Topic: Preserving the Untold Stories: Leveraging Emerging Technologies (AI and Machine Learning) for Archiving Hidden Histories of Children and Families Impacted by the Little Rock School Integration Crisis

Introduction

Until the late 19th century, historians systematically neglected childhood history,[1] focusing instead on adult achievements while ignoring the formative experiences that shaped them. This neglect reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of how historical agency actually develops and operates. When we examine the lives of history's most influential figures, we consistently find that their childhood experiences, shaped by complex networks of family, siblings, and community, played crucial roles in their later contributions to historical change.

The next paragraphs will explore some historical epochs, following Gombrich's framework that divides world history into five distinct eras: prehistory, ancient history, medieval, early modern, and modern/contemporary.[2] Although the prehistory era, by definition, lacks the documented individual stories necessary for this work, the analysis will highlight just two examples to establish the claim and launch us into the very crux of this thesis topic.

In the early Modern period, Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753) – the first African-American to publish a book of poetry- was kidnapped from West Africa as a child and arrived in Boston on a slave ship in 1761. John and Susanna Wheatley purchased her to work as a domestic servant, naming her after the ship that brought her, *"The Phillis"*. The Wheatleys' 18-year-old daughter, Mary, became

[1] Philippe Ariès, Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life, trans. Robert Baldick (Vintage Books, 1962). Phillipe is regarded as the first person to ever define childhood as a concept, particularly introducing the idea that childhood is not universal.

[2] E. H. Gombrich, A Little History of the World, in A Little History of the World (2017), https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300132076. Although Gombrich did not categorically adumbrate the epochs in history as such, his stories were chronologically laid out like this. He handpicked selected events from the Stone Age to the age of Atomic bombs.

Phillis's first tutor in reading and writing, with their son Nathaniel also teaching her. By age 12, Phillis was reading Greek and Latin classics in their original languages and difficult passages from the Bible. At 14, she wrote her first poem. Susanna Wheatley relieved Phillis of most domestic duties to focus on her education, with assistance from her daughter, Mary, who taught her reading, writing, religion, language, literature, and history. In 1773, at the age of 20, Phillis traveled to London with Nathaniel Wheatley, where her book, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, was published - the first book by an enslaved Black woman in America. The Wheatley family's decision to educate an enslaved girl was unusual for the period, but their encouragement made her literary career possible. [3]

In the Modern period, Claudette Colvin (born 1939) was 15 years old on March 2, 1955, when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white woman in Montgomery. As a result, two police officers dragged her off the bus, handcuffed her, and took her to jail. She was convicted and declared a ward of the state. Nine months later, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the same bus system, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) thought Colvin was too young to be the face for civil rights, so Parks became the symbol instead. But Colvin was one of four plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle*, the legal case that successfully challenged bus segregation laws in federal court in 1956. [4]

Her family—the Colvins, who raised her, her sister, who died young, and the household dealing with poverty and grief—is often overlooked in civil rights history. While Rosa Parks' name is widely recognized, Claudette Colvin remains less known, and her family's influence on her

[3] Henry Louis. Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley : America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (Basic Civitas Books, 2010).
[4] The Editors of Encyclopedia of Britannica, "Claudette Colvin," in *Encyclopedia of Britannica*, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudette-Colvin.

experience is rarely discussed. Her family - the Colvins, who raised her, her sister who died young, the household struggling with poverty and grief – are often talked about in civil rights history. Rosa Parks is well-known, but Claudette Colvin is not, and hardly does anyone talk about her family, who raised her and helped shape her agency. In one account, she claimed that the stories of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth did shape her consciousness, which shows the influence of intimate knowledge of oppression passed down through family and community practice. [5]

The Systematic Gap

Despite these clear patterns across historical epochs, historians provide little evidence of how these influential childhoods were constructed through the complex interplay of parents, siblings, society, and communal networks. This oversight misses a crucial truth: children develop their agency not in isolation, but through dynamic relationships with family members and community networks that both shape and are shaped by young people's actions.

The historiographical problem goes beyond simply adding childhood to existing narratives, but about recognizing that the family unit that spans siblings, extended relatives, fictive relations, and community networks functions as the primary site where historical agency is cultivated. When we ignore these formative relationships, we fundamentally misunderstand how historical change occurs. We see individual genius where we should see collective cultivation; we see isolated inspiration where we should see networked nurturing.

