

Sandwiching in History
Daisy Bates House
1207 W. 28th Street, LR
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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the March Sandwiching in History tour of the Daisy Bates House! I'd like to thank the Christian Ministerial Alliance and the L. C. and Daisy Bates Museum Foundation for allowing us to tour the house today (introduce Dale Charles & Kwendeche).

The Daisy Bates House was listed as a National Historic Landmark on January 3, 2001. It is nationally significant for its role as the meeting place for the Little Rock Nine, their supporters, and reporters during the 1957 Little Rock Central High School desegregation crisis. The house is also important for its association with Daisy Lee Gatson Bates, equal rights activist and mentor to the Little Rock Nine. Daisy Bates was a driving force in the effort to integrate Central High School in 1957 and thus played an integral role in the first test of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS*.

Keep in mind that this property is a **National** Historic Landmark, which means that it is EXCEPTIONALLY significant in our nation's history within the theme of racial desegregation in public schools. [The house is also listed on the National Register.] There are 23 NHLs in Arkansas (Central High School is also a NHL).

Post-WWII Little Rock

After the end of World War II, the enormous growth in the use of automobiles along with the network of streets and highways to accommodate them contributed to urban sprawl in Little Rock and cities throughout the U.S. Residents began moving to the suburbs on the outskirts of the city, and stores, banks, offices, and restaurants followed. Developers built subdivisions full of new Ranch-style homes. For instance, construction in the Broadmoor Development just west of University Ave. started in 1953. The 700-home addition was full of Ranch-style houses with the most up-to-date amenities, like air conditioning, Reynolds aluminum windows, fiber glass insulation, ceramic tile baths, washing machine connections, copper plumbing, exhaust fans, utility rooms, wide eave overhangs, carports or garages, and oversized lots.

Although the area from 25th Street (Roosevelt Rd.) down to 29th Street and from Pulaski Street (about the middle of this block) over to Fulton St. (runs N-S just west of Izard) was platted on March 24, 1905, as Crawford's Addition, the area wasn't completely developed until close to 1950. According to the 1939 Sanborn map, the entire eastern half of this block was still empty. But by 1950, there were homes constructed on the north side of 28th Street and on the southwest corner of 28th and Cross. Neither the Daisy Bates House nor the home just to the east of it appears on the May 1950 map. The Daisy Bates House was constructed in 1955.

Architecture

The Daisy Bates House was built in 1955 and is a good example of the Ranch style with its low-pitched, hipped roof; asymmetrical façade; multiple, steel-frame, picture windows with casement sashes; and carport. Situated on a large, sloped lot, the house has a partial basement, which can be accessed from inside the house or from the back yard. Similar to the Broadmoor homes I mentioned earlier, the Daisy Bates House featured air conditioning, ceramic tile baths, metal-frame windows, an exhaust fan, utility room, wide eave overhangs, and the typical 1950s-era interior with a faux brick fireplace, vertical wood paneling, and "harvest gold" oven and stove.

Daisy Lee Gatson Bates

Daisy Lee Gatson was born about 1913. Before the age of seven, she was taken in as a foster child by Orlee and Susie Smith and lived in the Union County town of Huttig, three miles from the Louisiana border. Gatson attended the segregated

schools in Huttig, but it has not been determined how much formal education she received. It is unlikely her education went beyond the ninth grade and may have been no more than four grades.

At the age of fifteen, she met her future husband, Lucious Christopher “L. C.” Bates, then a traveling salesman living in Memphis, Tennessee. After the death of her foster father, she apparently moved to Memphis in 1932. Little is known about her until she and her future husband moved to Little Rock in 1941 to start the *Arkansas State Press*, a weekly statewide newspaper devoted to advocating civil rights for African Americans. Gatson and Bates were married on March 4, 1942, in Fordyce. Although she rarely wrote for the paper, Bates gradually became active in its operations and was named city editor in 1945.

Shortly after their arrival in LR, both Daisy and L. C. Bates joined the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and began to participate in the organization on the state level. In 1952 Daisy Bates was elected president of the Arkansas State Conference of NAACP Branches. In 1955 L. C. and Daisy Bates built their dream home at 1207 W. 28th Street.

Desegregation of Public Schools

The mid-1950s were an exciting time for the NAACP’s efforts to overturn segregated schools in the South.

