



Sandwiching in History Tour

Daisy Bates House

1207 West 28th Street, Little Rock

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By: Ashley Sides

*Special thanks to: Mary Hardin
and the L.C. and Daisy Bates Museum Foundation, Inc.*



Hello, and welcome to the Daisy Bates House! I'm Ashley Sides, Preservation Outreach Coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. I'd like to thank Mary Hardin and the rest of the folks at the L.C. and Daisy Bates Museum Foundation for hosting us today and allowing us to tour this important place. First I will tell you the history of this house and its owners. Then, you will have a chance to tour the inside.

And before we pick up today's topic, I just want to announce that next month's tour will take place in Pottsville in Pope County at Potts Inn on the Butterfield Trail. Tour date is May 5th.

There are over 2,000 properties in Arkansas listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Most of them have local significance. The Daisy Bates House is in more exclusive company as one of only 17 properties in Arkansas that are National Historic Landmarks. (Of course, it is on the National Register as well.) National Historic Landmarks are properties that are exceptionally

significant on the national level and represent an outstanding aspect of American history and culture, while retaining a very high level of integrity.

As we will see, this house 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*.

Daisy Lee Gatson was born in 1914. She grew up in the small town of Huttig in southern Union County. When she was too young to remember, her mother was murdered, apparently by three white men, but the perpetrators were never brought to justice. She was raised by friends of her parents, Orlee and Susie Smith, not suspecting anything, and only found out about her real mother at age eight. As hatred toward white people started to take hold of her, her adoptive father counseled her to direct her hatred more productively toward the discriminatory system of society than against white people just for their skin color.

Daisy had limited formal education—it probably went no further than ninth grade, and maybe only up to fourth. At age 15 she met her future husband, Lucius Christopher—or L.C.—Bates. He was a married, 27-year-old traveling insurance salesman based out of Memphis, and Daisy's parents were customers. The two formed a bond but did not marry until over a decade later in 1942, after L.C. had divorced his first wife and moved to Little Rock.

With a background in journalism, a desire to publish an African American perspective on life and the issues of the day, and the support of Daisy, L.C. Bates established the *Arkansas State Press* in Little Rock in 1941. It became the largest statewide African American newspaper in Arkansas and provided a strong voice for civil rights. Mrs. Bates rarely wrote for the paper, but over time she took an active role in its operations and became city editor in 1945.

If you would like to read historic issues of the *Arkansas State Press*, this newspaper is available online. The staff at the Arkansas State Archives digitally scanned each issue and they are free to access at the Library of Congress's "Chronicling America" website.

The Bateses were both active in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP. In 1952, Mrs. Bates was elected president of the Arkansas State Conference of Branches, the statewide umbrella organization of the NAACP. Already with a statewide voice—at least among the Black community—events were about to take a turn that would give Daisy Bates a national platform and make her a household name among Whites as well.

But first, the Bateses built this house. Let's take a moment to talk about it, because it was part of the story of what came next.

As Little Rock spread out in the postwar period, this was one of the neighborhoods that saw increased development. While much of the neighborhood had taken shape in the years leading up to 1950, this lot was one that still sat empty. This is where L.C. and Daisy Bates chose to build their home in 1955 in the Ranch style, which was popular at the time. Typical of the style, the house has a low-pitched, hipped roof; asymmetrical façade; multiple steel-frame picture windows with casement sashes; and a 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 other new builds of the period, 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.

Mrs. Bates later recalled having the house built: “This was the dream house; we worked on it together, and the builders made it a kind of community thing; they built that fireplace and he didn’t charge me anything.”¹

It must have been a very comfortable home to live in and to host guests in. One can imagine the dreams that Mr. and Mrs. Bates must have had for it as they moved in in 1955.

Mary Hardin says the Bateses may have intuited the future need for security measures. There is an intercom system that enables communication between different points of the house—useful if a lookout needs to warn someone of danger approaching the house. There is also a spacious basement that is set up as a meeting space, but despite it being accessible from the ground level, there’s no clue from the street that it exists. Nevertheless, if an unsafe situation were to arise, there are passageways for escape and areas to hide down there. With their involvement in the NAACP and in publishing the *Arkansas State Press*, Mr. and Mrs. Bates may well have expected that their home was destined to become an operations center in the fight for civil rights.