This gap in historical understanding draws concern when examining social movements. Why? Because children's participation in movements is visible and documented – there are photographs,

[5] Margot Adler, "Before Rosa Parks, There Was Claudette Colvin," National Public Radio, 2009, https://www.npr.org/2009/03/15/101719889/before-rosa-parks-there-was-claudette-colvin.

news records, and even some of these individuals are still alive to give their testimonies. Yet historians consistently treat this participation as individual courage, rather than also analyzing the family systems that made it possible. But social movements are precisely about understanding how ordinary people create historical change. The mechanism of change is the network of relationships, resources, and strategies that enable participation. When we focus on individual children's bravery while ignoring how their families prepared, protected, and sustained them through crisis, we're not just missing context; we're fundamentally misunderstanding how social movements work.

The 1957 Little Rock desegregation crisis makes this particularly clear. We know the Little Rock Nine showed courage in entering Central High. The Little Rock Nine were a group of nine African American students who, in 1957, courageously integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, following the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Their bravery in the face of violent resistance became a powerful symbol of the civil rights movement and the fight for educational equality in America. There are photographs of Elizabeth Eckford walking past the mob. We have Melba Pattillo Beals' memoir describing daily harassment. But these documented acts of individual agency obscure more complex questions: How did these families decide which children would integrate? What strategies did siblings develop to cope with their brothers' and sisters' daily danger? How did extended family networks provide economic support when parents lost jobs? How did community networks help families sustain months and years of crisis?

These questions reveal that children's agency in social movements operates through family systems. The gap in historical understanding is pronounced here because the evidence is abundant, though not always as in this work, I had to put together some connections, yet historians still miss

it by centering individual actors rather than highlighting or acknowledging the collective infrastructure that sustained them.

Why Civil Rights?

Before examining how children's agency operated during the Little Rock crisis, I must first establish what is meant by "agency" and why capturing children's agency matters for historical understanding. Agency, at its most fundamental level, refers to the capacity or intentionality, as Jan Varpenenput it, of individuals to act independently and make choices that shape their circumstances. It encompasses will, the intentional exercise of choice, and the power to effect change; however, those choices might be constrained by external circumstances.[6]

Why does agency matter in historical analysis? Because history is not simply what happened to people, but what people made happen through their choices, actions, and resistance. To capture historical truth (that is, an inclusive understanding of past events, acknowledging diverse experiences and perspectives to reflect an accurate picture of what truly happened), we need narration from all actors who participated in historical events and go beyond just those with formal power or institutional authority. Every historical moment involves multiple actors with different perspectives, different stakes, and different forms of participation. When we systematically exclude certain voices, particularly those of children, we fundamentally misunderstand how historical change occurred.

This brings us to the focus on children specifically. Children represent a distinct category of historical actors whose agency has been systematically overlooked, partly because of their legal

[6] Jan Varpanen, "What Is Children's Agency? A Review of Conceptualizations Used in Early Childhood Education Research," in *Educational Research Review*, vol. 28, preprint, Elsevier Ltd, November 1, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100288.

and social status. Children are legal minors with specific protections, restrictions, and relationships to authority that differ from adults. As minors, they exist in a unique position: they possess the capacity for meaningful action and choice, yet they operate within legal frameworks that simultaneously protect and constrain them. They require guardianship, yet they exercise will. They lack certain legal rights, yet they shape historical outcomes.

To focus on children's agency, then, requires acknowledging this special paradox: children are both dependent and capable, both protected and active, both shaped by adults and shapers of adult decisions. In the literature review that follows, I will explore how different scholarly traditions have grappled with this paradox—from legal frameworks that define childhood, to how children learn race, hate, and love, to historical studies that document children's participation in social movements, to biological/psychological theories that explain how children develop the capacity for independent action.

Having established that, aside from the fact that there is an epistemic gap that needs to be filled, I need to say that this thesis chooses the civil rights conundrum as it is a perfect epitome for analyzing how children exercise their will during crisis moments under familial tutelage. In all, I will be travelling through the generally known stories of the Little Rock crisis by looking deeper, by reading against the grain.

By centering the experiences of siblings and families alongside the Little Rock Nine, we will understand how children's historical agency actually functioned—beyond individual heroism, but as part of complex family negotiations, protective networks, and multigenerational resistance strategies. The crisis reveals how children's agency emerges from and reshapes family structures, how siblings' experiences are as historically significant as those of the famous Little Rock Nine,

and how community networks enable young people to sustain resistance in the face of overwhelming opposition.

