

# Delta Sources and Resources

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**Through a Crowd Bravely:  
The Beginnings of Public School  
Integration in New Orleans**  
Amistad Research Center (online resource)  
Tulane University, New Orleans  
by Marcus C. Tribbett

A new online digital exhibition from the Amistad Research Center, presented through their partnership with the Google Cultural Institute and available for free, explores the history of public school integration in New Orleans. An online expanded version of their 2010 physical exhibit that commemorated the 50th anniversary of the 1960 implementation of the federal order to desegregate, “Through a Crowd Bravely” features photographs, images of historical documents, audio recordings, and videos all pertaining to the history of desegregation of New Orleans public schools. Both the physical exhibit and the digital expansion were curated by Christopher Harter.

Beginning in the early 1800s, the exhibition tells the story of inequities in public education in New Orleans. Images of documents, tables, and reports on schools and school funding through the early twentieth century illustrate what one might expect of the segregated system—more money was spent per pupil on white students than students of color in this era—but it is powerful to see the documentation and to be able to zoom in on the rows and columns of numbers with the site’s interactive features. An early twentieth-century report commissioned by the Louisiana State Board of Education touts the “substantial progress” made in its “program for



Ruby Bridges escorted by United States Marshals on steps of William Frantz Elementary School in 1960.

This photograph is in the public domain.

Available at Wikimedia Commons.

Negro education,” but more interesting are the letters written prior to World War II from African American leaders and citizens’ groups to New Orleans school boards petitioning for equitable funding and for curricula to include African American history and culture. These efforts led directly to the push for integration of the public school system and worked in tandem with national efforts led by the NAACP to challenge school segregation in the courts.

Legal strategies in Louisiana and New Orleans were led by attorneys Alexander Pierre Tureaud and Daniel E. Byrd, and although they did not begin to bear fruit until six years after the 1954 *Brown* decision, their work began much earlier, in the late 1940s. Federal Judge J. Skelly Wright was instrumental in issuing rulings that brought an end to segregation in the city and state, not only in public schools but also in higher education, in public parks, on New Orleans buses, and at sporting events. A number of

documents and an audio interview with the judge delve into his role in ordering integration and the predictable backlash from segregationist whites, and groups akin to the better known White Citizens' Councils in Mississippi, who organized a drive for Wright's impeachment, sent him hate mail, and made threats of violence.

Of course such treatment is exactly what African American leaders and community members had faced in the run up to school integration, and it was also the experience of the four young first-grade girls who, in November of 1960, were the first to integrate two elementary schools and of their families. Within a week, the parents of all the white students had pulled their children from school and would continue to boycott for the rest of the school year. The only white family who briefly re-enrolled their kids in one of the integrated schools saw the father picketed by segregationists at his place of employment.

Segregationist resistance occurred at both the state and local levels. In New Orleans, it was led by Plaquemines Parish political boss Leander Perez, Sr., and groups who supported school boycotts. Anti-integrationists and white supremacists organized harassment of supporters of integration, particularly focusing on whites who did not support the boycotts, with tactics of intimidation ranging from threats of violence to loss of employment. They also harassed and threatened New Orleans school board members (who ironically were also criticized for moving too slowly by pro-integration groups). Other groups, such as the "Back to School Trust Fund," organized in support of both blacks and whites who suffered from these reprisals. Ultimately, when the resistance to integration failed, Perez led calls for the creation of more private schools and supported "white flight" from the city's working class neighborhoods; the effects of this response are easily observable today.

Support for integration continued nevertheless, led by the group "Save Our Schools" (SOS). What is made clear by this outstanding digital exhibit, though, is just how long a process and how hard a struggle it was to integrate schools in New Orleans and the parishes of lower Louisiana. Full desegregation of all schools in the area (elementary and secondary, parochial as well as public) was not achieved until 1970.

Finding the exhibit online is very easy. A google search by its title will lead one directly to a hit on its website (url listed below). Even more convenient for online viewers, if viewed on a mobile device, the website will prompt users to download the Google Arts & Culture app to view the exhibit. This app is available in both Apple and Android versions, through the App Store and the Google Play Store respectively. (As a bonus, the handy app gives access to hundreds of museum sites and exhibits from all over the world, including several other exhibits offered by the Amistad Research Center.) I can personally attest that the user experience with "Through a Crowd Bravely" using the app on an Apple iPad is superb.

No matter how you choose to access it digitally, though, it is very much worth viewing, particularly for Delta history buffs, and it would be an excellent resource for teachers interested in expanding the story of public school integration in the United States beyond the usual focus on *Brown v. Board of Education* and the integration of Little Rock Central High School in 1957. "Through a Crowd Bravely" shows how widespread and how long a process school integration in this country was and the great effort required to overcome resistance to it.

"Through a Crowd Bravely" is available online at: <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/through-a-crowd-bravely%C2%A0/UAICTqdHep0pKA>