

## The Desegregation of Sturgis High School

After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling effectively desegregating public school systems Kentucky, unlike many of its southern neighbors, encountered very little public resistance to the decision. An exception to this lack of public protest was felt very intensely in 1956 when eight African-American students decided to attend the all-white high school in Sturgis, Ky. One student, James Howard, remembers his first day at Sturgis High School as anticlimactic, with little interest or surprise from the students and some obvious discomfort by the teachers. On the second day, there was an estimated crowd of 300 blocking the students' entrance into school. When members of the school board and city officials refused to stop the mob, Gov. Chandler ordered the state police and National Guard to escort the students to school.



Under the protection of 200 armed guards and facing over 1,000 angry protestors, the students returned to school while half of the white student body boycotted their attendance. The state's attorney eventually ruled that until the Sturgis school board created an integration plan, the black students should be prohibited from attending the high school. This prompted the barring of the eight students from entering the school less than a month from originally enrolling. The students chose to remain at home for the rest of the academic year rather than return to the segregated black high school. In 1957, the Sturgis school board closed the black high school and transferred the students to the Sturgis high school. There were no public racial incidents in 1957 when black students were admitted into the high school.

Oral history interviews with James Howard and other Kentucky civil rights activists can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress from the NAACP Records)

"Pass the Word" is a discovery tool for oral histories throughout the state of Kentucky. To learn more about this topic, visit <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.