

ARKANSAS BLACK HISTORY



Image courtesy of Encyclopedia of Arkansas

Wiley Austin Branton was a notable civil rights leader from Pine Bluff (Jefferson County). Most notably, Branton is remembered both statewide and nationwide for desegregating schools in Arkansas at the high school and collegiate levels. Branton became involved in civil rights after attending Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal School (AM&N), now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB), and serving in World War II. In 1948, Branton, alongside Silas H. Hunt, attempted to integrate the University of Arkansas School of Law in response to Gov. Ben Laney's proposal of having separate graduate schools for Black students. When the pair attempted to register for admission, only Hunt was accepted. Branton eventually became one of the first five Black students in the University of Arkansas School of Law in 1950, and one of the first three to graduate in 1953. Branton used his skills in law to file suit against the Little Rock School Board when they failed to integrate Central High School in 1956. He worked alongside Thurgood Marshall, Vernon E. Jordan Jr. and other representatives from major African American civil rights organizations throughout his career. With these organizations, Branton assisted in registering nearly 700,000 Black voters in the south between the years 1962 and 1965. He also worked on the implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Branton was inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame in 1988.

