

The Clinton 12 and the Integration of Clinton High School

Essential Question: What role did the Clinton 12 play in the Civil Rights

Movement in Tennessee and the nation?

Most people believe that the Little Rock Nine were the first African-Americans to successfully integrate a public high school in the South. But in fact, a full year before Little Rock, Clinton High School in Clinton, Tennessee became the first public school in the South to desegregate on August 27th 1956. The twelve African-American students who successfully integrated Clinton High School in 1956 were Jo Ann Allen, Bobby Cain, Theresser Caswell, Minnie Ann Dickey, Gail Ann Epps, Ronald Hayden, William Latham, Alvah J. McSwain, Maurice Soles, Robert Thacker, Regina Turner, and Alfred Williams; these twelve individuals became known as the “Clinton Twelve.”

In 1950, a group of residents filed a lawsuit on behalf of four black students who were denied the right to attend Clinton High School. The lawsuit was known as McSwain et al. v. County of Board of Education of Anderson County Tennessee. The lawsuit was heard in February of 1952. A number of distinguished local African American attorneys represented the citizens. Thurgood Marshall also attended on behalf of the Legal Defense Fund of the NAACP. Judge Robert Taylor of the U.S. District Court in Knoxville denied the lawsuit. Taylor did not believe that the school board violated the separate but equal doctrine by forcing African American students to attend school in another county. Judge Taylor’s ruling would stand until 1956.

The official end of the Jim Crow era in the South came on May 17th, 1954 when the Supreme Court handed down their historic decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas*. The *Brown* decision overturned *Plessey v. Ferguson* (1896), which had ushered in the doctrine of “separate but equal.” *Brown* declared that all laws establishing segregated schools to be unconstitutional throughout the nation. The *Brown* decision was a legal milestone for a number of reasons. First, because it officially ended de jure, or legal, segregation in the South, and second, because the decision finally guaranteed African-Americans the rights that had been granted them almost 100 years earlier with the passage of the 14th Amendment. The *Brown* decision also opened the door for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which would federally outlaw discrimination based on race, sex, color, or national origin.

The integration of Clinton High School by the Clinton Twelve would not be easy however. White supremacist John Kasper and Asa Carter both spoke in Clinton, TN in September of 1956 in an attempt to stir up trouble, and to avert the integration of Clinton High School. National Guard troops were stationed in Clinton, TN for two months to help avert any

violence. However, the integration of Clinton High School, unlike the integration of Little Rock High School one year later, occurred with much less violence than many had predicted. This was in large part due to the support from leaders in the community who opposed making the integration of Clinton a national spectacle. For example, everyday the Clinton Twelve were escorted by different leaders in the community, both white and black. Even white members of the Clinton High School football team were involved by supporting the Clinton Twelve. However, the integration of Clinton High School did not occur without any violence. On December 4th, 1957 a white Baptist minister, Reverend Paul Turner, was attacked by a white mob after escorting the Clinton Twelve to school. Then on October 5th, 1958, over a year after the school was integrated, it was bombed.

The integration of Clinton High School by the Clinton Twelve will forever be an important milestone in American history. It is a prime example of both the good and the bad side of American history. On the one hand it shows how the legacy of the segregated South will forever remain a stain on the American psyche. But on the other hand it shows how in times of adversity Americans can join together regardless of stereotypes and bigotry to create a more just and democratic society.

Sources: *Green McAdoo Cultural Center*. Green McAdoo Cultural Organization, n.d. Web. 18, July 2014. < <http://www.greenmcadoo.org/index.html> >

“Clinton High School.” *TN4me.org*. Tennessee State Museum, n.d. Web. 18 July 2014. < http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/a_id/111/minor_id/26/major_id/11/era_id/8 >

“The Clinton 12.” *NEAABS You.Tube site*. National Education Association, n.d. Web. 18 July 2014. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvOJRQPKmE4>>

“Clinton Desegregation Crisis.” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. 1st edition 1998. Print.

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Refer back to the text to inform your responses to the following questions.

1. Are you surprised that the students were willing to be the first African American students to integrate into Clinton High School?

2. Why would integration have been a difficult process for the Clinton 12?

3. How do you think they felt throughout the process?

Refer back to the text to inform your responses to the following questions.