

Introduction to North American History

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On Will Counts' Photograph *Elizabeth Eckford attempting to enter Little Rock High School on 4th September, 1957* and Why White Women Protested Desegregation of Public Schools During the Civil Rights Movement

In the course of history, women have generally been regarded as victims of discrimination at the hands of their male counterparts, fighting in a seemingly endless struggle for equality and freedom. Consequently, white women playing an active part in discriminating other social groups have often been overlooked, as straight white men have been assumed to take on the leading role in discriminating against other social groups. As a result, white women's active role in supporting the segregationist cause has, until recently, gained little scholarly attention; it were white women as supporters of the civil rights movement who have generally been studied more (McRae 8). Although scholars were not unaware of white women's involvement, they simply attributed white women's support of segregation to "inherent racism" or to them being suppressed by their male counterparts, being forced to share the same racist beliefs (Ibid.). In fact, white women supported racial inequality nationwide and systematically formed groups of massive resistance. As McRae puts it, "white women were the mass in massive resistance" (4) during the Civil Rights Movement. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 which opened previously white-only schools to Blacks students, white women took to the streets to protest it. But their involvement did not end there; they indoctrinated the youth on their racist ideologies (McRae Ch. 8, p. 9), censored public school textbooks, raised money for the Civil War centennial, encouraged their children to participate in essay contests about the advantages of segregation, and formed or joined segregationist organizations (8). Amid massive resistance against school desegregation, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* published a photo by journalist Will Counts which shows a Black girl walking in front of a white, predominantly female, hostile-looking crowd. The photograph with the title *Elizabeth Eckford attempting to enter Little Rock High School on 4th September, 1957* went on to spark great international attention about the horrors of white supremacy during the attempt to desegregate schools in the South. As a result, it serves as an infamous example of white supremacy practiced by white women and was for many the first exposure to white supremacy by white women. This essay will elaborate on continuative questions such as: In how far and in which manner did the

photograph portray white supremacy at the hands of white women? What were the reasons behind white women forming groups of massive resistance against desegregation? What exactly did they do and what were their characteristics? Does the photograph give us hints about the white women's social class? Did all white women who protested desegregation of public schools use the same methods or were there distinctions made? This essay will address these questions by closely examining Will Count's photograph picturing a hostile white mob of predominantly white women behind Black student Elizabeth Eckford on her way to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. This essay will argue that the prevalent reason behind white women protesting desegregation of public schools is gender-related. Furthermore, it will draw a connection between the social class and white women who took to the streets to protest desegregation of public schools.

First of all, what is the historical background which lead up to the civil rights movement, and, ultimately, the publication of the photograph of Elizabeth Eckford? The Civil Rights Movement, also often referred to as The Black Freedom Struggle in order to emphasize the fact that it is still acute today, gained momentum after World War II when legal segregation in public life was still taking place. It began with the Jim Crow laws being introduced in the post-Civil War era in the 18th century. They were a number of statutes that legalized racial segregation. Under these laws, African Americans were, for example, not allowed to vote or to participate in formal education. Furthermore, the laws included a spatial segregation, which banned African Americans from using public facilities, such as libraries, public colleges, and parks. In other words, African Americans were closed out of the public sphere. African Americans who did not obey these laws faced legal prosecution, physical intimidation and death ("Jim Crow Laws"). The Plessy v. Ferguson decision from 1896, a landmark ruling by the United State Supreme Court, upheld the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of "separate but equal". After WWII, Black soldiers returned home and were still denied full citizenship, despite having fought for their country. They were still discriminated against in almost all spheres of life, e.g. they were not allowed to vote and had, among other restrictions, less access to education; especially the South remained deeply segregated. The Truman (1945-53) administration was more open to civil rights than any previous presidency and established a Committee on Civil Rights called *To Secure These Rights* (1947). This Committee recommended federal anti-segregation, anti-lynching, voting rights and equal employment legislation. Although Congress did not enact these changes, Truman issued executive orders to prohibit discrimination against federal employees and integrate the armed