The Little Rock crisis thus serves as a lens through which we can develop new methodologies for understanding children's agency throughout history - methodologies that center family and community networks rather than treating them as background context. Through this approach, we can begin to tell the hidden stories of how historical change actually happens: not through isolated individual action, but through the complex interplay of children's agency and the family systems that both shape and are transformed by young people's choices.

In recovering these hidden histories of the Little Rock crisis, my investigation contributes to a broader project of reimagining how children's agency has operated throughout human history—always embedded in, emerging from, and reshaping the family and community networks that historians have too long treated as merely supporting context rather than as the primary sites where historical agency is born, nurtured, and sustained.

Scope of my project

My research will examine both the widely documented experiences of the original Little Rock Nine and the lesser-known stories of students like Sybil Hampton, Franklin Henderson, and Sandra Johnson who integrated Central High in subsequent years, revealing how family strategies evolved as the crisis extended beyond 1957. The original nine students ranged from 14 to 17 years old in 1957: Carlotta Walls LaNier (14), Gloria Ray Karlmark (15), Jefferson Thomas (15), Melba Pattillo Beals (15), Minnijean Brown-Trickey (16), Elizabeth Eckford (16), Terrence Roberts (16), Thelma Mothershed (17), and Ernest Green (17). Sybil Hampton was 10 in 1957, though we don't yet know the ages of Henderson and Johnson that year. The scope of my work will cover the

formative years of the crisis, and after the crisis, from the perspective of the impact on external parties connected to each of the children.

It is also important to note and acknowledge that my investigation of this topic has some limitations: not all individual family voices can be recovered; some experiences remain irretrievably lost; and the passage of time has inevitably shaped how families remember and narrate their experiences. Oral histories, one methodology on which this project builds, are bound to have these limitations. However, these limitations do not invalidate the project but rather highlight why developing new methodologies for recovering hidden histories is so urgent. This is why a second component of my thesis incorporates preservation utilizing digital methodologies. Normally, this work should also include a section for the communities concerned and involved to submit feedback, which can be screened and implemented in the website. But considering the logistics involved, this work does not include that task.

The decision to create a digital archive directly addresses the problem of "*hidden history*" that motivates this research. These stories have remained hidden not because they were unimportant, but because traditional historical preservation methods were never designed to thoroughly capture the intimate, family-centered experiences that this study reveals to be central to understanding historical change.

Digital technology provides a friendly way to preserve, organize, and easily access the materials that tell the stories of children and families. This technology turns these scattered, private items into a clear, searchable, and welcoming historical resource.

The integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning into this archival project represents technological innovation; it also constitutes a methodological intervention in how historians and

archivists approach hidden histories towards user consideration and satisfaction. The centerpiece of this technological approach is an AI-integrated chatbot that provides users with personalized, interactive experiences when engaging with these historical materials. Rather than passively consuming pre-written narratives, users can ask specific questions, explore connections between different family stories, and receive tailored responses based on their particular interests and educational needs.

This AI chatbot serves multiple crucial functions: it pulls information from the website itself, it can identify patterns across family narratives, connect related stories across different families, reveal thematic connections that might be missed through traditional archival methods, and most importantly, create individualized learning pathways that adapt to each user's level of knowledge, prompting skills, and specific areas of curiosity. It is designed for every demographic; a middle school student can ask about what it was like to be a sibling of one of the Nine, and the system can provide age-appropriate responses while drawing from multiple family accounts. And a researcher can also enquire about protection strategies, the bot then synthesizes information across all archived families to provide a summarized analysis.

Logistics and time constraints make a full exploration of shared authority impossible. But to abide by the best practices of archiving, this technology is also designed to accommodate future research and development, which means the technology includes an approach that democratizes historical preservation by enabling families themselves to contribute materials and stories without requiring specialized archival training, while ensuring that users can access and understand these materials through personalized interaction rather than generic presentation. The digital platform becomes not just a repository but an intelligent, responsive tool for ongoing historical recovery, inviting

community participation in both preserving and interpreting these crucial histories. And this is what a future study for this project will include.

Creating an accessible digital archive means ensuring that these hidden histories become permanently unhidden. Unlike traditional archives, which require physical access and specialized knowledge to navigate, the digital platform makes these stories accessible to students, researchers, families, and community members regardless of their location or institutional affiliation. And much more importantly, to interested parties out of state.