But as you drive through this neighborhood, little would you suspect that this modest house would have such a significant historic story to tell.

Let’s zoom out to the national scene. This was the era of Jim Crow. Public spaces were segregated. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court had upheld this principle, endorsing a “separate but equal” doctrine. But in reality there was no equality. In the case of segregated public schools, the result was substandard educational opportunities for African American students. But the mid-1950s were an exciting time for the NAACP’s efforts to overturn segregated schools in the South.

It's 1954, 1955. Around the same time that the Bateses were building this house, the headlines in their *Arkansas State Press* and all other newspapers around the nation were proclaiming

¹ Robinson, Deborah. *Daisy Bates in Her Own Words*. Selection from the book on display in the Daisy Bates House Museum.

seismic shifts in the high court's rulings on school integration. 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 a violation of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution and ordered public schools to integrate.

In Charleston, Arkansas, they immediately did so without any trouble. They were the first in the South. This is three years before Little Rock.

But for the most part, schools around the South had no intention of immediately complying. A year later, in the 1955 *Brown II* case, the Court outlined how *Brown I* would be implemented, stating that desegregation in public schools must progress "with all deliberate speed." What "all deliberate speed" meant was open to interpretation.

While the Hoxie schools chose to defy opposition and integrate at this point, much of the South remained determined to deliberately slow the process down.

That May in 1955, as the *Brown II* decision was coming down, Little Rock Public School Superintendent Virgil Blossom unveiled the "Blossom Plan," which mandated the gradual desegregation of Little Rock 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 Little Rock School Board. However, the courts upheld the school district's plan to start integrating in 1957.

Not only did the *Arkansas State Press* advocate staunchly for integration, Daisy Bates, in her role as president of the Arkansas conference of the NAACP, had become the primary spokesperson for the efforts to desegregate the Little Rock schools. With the previously all-White Central High set to be the first desegregated Little Rock school, Mrs. Bates became the liaison between the newly enrolled African American students planning to go to Central and the Little Rock School Board, and she got involved with preparing these nine brave Black students to attend there in the 1957 school year. The names of these students—also known as the Little Rock Nine—were Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carlotta Walls.

As the fall semester approached, white segregationist opposition increased through means ranging from the legal system to terrorism. In late August, the Mother's League of Central High School was formed. Attempting to give segregationists a veneer of respectability through the image of "motherhood," they filed a temporary injunction against school desegregation on the grounds that mothers were terrified to send their children to Central high because of rumors of armed student gangs. Although initially granted, the injunction was overturned a few days later in federal court.

Meanwhile, the Bateses' very lives came under threat. Mrs. Bates wrote about an episode that happened around this time: "Suddenly a large object came crashing through the glass [of the living-room window]. Instinctively I threw myself on the floor. I was covered with shattered glass. L.C. rushed into the room. He bent over me as I lay on the floor. "Are you hurt? Are you hurt?" he cried.

"I don't think so," I said uncertainly. I reached for the rock lying in the middle of the floor. A note was tied to it. I broke the string and unfolded a soiled piece of paper. Scrawled in bold print were the words: STONE THIS TIME. DYNAMITE NEXT."²

Everything came to a head when Governor Orval Faubus called in the Arkansas National Guard to stand in front of Central High and prevent the nine African American students from attending the first day of school on September 3, 1957. His justification was that there had been threats of violence and this was a security precaution. School officials therefore urged the students not to attend school the first day. A federal judge interpreted Faubus's purpose with the National Guard as merely keeping the peace and ordered that integration proceed the next day.

The school made plans with the parents of the Nine to enter the school on the second day. Superintendent Blossom requested that no adults accompany the Little Rock 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 Black and White ministers. Bates notified the students by phone late on the night of September 3rd; 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 September 4th to monitor the students' progress, they heard on their car radio that one of the students was being mobbed; Mrs. Bates immediately knew that it was Elizabeth Eckford.