forces. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), America's oldest and largest civil rights organization founded in 1909, then took action and achieved the abolition of segregation in schools, the renunciation of the Separate But Equal Doctrine, and the abolition of racial segregation in public transport with its attorney Thurgood Marshall. The abolition of segregated schools was achieved in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which declared segregation in public education unconstitutional, thus overruling the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision from 1896. However, most Southern communities rejected the new decision and kept their schools segregated. Three years later, in 1957, Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas was the first school in the South which had to open its doors to Black students. Nine Black students, who were to become known as The Little Rock Nine, were selected and were to start school at Central High School on September 4, 1957. Although the desegregation of public schools was federally mandated, Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas ordered troops to block the entrance of the school to stop the new Black students from entering. Moreover, the Black students, with Elizabeth being the first to arrive, faced racial slurs and intimidation by an angry white mob who had followed her. As Elizabeth attempted to enter the school, guardsmen raised their rifles, not letting her pass (Cosgrove par.4), which resulted in the Little Rock Nine being chased from campus by the angry mob. Faubus justified this action by stating that “[a] man without a great deal of courage would have taken the easy way out and said to the Negroes, ‘Go in there and get hurt,’ [...] [b]ut I’d rather take the criticism than face the prospect that I’d been negligent and caused someone’s death in this integration thing” (par. 8). After a meeting with President Dwight Eisenhower, the Arkansas National Guard was removed from the school grounds (par. 9). Almost three weeks later, on September 23, 1957, the Little Rock Nine entered the school for the first time, followed by violent protests. For their safety, they were then pulled out of school again at lunchtime. The next day, Eisenhower had ordered troops to escort the Little Rock Nine and to protect them from “troublemakers” (Ibid.). Witnessing this, Faubus declared, “Little Rock has been occupied”. Moreover, “Little Rock became, for segregationists, the symbol of federal commitment to school integration and of federal betrayal of the rights of white southerners” (McRae 4). Although desegregation of Central High School failed that day, September 4, 1957 is still seen as an important date in the struggle for equal rights in the Civil Rights Movement, as it was the first time that Black students were supposed to attend a previous white-only school in the South. Furthermore, many photographs were taken of the event, as it caused a lot of national and international media attention and showed how vital children and teenagers were in the fight for equal rights.

The photographer Will Counts took the infamous photograph of Elizabeth Eckford when he was working for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, aiming to show the horrors of white supremacy (Jackson par. 5). The photograph, among others Counts took of the event, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and is nowadays referred to as the most iconic picture of the Civil Rights Movement (Lamoureux par. 1). In his book, *A Life is More Than a Moment* (1999), Counts states that “[i]t was exhilarating to make a contribution as the nation and the world learned of the injustices that the Black students were experiencing” (Graham). Furthermore, he felt “empathy” (“Will Counts, 70; Noted for Little Rock Photo.”) for Elizabeth as she was followed and harassed by the angry mob predominantly consisting of white schoolgirls and their mothers. Whilst he was taking pictures of Elizabeth Eckford, he was dressed “like someone from the rural South” (Ibid.) in order not to attract attention and be harassed by the angry mob himself – a dress choice which seems justified, considering the fact that reporters were attacked by white protesters when the Little Rock Nine entered the school for the first time on September 23, 1957 (Cosgrove par. 11). As a result, Counts felt like he did not fit in either and supported desegregation. Furthermore, Counts used a 35mm Nikon S2 camera with a wide-angled lens which provided him with a technical advantage over the other photographers, as Counts did not have to reload after each shot. He was able to take 36 exposures before reloading. As a result, he was able to follow the example of Henri Cartier-Bresson, his idol, who claimed that taking many photographs of an event would more likely provide the photographer with the best representative shot (Gochenour par. 5).