The digital format also enables new forms of historical engagement: interactive timelines that show how family experiences connected to broader historical events, search functions that allow users to explore themes across multiple family stories, and multimedia presentations that integrate photographs and documents in ways that traditional archives cannot accomplish.

This study's approach to children's agency and family networks offers a replicable methodology for uncovering hidden histories in other historical contexts. The theoretical framework developed here—centering family networks as sites of historical agency rather than treating them as background—can be applied to understanding children's roles in other social movements, migration experiences, wartime disruptions, and periods of social transformation.

The digital archival methodology similarly provides a model for how emerging technologies can be deployed to preserve and analyze the kinds of materials that constitute hidden histories: personal photographs, family documents, oral traditions, and community memories that rarely find their way into traditional archives.

Understanding how children's agency operated through family networks during the Little Rock crisis helps to comprehend contemporary social movements where young people sometimes play

central roles. During periods of activism, immigration transitions, or any type of justice movements, children today still develop their agency individually through family and community networks that provide both resources and constraints for their historical participation. This research also contributes to ongoing debates about children's rights, family autonomy, and the responsibilities of communities to support young people's civic engagement. By revealing how families historically balanced protection and empowerment, support and independence, this study offers a historical perspective on contemporary questions about children's capabilities and roles in social change.

Literature Review

What is Children's Agency and Why Does It Matter?

Jan Varpanen defines agency as "the capacity or intentionality of individuals to act independently and make choices that shape their circumstances."[7] The definition includes both will, which is the intentional exercise of choice, and the power to affect change. Claudio Baraldi takes this further, arguing that children's agency is not an inherent trait at all. Agency, he claims, is created through communication systems.[8] Children exhibit "unpredictable actions" within structured settings, and those actions are either facilitated or suppressed depending on whether adults organize hierarchical or collaborative environments.[9]

Both scholars do important theoretical work. But both miss something crucial: they study agency in contemporary educational settings and ignore how children develop agency within family networks.[10] Varpanen's research focuses almost entirely on schools. Baraldi analyzes twenty-three years of classroom videos from Italy.[11] Neither study examines families as communication systems, primarily because their focus is on specific research objectives. So it is understandable

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[7] Jan Varpanen, "What Is Children's Agency? A Review of Conceptualizations Used in Early Childhood Education Research," *Educational Research Review* 28 (November 2019), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100288
[8] Claudio Baraldi, *Facilitating Children's Agency in the Interaction: Challenges for the Education System* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 23.
[9] Baraldi, 38.
[10] Varpanen,
[11] Baraldi, 304.

why they did not consider children during crisis moments, when questions about agency become questions about survival.

My research aims to address this gap by exploring how personal willpower, developed within family networks, enabled resistance. All children who integrated Little Rock schools gained the ability to also integrate Central High School through their family networks. It is important to recognize that the family unit—comprising siblings, extended relatives, and community ties—serves as the main space where historical agency is cultivated. The Little Rock crisis highlights the need to understand this better. Behind each student was a family network that made specific choices and developed strategies for survival. This literature review looks at what existing scholarship says about children's agency and racial learning, identifies gaps in that research, and shows how family experiences during Little Rock fill those gaps. It also raises new questions about how agency develops during crises.

How Do Children Learn About Race?

In 1968, after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., Jane Elliott divided her third-grade class in Riceville, Iowa, by eye color so she could teach children the dangers of discrimination of any kind. The children with brown eyes were given special privileges and considered “superior,” while blue-eyed children were treated as "inferior," prevented from wearing collars, and not allowed extra food during lunch. The following day, she reversed these rules.[12] The results were immediate and striking. Children labeled as "inferior" performed worse academically and exhibited different

[12] William Peters, *A Class Divided, Then and Now, Expanded Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

behaviors. Conversely, "superior" children excelled academically and actively discriminated against their peers.[13]

From Elliott's experiment, a crucial point was proven: children learn discrimination through lived experience, not just parental instruction, even though most of the time an authority figure helps to affect this learning. Even an arbitrary hierarchy based on eye color produced measurable behavioral and academic changes within hours. Terrence Roberts, one of the Little Rock Nine, later observed that hatred is easier to organize than understanding. Elliott's experiment demonstrated this principle. Children quickly organized themselves around superiority and inferiority based on nothing more than eye color. But Roberts's insight points to something more profound: hatred mobilizes efficiently because every individual has an innate sense of internal uniqueness tied to self-esteem. The problem comes when that uniqueness gets transformed into superiority, when "I am unique" becomes "I am better." Elliott's blue-eyed students learned within hours to translate their designated "superiority" into dominance. What they needed to know instead was that uniqueness is an invitation to embrace differences, not grounds for dominance. Even though this experiment did not last for long, we could see the effects on the children. This was not the case for the Little Rock Nine. Theirs was real! Real violence and the effect rippled through their families. Their families lost jobs, faced economic boycotts, and organized armed guard networks to protect their homes. Understanding how these children learned about race requires examining the family systems that taught them both how to survive segregation and how to resist it.