The “separate but equal” doctrine was endorsed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that upheld Louisiana’s 1890 segregation law for railroad cars. The “separate but equal” doctrine applied to public schools, resulting in substandard educational opportunities for African American students.

In 1954 the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, led by Thurgood Marshall, convinced the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS*, stated that separate but equal was unconstitutional as a violation of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution and ordered public schools to integrate. A year later in the *Brown II* case, the Court outlined how *Brown I* would be implemented, stating that desegregation in public schools must progress “with all deliberate speed.”

In May 1955 the Superintendent of LR Public Schools, Virgil Blossom, unveiled the “Blossom Plan,” which mandated the gradual desegregation of LR schools

from the top down—that is from high school, to junior high, to elementary—beginning sometime in 1957 and continuing over a period of up to 11 years. The lack of a specific time frame led the NAACP and parents of African American students to file suit against the LR School Board. However, the courts upheld the school district’s plan to start integrating in 1957.

Central High School Desegregation Crisis

Daisy Bates would receive national recognition for her role in desegregating LR Central High School beginning in the summer of 1957...

Nine black students, known as the “Little Rock Nine,” exercised their right to attend the previously all-white Central High School under the “Blossom Plan.” [LR Nine: Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Patillo, Gloria Ray, Terrance Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carla Walls.]

On August 20, 1957, the Mother’s League of Central High School organized with the intent of preventing integration at Central High. Closely aligned with the Capitol Citizen’s Council, the Mother’s League served as a way in which segregationists could align their cause with the respectability of “motherhood.” Two days later, a rock crashed through the Bates’ living room window with a note reading, “Stone this time. Dynamite next.” This was done because the Bates’ were involved with the NAACP and they covered all of these developments in their newspaper, the *Arkansas State Press*.

On August 27, 1957, the Mother’s League filed a temporary injunction against school desegregation, claiming that mothers were afraid to send their children to school because of rumors that black and white students were forming armed gangs. Governor Orval Faubus appeared as a surprise witness, testifying that he personally knew of guns being taken from students. Pulaski County Chancellor Murray Reed granted the injunction. However, the next day, Federal District Court Judge Ronald Davies set aside Reed’s injunction and ruled that no one could hinder the implementation of the desegregation plan.

Everything came to a head when Governor Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the LR Nine from entering the school on September 3, 1957. As president of the state conference of the NAACP, Daisy Bates became the liaison between the LR Nine and the LR School Board. Following Faubus’s order, school officials urged the students not to attend school the first day. A meeting was held

with Superintendent Virgil Blossom, the LR Nine and their parents, and Daisy Bates about getting the students into Central the next day. Superintendent Blossom requested that no adults accompany the LR Nine, but Mrs. Bates developed a plan for the students to meet at 12th and Park streets and be escorted to school by a group of white and black ministers. Bates notified the students by phone late on the night of Sept. 3, 1957; however, she could not get in touch with Elizabeth Eckford because her family did not have a telephone.

As L. C. and Daisy Bates drove toward Central High on the morning of Sept. 4, 1957, to monitor the students' progress, they heard on their car radio that one of the students was being mobbed—Bates instantly knew that it was Elizabeth Eckford. L. C. Bates jumped out of the car and ran to the site, where he sat with Elizabeth on a bus bench. When a white woman came to assist, Mr. Bates left the scene. Not only did the National Guard cast Eckford into a hostile crowd alone, they also prohibited the other 8 students from entering school property.

Photographs from the event, in particular the photo of Eckford being yelled at by a white woman, appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world, turning the situation in LR into an international crisis. The Daisy Bates House became the meeting place for reporters wishing to interview the LR Nine. A press conference was even held at the Bates House.

The LR Nine remained out of school until the end of September 1957, when Federal Judge Davies ruled that Governor Faubus had not used the National Guard to preserve law and order and that the troops must be removed. The LR Police Department was set to enforce the law on Monday, Sept. 23, when the LR Nine would again try to enter Central High.

On the morning of the 23rd, the students met at the Bates House with their parents and reporters. Mrs. Bates walked with the Nine to Central High, where they encountered an angry mob of 1,000 people. Police could not control the crowd as the students entered the building and quickly removed the Nine through a basement door. While this was going on, the crowd attacked three black journalists covering the story. This created a diversion and allowed the police to get the LR Nine away from the school and back to their homes.