Counts’ monochromatic photograph shows a person who is by the photograph’s subtitle and the complexion of her skin “Elizabeth Eckford attempting to enter Little Rock High School on 4th September, 1957”. Her name and her clothing indicate that she is female. Elizabeth is positioned in the foreground of the picture and is wearing a white, buttoned-up T-shirt with an all-white skirt which creates a contrast to her dark skin. Elizabeth is shown from her thighs upwards. She has dark, short and curly hair. She is holding a folder in her left arm, pressed to her chest and walking whilst having a neutral, indifferent look on her face. The dark sunglasses which cover her eyes may serve as a means to hide her emotions in a crowd whose feelings appear to be very hostile towards her. Directly behind Elizabeth, in the center of the photograph, is a young white female. She is wearing clothing which resembles Elizabeth’s - a white, short-sleeved dress, which at least reaches to her knees. She has similar hair to Elizabeth’s and her face is perfectly exposed, so that the sun shines on her light-skinned face like a spotlight. It hits her from the side, making it look almost demonic, as she is caught mid-vowel, with her mouth wide open. The position of her left leg indicate that she is moving and walking behind Elizabeth.

In front of this girl, and on the right half of the picture, two more white females are positioned arm-in-arm. They are pictured from their thighs upwards. They appear to be older than the latter two, as their clothing and their faces indicate. The woman on the left is wearing a patterned dress and is holding a black rectangle-shaped bag in her left hand, pressed to her chest. Her hair is short, and she has her head slightly turned to her right; her hostile gaze is directed at Elizabeth. She is holding the arm of another woman who is walking to her left. This woman to her left and on the foremost right half of the picture is turning her head to the right in and seems to be sharing the same hostility toward Elizabeth. Her hair is short and seems to be of a lighter color. Both women who are walking arm-in-arm are in the foreground of the picture. The women's clothing suggests a lower middle class to working class status. On the left half of the picture, another younger person of a light complexion with short, blonde hair is positioned. The clothing and facial structure indicate that the person is female. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved dress. She is holding several books pressed to her chest and a metallic case with a handle in her left hand. Her gaze is not directed at Elizabeth, as she is looking straight ahead. However, her mouth is half-open, as though she is talking, or excited by the situation. Further in the background of the photograph, and on the left half of the picture, two persons are positioned. They are both wearing helmets and uniform-like attire, which indicates that they are soldiers or guardsmen. Their gaze is directed to the front, as they are turning their heads slightly to their right. The soldier who is further away appears to be Black. Both their mouths are slightly opened. In the background of the picture more people are positioned, all of whom seem to be looking to the front, although not directly at Elizabeth. Several other persons are positioned in the background, with parts of their bodies hidden by the people in front of them. One person among the people in the background who catches the eye is a young blond man on the right half of the picture. In contrast to the persons surrounding him, who carry an either indifferent or hostile expression on their faces, this man is smiling. Like most of the others, he is wearing light clothing. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that all persons in the picture, except for Elizabeth and the soldier in the further background, are white. Behind the crowd, there is a structure with many windows which resembles a school building. The tree in the background, as well as the shades on the person's faces and bodies indicate that this scene takes place on a street during broad daylight. Referring back to the subtitle of the photograph, we know that it is, in fact, daylight and that Elizabeth Eckford, the Black girl in the foreground, is followed by an angry mob consisting of white, primarily female, people protesting her integration into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The center of the picture is occupied by Elizabeth and the shouting white girl behind her, who has later been identified as Hazel Bryan. Although the subtitle suggests that the photograph is about Elizabeth, it is on Hazel that the eyes land; she is the center of attraction. According to Fines from the New York Times, Hazel was in the midst of shouting “Go home, nigger! Go back to Africa!” when the picture was taken (Margolick par. 8). Other chants which Elizabeth was forced to endure were “Lynch her! Lynch her!” and “No nigger bitch is going to get in our school!” (Ibid.), an elderly white woman even spat in her face. The morning after the picture was taken and published, their faces went around the world, with Elizabeth becoming “probably the most widely known high school student in the whole United States” (Ibid.). Shortly after the publication, Hazel received critical mail, which resulted in her parents pulling her out of school for protection (Ibid.). However, as many white parents pulled their children out of school as a protest to desegregation, this may also have been the real reason for Hazel’s parents. Decades later, Hazel regretted her behavior during that day and apologized to Elizabeth. However, the photograph still serves as an example of white supremacy at the hands of white women.

