The Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education (1954), with its declaration that segregated public schools were unconstitutional, overturned decades of precedent and challenged deeply held social traditions. Resistance to the decision was widespread, especially in the south. Not all state governments were quick to comply with the Supreme Court’s order to integrate “with all deliberate speed,” and many fought openly against it. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus ordered his state's National Guard to block the entry of nine newly enrolled African-American students to Central High School in Little Rock.

A violent mob gathered in front of the school, and city police failed to control it. When Elizabeth Eckford stepped off the city bus, wearing the pleated skirt she had sewn for what was to be a happy occasion, it was this mob scene that greeted her. The eight other African-American students had made plans to arrive at school together, but because Eckford’s family did not have a phone, she did not learn of these plans. She arrived at school and faced the angry mob alone. National Guardsmen, under the direction of Governor Faubus, blocked all of the African-American students from entering the school. Eckford proceeded to a bus stop to leave the area as angry segregationists shouted threats.