That night, the Nine and Mr. and Mrs. Bates received police protection from unruly mobs said to be wandering the city. In addition, L. C. Bates continued the informal security detail he'd organized months earlier with neighbors and ministers. Police reported that they stopped a motorcade of about 100 cars about 2

blocks from the Bates House filled with angry people armed with dynamite, guns, clubs, and other weapons. However, the police could not stop the threatening phone calls that continued throughout the night.

Finally, on September 24, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the AR National Guard and authorized the Secretary of Defense to send in regular Army troops as necessary to enforce the order of the U.S. District Court. By that evening, 1,000 paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, had arrived in LR and surrounded Central High.

On the morning of Sept. 25, 1957, the 101st Airborne arrived at the Bates House at 9 am to escort the LR Nine into Central High School. When the day ended, the Army returned to escort the students back to the Bates House, where they had a conference about their day with Mrs. Bates.

Throughout the 1957-58 school year, the LR Nine faced enormous amounts of stress and fear for their personal safety. They were physically attacked, yelled at, and the repeated targets of hate literature. However, instead of fighting back or speaking out, they would gather at the Bates House to discuss the issues with Mrs. Bates, their parents, and former teachers from Dunbar Junior High and Horace Mann High School. The Bates House became a fortress with volunteer guards, flood lights, and frequent calls to the police. Even so, two crosses were burned in their front yard and shots fired into the house from a passing car.

In February 1958 the LR School Board filed a request with the Federal District Court to delay integration until the concept of “all deliberate speed” was defined. The delay was granted until January 1961. The 8th Circuit Court of Appeals reversed this decision, giving the school board only 30 days to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that integration must proceed at Central High School. Hearing this, Governor Faubus signed a school closing bill previously drawn up by the AR Legislature, ordering all four LR public high schools to close as of 8 am on Sept. 15, 1958. Schools remained closed for the entire 1958-59 year, known as the “Lost Year.”

Faubus blamed the closing of schools on Daisy Bates, which prompted more violence. Segregationists harassed Bates and even threw a bomb at the Bates House. Slowly, the white people of LR realized that they needed to have the schools open, even if that meant desegregation. The first group to work toward this goal was the Women’s Emergency Committee to Open our Schools (WEC), led by LR philanthropist and friend to Daisy Bates, Adolphine Fletcher Terry. The

organization remained all-white in order to be politically viable, but they kept Bates informed on their activities.

LR high schools reopened in the fall of 1959 with the majority of African American students attending the all-black Horace Mann High School and a handful of students attending Central and Hall High Schools.

Later Career

The fight to integrate LR schools took a major financial toll on the Bates' newspaper, the *State Press*. Advertisers pulled their ads, taking away the paper's revenue. The paper closed on October 29, 1959.

Daisy Bates was appointed to the Democratic National Committee working on voter registration campaigns, and Mr. Bates worked for the NAACP. In 1963 Daisy Bates was the only woman invited to speak at the Great March on Washington.

In the early 1960s, Daisy Bates moved to the all-black community of Mitchellville, just north of Dumas in Desha County. She worked with local residents to improve economic and community conditions in the area, and before she moved back to LR, Bates helped to incorporate the town and elect its city council and first black mayor.

Daisy Bates suffered a major stroke in 1965 and never fully recovered. Despite this, she continued to work for the social betterment of the U.S. and to speak at public engagements. In 1980 she revived the *Arkansas State Press* as a tribute to L. C. Bates after his death. She sold the newspaper four years later. Daisy Bates died in LR on November 4, 1999 (heart attack) and was buried in Haven of Rest Cemetery. A week later, President Bill Clinton presented the LR Nine with the Congressional Gold Medal.

Current Plans

Bates House is currently owned by the Christian Ministerial Alliance and administered with the help of the L. C. and Daisy Bates Museum Foundation. Goal is to turn the house into a museum with as much period furniture as possible and the basement used as an educational room. Unfortunately, the 1999 tornado that came through LR damaged the house and it was temporarily unsecured—at this time, some looting took place. Some of the original 1957 furnishings have been

restored. Other items were purchased from period catalogs or from antique stores to make the house appear as it did in the late 1950s.

Next tour is April 1 at the Ashley-Alexander House in Scott!