In her book, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (2018), Elizabeth Gillespie McRae points out that the Brown decision of May 17, 1954, also referred to as Black Monday by segregationists, feminized massive resistance (3). This can also be seen in the above described photograph of Elizabeth Eckford, as most white people surrounding and harassing her are female. Furthermore, there are two white women on the right half who appear to be far older than the other white women who are positioned in the foreground of the picture – their hostile facial expressions and the context suggest that they are mothers of white High School students attending Central High School, protesting desegregation. The deep-rooted reason for the white women in the photograph, and white women in general, to form groups of massive resistance to protest school desegregation which underlies all of their justifications to maintain the color line, is that the Brown decision interfered with their private realm. With their children coming into contact with Black students on a daily basis, white women feared a loss of control, as their role as mothers was to run the house and protect their children from outside forces. As a result, white women replaced their racial identity with a gender identity (13), thus using their gender identities to justify their involvement in the politics of public education (18), i.e. they linked their authority over their children to their political mobilization (McRae Ch. 7, p. 18). In addition, white supremacy had racialized their understanding of the responsibilities of motherhood (Ch, 7, p. 4). According to McRae, being a good white mother or a good white woman in the Jim Crow South meant

teaching and enforcing racial distance in their homes and in the larger public sphere (4). Nadine Aaron, the president of the Mother's League of Little Rock, emphasized this sentiment. At the league's first public meeting, she announced that its objective was "to find ways and means to prevent integration of the races at Central High School and to provide a rallying point for all parents who are like-minded". It arose, she told the Arkansas Gazette, simply because "[t]his is a matter for the mothers to settle. It is time for the mothers to take over" (Cope 5). The above-mentioned quote sums up the argument of white women's maternal instinct and protectiveness over their children with the example of a statement by a member of the Mother's League. The following paragraphs will elaborate on the arguments that explain further reasons behind white women's protests against integrated schools.

One prevalent reason why white women took to the streets to protest educational desegregation, like they did in the photograph of Elizabeth Eckford, was that white mothers believed that it would change their homes and their families if whom their children chose for sexual and marriage partners would change (McRae 4). To them, the Brown decision was as much about interracial consensual sex and marriage as it was about education – interracial marriage was still illegal in all Southern states in 1954. In a petition against school desegregation which summarizes this sentiment, one woman proclaimed that the "grave danger is a little white girl and a little colored boy being together at school [...] [w]hich will bring mixed races, mongrels, curs, and everything in general" (McRae 6). White supremacists "saw sex and marriage as the most obvious and unavoidable outcome of racial integration" (Ibid.). Not surprisingly, many adolescents shared the same beliefs as their parents, with one High School girl saying that "many high school students are mature enough to have arrived at the sensible conclusion that it is best for both races to keep to themselves" (Patteson). As a result, this sentiment can also be viewed in the picture of Elizabeth Eckford in which she is harassed by white high school students her age. As mentioned above, the white girl protesting her integration and screaming behind her has been identified as 15-year-old Hazel Bryan who also attended Central High School. To sum up this argument, white mothers and their children oftentimes shared the same belief – that desegregation was wrong because it would facilitate or enable sexual relations and marriage between Black and white students, with interracial marriage still being illegal at the time. It also interfered with their private family life in which the gender-specific authority of a white mother was to run the house and take care of her children.

Another argument white supremacists used to justify their protests is that they regarded Black people as intellectually inferior. In their belief, desegregation of the public school system

would harm their children's academic development. Once again, white women believed desegregation interfered with their private realm because their white children would have to study with Black children. In addition, they commented on the Black teachers' education, which they regarded as inferior to a white teacher's education. Simultaneously, white supremacists also feared that employing Black teachers to educate white students could not ensure that white children would be schooled in white supremacy. As a result, the intellectual reproduction of segregation would be disrupted (McRae Ch. 7, p. 9), with the long-term effect that white supremacy would cease to exist and the superiority of the white race in the public sphere endangered.

