

Ruby Bridges

Ruby Bridges was born in Tylertown, Mississippi on the 8th September 1954, during the **civil rights movement** in the USA. 1954 was the year that racial **segregation** in schools across America was ended. Although Ruby had attended a **segregated** kindergarten, when she was six years old, she became the first African-American child to go to an all-white elementary school.

Segregated Schools

In the USA up until 1954, black and white children had to go to separate schools – this was called **segregation**. In 1954, a US Supreme Court ruling was made to **desegregate** schools. As a result, it became law for black and white children to be able to go to the same school. However, some parts of America, especially the southern states (including Louisiana), resisted this law.



A protest against desegregation, 1959

Despite its resistance, in 1960, Louisiana was ordered to **desegregate** its schools. Ruby, the eldest of five children whose parents were former **sharecroppers**, was living in New Orleans, Louisiana when this happened. She was attending a **segregated** kindergarten for black children some distance from her home.



Ruby

The Louisiana school district created an entrance exam to see if African-American children could compete academically with the children at the all-white schools. Worried about her safety if she passed, Ruby's father was unsure whether she should take the exam. Many local, white Americans were angry about desegregation. However, Ruby's mother was confident that Ruby should have the opportunity of a better education than she had had.

Ruby, along with five other African-American children, passed the test with flying colours. Thus, Ruby was granted admission to a local all-white school, William Frantz Elementary School, which was conveniently close to her home.

Her First Day at School

Disruption and protest was expected when the first African American to attend an all-white school arrived for her first day. As a result, Ruby was driven to school and escorted into the building by US Marshals (American Police Officers). Upon arrival, Ruby and her mother were met by a mob of angry people, chanting and protesting. Some were shouting offensive names, trying to intimidate Ruby and her family.



Ruby's First Day



Did You Know ...?

In 1964, the artist Norman Rockwell created a painting to show Ruby Bridge's first day at school. It is called: 'The Problem We All Live With'.



Her First Year

Only one teacher was willing to teach Ruby – Mrs Barbara Henry. For the whole year, it was just the two of them in the classroom. In fact, at playtimes and at lunchtimes, six-year-old Ruby was alone. Gradually, other children, from all backgrounds, joined her class. Many families from all over the USA praised her courage, some of whom sent money and clothing in support. However, everyday life was difficult for her family. Her father was sacked from his job, some shops refused to sell to her mother, and her grandparents were told to leave the home where they had lived for 25 years.





What Happened Next?

Ruby Bridges continued her education at integrated schools. Many years later, her nieces attended the same elementary school. She is now a civil rights activist and chair of the Ruby Bridges Foundation, which aims to promote "the values of tolerance, respect, and appreciation of all differences".



In 2014, a statue of Ruby was unveiled in the courtyard outside William Frantz School. In 2001, she was awarded a Medal from President Bill Clinton, recognising her exemplary service to her country. In 2011, she met with President Barack Obama – the first black US president – at the White House. They both looked at the Norman Rockwell painting and he reportedly said to her,

“I think it’s fair to say that if it hadn’t been for you guys, I might not be here and we wouldn’t be looking at this together.”



Glossary

activist

A person who campaigns for change.

civil rights movement

A movement to end treating people differently based on the colour of their skin, and to improve the lives of African Americans.

desegregate/desegregation

The ending of a policy of segregation.

segregate/segregation

The separation of different racial groups.

sharecroppers

Farmers who work the land but do not own it.

Questions

1. What did Ruby have to do to be allowed to go to the all-white school? Tick **one**.

- write a letter asking to join the school
- be interviewed by the head teacher
- take and pass a test
- pay lots of money to the school

2. What was the name of the all-white school Ruby joined?

3. Match the year to the event in Ruby's life.

1960

Ruby Bridges was born

2014

Ruby was awarded the Presidential Citizen's Medal by President Bill Clinton.

2001

Ruby started at William Frantz School.

1954

A statue of Ruby was unveiled at William Frantz School.

4. What is the name of the painting by Norman Rockwell, based on Ruby's experiences?

5. Why did Ruby's mother want her to go to an all-white school?

6. **Find and copy** a word which means 'a group of people intent on causing trouble'.

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7. Why did Ruby need to be taken to school by US Marshals?

8. When Ruby became the first African-American child to attend an all-white school, life changed for her whole family, too. Do you agree or disagree? Use evidence from the text.

- Agree
 Disagree

9. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s changed US history. Look at the quotation from President Barack Obama. Who do you think he is talking about when he says, '...if it hadn't been for you guys'?
