

# A STORY BEHIND A PHOTO



## A Story Behind A Photo

### Introduction

Civil rights activists relied on many strategies and tactics in their fight for legal, political, and economic equality. For example, they organized marches, protests, and campaigns that opposed racist laws and practices. They boycotted businesses that refused to hire black Americans. They led complex legal battles that aimed to dismantle racist laws. They organized politically by encouraging black Americans to register to vote and participate in elections at a time when black voters were intimidated and threatened if they appeared at polling places. They petitioned local and national lawmakers to enforce civil rights legislation. They also engaged in various acts of civil disobedience, which implied doing something that was illegal under inherently unjust segregationist laws. One popular act of civil disobedience was sit-ins, during which black individuals or groups would occupy space designated for white persons only. Sit-ins were organized in public spaces and private businesses. They were a form of a peaceful yet powerful demonstration that put economic, political, and social pressures on the economic, political, and social system that denied black Americans basic civil rights.

One popular site of sit-ins was a chain of stores F. W. Woolworth. In southern cities, the stores had lunch counters for white customers only. Dr. John Kirk from the History Department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock argues that a sit-in at the F.W. Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina, organized by four students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College on February 1, 1960, “truly ignited a sit-in movement.” It also served as inspiration for similar acts of civil disobedience that later took place in Arkansas. Kirk writes, “The first sit-in in Little Rock took place shortly after the Greensboro action. At 11 a.m. March 10, 1960, around 50 Philander Smith College students marched from campus to the F.W. Woolworth store on Main Street and asked for service at its whites-only lunch counter. The manager refused to serve the students and immediately alerted Police Chief Eugene G. Smith. The assistant store manager called Woolworth’s home office in St. Louis for instructions and then closed the lunch counter. When Chief Smith arrived he asked the students to leave. All but five did so. Those remaining, Charles Parker, 22; Frank James, 21; Vernon Mott, 19; Eldridge Davis, 19, and Chester Briggs, 18, were arrested for loitering.”

The arrest did not discourage civil rights activists and the sit-in from March 10, 1960, was not the only one at the F.W. Woolworth store on Main in Little Rock. In this activity, you will examine a photo that documents another sit-in at the F.W. Woolworth store in Little Rock.

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Students conducting a sit-in at Woolworth in Little Rock, November 7, 1962 (J.N. Heiskell Photograph Collection)

### Questions:

1. Imagine that you do not know anything about this photo and about the history of sit-ins. Examine this photo. What do you see? Describe the scene in the photo.
2. Now place this photo in its proper historical context. Look at the title, think of when and under what circumstances the photo was taken. What can we see in this photo when we know its historical context?
3. What do you think about organizing sit-ins to fight for social justice? Do you think it was an effective strategy to fight against racial segregation? What social causes can you think of today that we could fight for by organizing sit-ins?