Beyond this, many segregationists took on positions as spokeswomen for Black communities, saying that although Black southerners wanted equal facilities, they did not want integrated ones. They believed their claim to be supported by scattered Black signatures on petitions to keep the schools segregated. A report from New Hanover County claimed that "blacks and whites had lived together harmoniously in the South" and pointed to the successes of some Black-only schools (McRae Ch.7, p. 7), thus negating a need for desegregation from both sides.

Furthermore, many segregationists also justified their protests to maintain the color line by calling it God's will (McRae Ch. 7, p. 8). In a letter, one woman blamed the Supreme Court for undermining God's authority and creative handiwork. Another women suggested that God made many different kinds of birds, just as he made distinctions between humans: "God made everything of its kind and it was good, [...] he made the birds of the air, but he didn't make them all alike [...] [T]hey do not mix, yet they all fly in the same air" (Rouse). To many, abolishing segregation was breaking God's law. Calling segregation God-given also correlates with the argument that segregation had existed since the founding of the United States, as Christianity was the most common religion since the foundation of the USwhi, and therefore should not be abolished (Ch. 7, p. 11). Mary Thomason of the Mother's League combines the argument of God's will and that segregation had always been there as follows:

"We are praying the leaders will see the will of [the] people and not try to force on us something we cannot and will not accept [...] if this injustice of the states losing their rights continues, we will be losing everything that has made America a great and Christian nation. When the will of the people is ignored, then dictatorship sets in and we will have lost our rights as citizens to even express our opinion. I do not believe the mothers in the league can ever accept integration in our hearts and it has never been the American way of life to sit and have something forced on us that we cannot accept." (Cope 11)

In the quote above, Thomason focuses on Christianity and “the American way of life” which would be disturbed if desegregation were to be enforced in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The white women who took part in massive resistance to protest school desegregation came from a variety of backgrounds (intro 4). McRae points out the differences among female segregationists:

“[...] [Massive resistance] included old and young, college-educated and high school dropouts, career women and homemakers, urbanites, suburbanites, and rural residents. These women were married and single, childless and mothers. They were staunch Democrats, Republicans, and Independents; some were all three. Their formal and informal networks stretched from the rural environs of the Black Belt South to the right-leaning West Coast city of Pasadena; from the bastion of southern liberalism, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to Boston’s working-class Irish neighborhood, South Boston.” (5)

As a result, it is difficult to suggest that all female segregationists came from a certain social class or had the same background. However, it can be differentiated between the methods white working-class women in contrast to white middle class women employed to advocate against desegregation. White working-class segregationist women took to the streets, like the members of the Mother’s League of Little Rock, which drew both its core support and leadership from lower middle-class and solid working-class employees (Cope 14). The parents of Hazel Bryan, the white girl who is pictured behind Elizabeth Eckford shouting at her, were part of the working class. Her mother worked at a lightbulb factory and did not make a lot of money (Margolick 1). Furthermore, most members were married (Ibid.). They used verbal harassment and physical violence during their protests and mobilized their children as political actors to spread their ideology, like the recording secretary of the Mother’s League, Mary Thomason. She was especially provocative in protesting desegregation. On September 23, when the Little Rock Nine first entered the school premises with guards protecting them, Thomason was present (Cope 22). According to Oscar Alagood, news director of KATV, Thomason was “always prodding the others in the crowd and [...] constantly kept her mouth going by yelling insults at the Negroes and others she suspected of being in favor of integration” (Ibid.). The closing of Central High School was a success for the white working-class women, as they had protested for its closure. They preferred closing down the schools over letting Black students attend it. When Central High School closed for the summer in 1958, 19,470 of 27,031 Little Rock residents voted to close schools rather than to continue desegregation (McRae Ch. 8, p. 4). They saw it as a success when the school closed for one academic year from 1958 until September 1959 (McRae Ch. 8, p. 5).

