

INTRODUCTION TO NOLA RESISTANCE

Grades 6–12

LESSON 3: Integrating McDonogh 19

Introduction

On May 16, 1960, Judge J. Skelly Wright mandated a plan for integration of New Orleans’s public schools. Wright believed this action was necessary because the school board had not complied with *Brown v. Board of Education’s* directive to integrate “with all deliberate speed” in 1954 or Wright’s previous 1956 order to the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) to prepare for integration. The judge’s plan was the first court-ordered school integration plan in the country and was originally scheduled to take effect at the start of the 1960 fall semester. Wright’s plan gave families an option—all children entering first grade could choose to attend the school nearest their home, whether it was a formerly all-white or formerly all-black school, or stay at the school they had attended the previous year.¹

While debate raged among parents, politicians, and community leaders about whether schools should comply with Wright’s order or close, OPSB was granted a stay in the desegregation order. Instead of taking effect at the start of the fall semester, the date of implementation moved to November 14, 1960.² In an act of rebellion against the looming desegregation deadline, the state legislature declared November 14 a holiday and ordered all parish school boards to close their schools. OPSB was the only school board in the state to open its schools as usual, in direct defiance of the state legislature.³

Although it technically complied with Wright’s order, OPSB also used tactics designed to thwart the actual integration of its schools, such as the pupil placement law. This law placed the burden of integration on black families: black children were automatically assigned to a black school, unless they applied for a transfer to an all-white school. Some of the criteria used to evaluate transfer applications included intelligence tests, scholastic aptitude, the student’s home environment, and fourteen other categories—many of which were vague and subjective. OPSB received 138 applications for transfer for the fall 1960 semester; one was from a white student (it was rejected), and 137 were from black students—only five were approved.⁴

Three of the approved transfer applicants were Gail Etiénne, Tessie Prevost, and Leona Tate, and they became the first black students to attend McDonogh 19 Elementary School on November 14, 1960. The three six-year-old girls were accompanied by their parents and US marshals so that they could safely pass through the large mob that was screaming and yelling insults at them outside of the school.⁵ White parents immediately began pulling their children out of the school, and by the end of the day on November 14, no white students were attending classes at McDonogh.⁶ Gail, Tessie, and Leona continued to attend classes as the sole students at McDonogh for the rest of the 1960–1961 school year.

Each of the three women who, as girls, integrated McDonogh 19 has vivid memories of that event. As you hear from Tessie, Gail, and Leona about their experiences, listen closely to the words and imagery that each person uses to tell her story.

[1] *The New Orleans School Crisis*, report by the Louisiana State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (Washington DC, Government Printing Office, 1961), 6.

[2] *The New Orleans School Crisis*, 10.

[3] *The New Orleans School Crisis*, 14.

[4] Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 234–35.

[5] Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans: The Hundred-Year Struggle to Integrate the Schools* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 401.

[6] *The New Orleans School Crisis*, 14, 25.