Elizabeth had tried to go to school like she was supposed to but was all alone. Thinking the soldiers were there to help her, she was shocked when they let White students in the school but turned her away. Looking desperately into the crowd for friendly faces, she was met only with shouting and jeering. One woman spat on her.

Realizing what was happening, Mr. Bates jumped out of his car and ran to the site, where he sat with Elizabeth on a bus bench to protect her for a while. 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 that day, they also prohibited the other eight students from entering school property.

² Robinson, Deborah. *Daisy Bates in Her Own Words*. Selection from the book on display in the Daisy Bates House Museum.

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 Little Rock into an international crisis. The Bateses' home became the meeting place for reporters wishing to interview the Little Rock Nine. A press conference was even held here.

The Little Rock Nine remained out of school until the end of September, when Federal Judge Ronald Davies ruled that Governor Faubus had not used the National Guard to preserve law and order and that the troops must be removed. All that month, when the students had been unable to attend classes, Mrs. Bates arranged tutoring for them so they would not fall behind academically and give detractors an excuse to say they couldn't keep up with White students.

With the National Guard removed, the Little Rock Police Department was sent to enforce the law on Monday, September 23, when the Little Rock Nine would again try to enter Central High.

On the morning of the 23rd, the students met here at the Bates House with their parents and reporters. Mrs. Bates accompanied the Nine to Central High, where they encountered an angry mob of 1,000 people. The nine African American students entered the school, but police lost control of the crowd. With the mob growing more riotous and threats of violence escalating, the police quickly removed the Nine from the school through a basement door. While this was going on, the crowd attacked and beat black journalists who were covering the story. This created a diversion and allowed the police to get the students away from the school and safely back to their homes.

That night the police guarded the Nine and Mr. and Mrs. Bates to protect them from angry mobs said to be roaming the city. This was in addition to an informal security detail at the house that neighbors and ministers had been assisting Mr. Bates with already. That night, police reportedly turned away a hundred cars loaded with angry people brandishing dynamite, guns, clubs, and other weapons, which had gotten as close as two blocks from the Bateses' home. Threatening phone calls, however, came in all night long.

The following day, the Nine stayed home again, but this time the President of the United States came to their aid. President Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas 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 Little Rock and surrounded Central High.

On the morning of September 25, 1957, the 101st Airborne arrived at the Bates house at 9 a.m. to escort the Little Rock Nine into Central High School. When the day ended, the Army returned to escort the students back to the house, where they debriefed with Mrs. Bates about their day.

Throughout the 1957-58 school year, the Little Rock Nine faced enormous amounts of stress and fear for their personal safety. The troops remained to protect them each day at school; when the 101st Airborne left in November, the National Guard took over. Nevertheless, the students were physically attacked, yelled at, and were 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 were fired into the house from a passing car.

The Associated Press named Daisy Bates the 1957 Woman of the Year in Education and one of the top ten newsmakers in the world.

Ahead of the 1958-59 school year, the Little Rock School Board sought to delay integration further by a series of federal court requests and appeals. In August of 1958, the Supreme Court agreed with the defense presented by NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall and ruled unanimously that integration at Central High must proceed.

In response, Governor Faubus signed a school closing bill that had been previously drawn up by the Arkansas state legislature, ordering all four Little Rock public high schools to close as of 8 a.m. on September 15, 1958. Schools remained closed for the entire 1958-59 year, which became known as the “Lost Year.” Faubus blamed the closing of schools on Daisy Bates, which prompted more violence. Segregationists harassed Bates and even threw an incendiary bomb at the Bateses’ home.

The Lost Year wore on. Students whose schools were closed found education where they could—if they were able to—by commuting to other cities, for example. Public opinion among whites slowly began to shift as even people who otherwise would support segregation started to realize 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 Little Rock philanthropist, civil rights supporter, 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.

Little Rock high schools reopened in the fall of 1959. Even then, most African American students continued to attend the all-Black Horace Mann High School, while a handful of brave Black students attended Central and Hall High Schools with White classmates.

The *Arkansas State Press* was a casualty of the Bateses’ involvement in the fight to integrate Little Rock’s public schools. Enough White advertisers pulled their ads in protest that the lost revenue forced the Bateses to close the paper in late 1959. It had served Arkansas for 18 years to that point.