White middle-class women, on the other hand, did not take to the streets, and wanted the school to reopen, as “closing schools would erode economic investment in Little Rock” (Schuyler 1996). Instead of mobilizing their children, white working-class women mobilized “their civic organizations, their fellow club members, and their political capital” (Ibid.), like the Little Rock’s Women’s Emergency Committee. Although superficially sharing the same beliefs, white segregationist women differed in their methods, which depended on their social class.

To sum up, Will Counts’ photograph *Elizabeth Eckford attempting to enter Little Rock High School on 4th September, 1957* shows white supremacist women protesting the integration of the Little Rock Nine – nine African American High School students – into Central High School. The white women’s hostile gazes in the foreground of the photograph are directed at Elizabeth Eckford and show the aversion they felt towards her and Black people in general. The photograph has become known as the most iconic photograph of the civil rights era and has been for many white people the first exposure to white supremacy practiced at the hands of white women, as white women were not generally regarded as taking the active role in discriminating against other groups. The main gender-related argument which explains why white women protested against the desegregation of Central High School is the fact that they feared losing control of their private realm, i.e. their children and their house, as they feared desegregation was directly linked to interracial marriage, which was still illegal. Moreover, white supremacist women believed that studying together with Black children would hinder the academic development of their white children, as they regarded Black children as intellectually inferior. At the same time, they also looked down upon Black teachers, doubted their teaching skills and feared that their white children would not learn about the “positive” sides of white supremacy at school anymore. Furthermore, white women protesting desegregation claimed that the Black population supported segregation and did not want to share facilities. In addition, they also used the argument of God to advocate against desegregation, stating that it was against God’s will and that segregation was a vital part of the US that should not be abolished. It is probable that the white women positioned in Counts’ photograph were either students of Central High School or their mothers, as the two women on the right half of the photograph appear to be far older than the others. These women were probably part of the lower middle class or solid working class, as white women who took to the streets to protest desegregation were generally part of these social classes. Hazel Bryan belonged to the working class and is pictured openly protesting desegregation of Central High School. The Mother’s League of Little Rock, with some members present at Central High School on September 4, 1957, serves as another example

of white supremacist women who took to the street and, according to surveys (Cope 175), were part of the lower middle class or solid working class. Another characteristic of white segregationist women who took to the streets to protest desegregation is the fact that they oftentimes took their children with them and educated their children on white supremacy. As it would have gone beyond the scope of this paper, further research examining the methods white segregationist women used to maintain the color line in other spheres of life, e.g. in the movie industry or in other professions, should be undertaken. In addition, further research could usefully aim to consider white women's involvement before the Civil Rights Movement, e.g. in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. Moreover, one could examine white supremacy practiced by white women after desegregation was successfully implemented in the South.

The Civil Rights Movement is thought to have ended in the late 1960s. However, the Black Freedom Struggle, which also refers to the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century, appears to be far from over. In 2020, new debates on racism and white privilege have emerged, catalyzed by the death of George Floyd, a Black man, who died at the hands of four police officers in Minneapolis. His death is believed to have a racist motive, and so on the aftermath of his death, people across the United States, as well as on an international level, took to the streets to protest police violence and calling for a defunding of the police. As a result, the *Black Lives Matter* movement was initiated across the globe. As Ernest Green, the oldest of the Little Rock Nine, put it in 1992: "[T]he thing integration demonstrated is that, as you challenge the system, it doesn't stop with schools. It extends to include all other arrangements and relationships. Once you open Pandora's box and let the genie out, you can't put the genie back in." With the *Black Lives Matter* movement, people aim to challenge the system again - a system, which, looking at past events, seems to have been excusing or forgiving discrimination against Black people. Although segregation is legally no longer in place in the United States, racism and the color line seem to still exist (Searcey / Zucchini).

Word Count: 5199

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“Elizabeth Eckford attempting to enter Little Rock High School on 4th September, 1957” by Will Counts.