



Philander Smith College and the 1957 Crisis



President Bill Clinton is joined by members of the Little Rock Nine and others for a service at Philander Smith College to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the crisis at Central High. Photo by Isaiah Trickey.

Introduction

In 1957, Little Rock's Philander Smith College, an historically black college, opened its doors to the "Little Rock Nine" to help them prepare for their first days as students at Central High School. Barred from entering the all-white high school by order of the governor, the students struggled to keep from falling behind in their coursework, aided by Philander Smith College faculty members.

September 1957

On the evening of September 2, 1957, the day before the schools were to open in Little Rock, Governor Orval Faubus appeared on statewide television and announced that he intended to surround Central High School with Arkansas National Guard troops because of "evidence of disorder and threats of disorder." Faubus said,

"The mission of the State militia is to maintain or restore order to protect the lives and property of citizens."

Two days later, nine African-American students, the "Little Rock Nine," attempted to enter the school, but were turned away by the troops.

While the NAACP and the school board pursued the matter through the federal courts, all of the Nine were denied entry to the school for the next two weeks. During this time Philander Smith College opened its doors to the students. The faculty provided tutorial opportunities for the students to enable them to stay current with their studies and rejoin their white classmates.

"Realizing that the dilemma of integration wasn't going to be resolved quickly, everybody seemed to be concerned about our falling behind in our schoolwork. Teachers from our community along with other professionals were offering to give us books and to tutor us. It felt good to dress in school clothes and go to Philander Smith, our community's college. For part of each day, I studied schoolwork and spent time with my eight friends, enjoying a thimbleful of normality." Melba Patillo Beals, Little Rock Nine.

The Faculty Responds

Dr. Ozell Sutton attended Philander College and graduated in 1950. He was the president of the Little Rock chapter of Philander Alumni. He recalled his involvement in tutoring the Little Rock Nine.

"The subject of the tutorial was how do we get through this? We learned strength, vitality, and throughout the civil rights

movement that young people were our contacts with what ought to be. They (Little Rock Nine) forced me to act out my commitment...I learned how to struggle, and what it means to be committed...Philander was there, willing and ready to assist."

Philander Students Continue the Fight

In March 1960, nearly 50 students participated in a sit-in demonstration at Woolworth's lunch counter in downtown Little Rock. Store managers closed the lunch counter and five Philander Smith College students were arrested after refusing to leave. They were charged with loitering and with "creating a disturbance in a public place." Chief of Police Eugene Smith reported that all five were "sitting there with their backs to the counter" reading books and magazines.

George Howard, Jr., an attorney for the five students argued in court that the arrests were a violation of the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution. He said that criminal laws should not be used to help private business owners deprive customers of equal treatment.

September 1997

In 1997 President Bill Clinton attended a candlelight vigil at Philander Smith College in observance of the 40th anniversary of the Central High desegregation crisis. In his speech, he stated,

"...Parents and family members who were threatened with the loss of their jobs, neighbors who gave them everything from money to food to transportation and, of course, the faculty here at Philander Smith, who volunteered to tutor them, [gave] an extraordinary gift. And I would say to all of you who were involved in that, they all turned out pretty well, and I thank you for that."



Dr. Terrence Roberts, one of the Little Rock Nine, speaks at Philander Smith College, September 25, 1997. Photo by Isaiah Trickey.

What Is An HBCU?

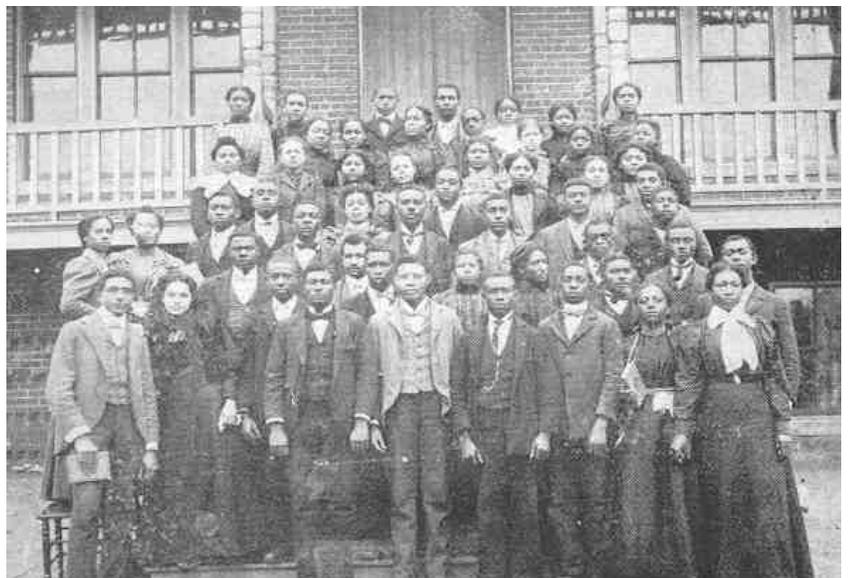
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are postsecondary institutions that were originally founded for the purpose of providing educational opportunities for African Americans before and after the Civil War.

Today, there are 106 HBCUs, located in 20 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands. They include accredited two- and four-year as well as graduate and professional institutions.

Philander Smith Today

Philander Smith College was established in Little Rock in 1877 to provide educational opportunities for former slaves following the Civil War. The college was opened under the supervision of the Freedmen's Aid Society of The Methodist Episcopal Church, and it was named Walden Seminary. In 1882, Adeline Smith, widow of Philander Smith-an Illinois philanthropist - donated \$10,500 to Walden Seminary. The school's trustees renamed the institution Philander Smith College in recognition of this gift. Philander Smith College awarded its first baccalaureate degree in 1888 and became accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in 1949.

Today, Philander Smith College is one of four historically black colleges and universities in Arkansas and is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and the United Negro College Fund. The college places special emphasis upon the importance of service among its faculty and students and encourages their participation in the greater Little Rock community. Among its illustrious alumni, Philander Smith College includes Dr. Joycelyn Elders, former U.S. Surgeon General, Charles Adams, an inventor who developed the U.S. Postal Service sorting machine, and Hubert "Geese" Ausbie, former Harlem Globetrotter. For more information, see www.philander.edu.



Philander Smith College students, late 1800s. Courtesy Arkansas History Commission.