Daisy Bates was always fighting for something. She and Mr. Bates remained active in the NAACP for many years. Although she stepped down from the presidency of the NAACP state conference in 1961, she was a board member until 1970. In 1960 Mrs. Bates moved to New York to write her memoir, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*. In 1963, she and L.C. divorced, but only for a few months before remarrying. That year she was also a speaker at the 1963 March

on Washington, the only woman to make an address at the event. Between 1968 and 1974 she lived in the all-Black town of Mitchellville in Desha County to direct the community's Economic Opportunity Agency, a federal anti-poverty program. She worked with local residents to improve economic and community conditions in the area and ultimately helped to incorporate the town and elect its city council and first mayor. She would commute to Little Rock on the weekends to be with her husband.

In the course of this, Mrs. Bates suffered a major stroke in 1965 and never fully recovered. She nevertheless continued her mission to work for the social betterment of the nation. L.C. Bates died in 1980, and Mrs. Bates reestablished the *Arkansas State Press* in 1984 as a tribute to him. She sold it in 1988.

She also faced personal financial trouble in her later years. She apparently had to mortgage her home to make ends meet and would have lost it to foreclosure, but the Christian Ministerial Alliance stepped in to buy it so she could remain living here.

In ailing health during the last years of her life, Mrs. Bates expressed a desire that her house be turned into a museum after her passing. Alarming, the tornado that tore through Little Rock in January 1999 came close to destroying it. Mrs. Bates was not living in it at the time. Thankfully, the house was spared, and the main damage was to the roof and carport. But as a result, the house was temporarily unsecured and some looting did take place.

On November 4, 1999, Daisy Bates died. She was buried in Haven of Rest Cemetery.

Her house was repaired and has undergone substantial renovation to preserve it and even return it to its 1957 appearance to better enable it to tell the story of the Little Rock school integration crisis and Mrs. Bates's role in it. 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. The Christian Ministerial Alliance still owns the house, and the L.C. and Daisy Bates Museum Foundation, Inc. operates it as a museum, with tours available by appointment.

The house was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2001. Normally a historic site has to have attained its historic significance at least 50 years in the past to be considered for listing as a National Historic Landmark or even to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places, but due to its exceptional historic significance, the Daisy Bates House was deemed eligible 44 years after the events of 1957.

Daisy Bates has been recognized and commemorated in numerous ways. President Clinton spoke at a memorial for her in Little Rock in 2000. In 2001, the Arkansas legislature designated the third Monday in February "Daisy Gatson Bates Day" alongside Presidents' Day. Streets in towns throughout Arkansas, including here in Little Rock, are named after her. A monument to them stands on the grounds of the Arkansas State Capitol building.

And as you probably already know, later this year a majestic statue of Daisy Bates, along with one of Johnny Cash, will be installed in the U.S. Capitol in National Statuary Hall to represent the state of Arkansas before the nation. Keep your eye on the news; this may happen as early as June.

Also, this coming May 27th, the Arkansas Walk of Fame in Hot Springs will be inducting Daisy Bates into the Walk of Fame. Funds are being raised for a special plaque to honor her. The Arkansas Walk of Fame is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, and they are working with Janis Kearney—a friend of Mrs. Bates's and a former *Arkansas State Press* employee who bought the paper in 1988—to raise these funds. If you're interested in more information about the event, I have a (very) few flyers here.

Now we will tour the house.

As you enter, you'll be taken back in time to 1957 when the Little Rock Nine would gather here with the Bateses to debrief after a rough day of school, when reporters would flock to the house for interview, when civil rights leaders would meet her to make plans. One thing that's different is the window does not have holes patched up and tape running across it to hold it together. But you'll get to see the bedroom where Martin Luther King, Jr. stayed when he visited the house. And you'll see photos of Mr. and Mrs. Bates and the events that I've been describing.

It's not a large house, and tours have to move through in a controlled way, so we will need to take turns going through in groups of up to 15 people. Mrs. Hardin will be your guide. Due to the number of guests we have today, this could take a while, so please see the home and move on through so that other people will have time to come through after you.

Thank you!

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