elizabeth Eckford with Grace Lorch during Little Rock Central High School desegregation crisis, September 4, 1957 (Raymond Preddy Photographs on the Little Rock Central High School Crisis)

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### Questions:

1. When and where were the two photos taken? Who are the individuals in the photos? See the short photo descriptions and “Introduction” for more information.
2. Examine the two photos. What is happening in each of them? Who are the people surrounding the young woman on the bench? What are they doing?
3. How would you describe the young woman on the bench? What emotions can you see in her face and in her body language?
4. Compare the two photos. What similarities and differences between them do you see?
5. Compare L.C. Bates and Grace Lorch, the two individuals who accompany Eckford. Note that Bates is sitting calmly next to Eckford while Lorch is standing and actively shielding Eckford. How would you interpret this difference in their behavior?
6. What do these two photos tell you about the experience of black Americans in Arkansas in the 1950s? What do they tell you about the experience of black youth at the time?
7. Elizabeth Eckford was fifteen years old when these two pictures were taken. What does her story tell us about the role of youth in the civil rights movement? What does her story tell us about Arkansas and the United States in the 1950s?