[13] Peters, *A Class Divided*.

Historian Jennifer Ritterhouse shows another dimension to how children learn race. In *Growing Up Jim Crow*, she asks the foundational question: "How did black and white children of the Jim Crow era learn race, both the racial roles they were expected to play in their society and a sense of themselves as being 'black' or 'white'?"[14] In the second chapter of the book, there is an answer: Children learn through active experience rather than merely mimicking adults' opinions."[15] Interactive play and experimentation were central. She describes it as racial etiquette, which served as a script guiding interracial encounters, providing a framework for understanding experiences from different perspectives while remaining always subject to interpretation and improvisation.[16]

Black families taught their children protective strategies. Parents emphasized avoiding whites when possible. They taught enough racial etiquette to get by. They also promoted an alternative "politics of respectability" to maintain dignity.[17] The teaching involved a dual message that Black parents communicated carefully: "the white folks weren't any better than we were...but they sure thought they were," which "amounted to much the same thing in practice."[18]

This approach focused on teaching children to be self-defining in their own minds.[19] Parents' training directly emphasized what Nannie Helen Burroughs said in her speech at the Women's Comvention of the National Baptist Convention in 1905: "*men and women are not made on trains and on streetcars*…" but that characters are formed at home.[20] Burroughs was remarkable African American educator, activist, and religious leader who dedicated her life to empowering Black

[14] Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.
[15] Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*, 55.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, 20.
[18] Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*, 5.
[19] Ibid, 85.
[20] Ibid.

women through economic independence, and moral leadership. Her statement also touches a popular African proverb that says that charity begins at home. The goal of self-defining lessons was for children to understand their inherent worth regardless of how segregated society treated them. Middle-class families emphasized dignity and public performance. Working-class families also taught respectability, challenging assumptions about class differences in Black child-rearing strategies.[21]

But here Ritterhouse documents something critical for understanding children's agency. She describes this by saying that sometimes, Black children reacted to discrimination with anger and favored more direct, less patient approaches to combating racism compared to the strategies their parents recommended.[22] This is to say that in some cases, children developed their own ideas about how to respond to racism. Their agency emerged partly in tension with, not just obedience to, parental teaching.

Ritterhouse also highlights "social dramas" as important learning moments for both Black and white children. These social dramas refer to incidents that were memorable enough to be reinterpreted repeatedly over time, often being shaped by racial dynamics and the corresponding etiquette.[23] Children experienced and continuously reinterpreted these moments. Ritterhouse's work is important to this research. She shows that families teach about race, especially in Black homes. Children sometimes wanted different actions than what their parents suggested. She also explains how people's (children) actions and conflicts help them learn and find their identity. But there is an epistemological gap. Ritterhouse focuses on parent-child dynamics. She mentions extended family networks briefly but never analyzes them systematically. She examines how

[21] Ibid, 98.
[22] Ibid, 20.
[23] Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*, 19.

individual children learned race. She never asks what happened when siblings witnessed those social dramas together, when one brother or sister faced discrimination.

The children's experiences during the Little Rock crisis expose these gaps. Conrad Beals learned about race by watching his sister Melba face daily violence. He couldn't play outside alone. He walked to school only in groups. His friend Clark's family told Clark that Melba was wrong for staying in that white school, being mistreated every day, and Conrad had to process how other families' racism shaped his own friendships.[24] Sybil Hampton's brother enrolled at Central High the year after she did. According to Hampton, the experience was much more damaging to a boy than to a female.[25] This can be described as vicarious racial learning. Siblings witnessed social dramas. Brothers and sisters processed family trauma together. Children learned about race and resistance from parents and also from watching what happened to their siblings. Neither Elliott's experiment nor Ritterhouse's analysis captures this dimension. Elliott had no sibling witnesses in her classroom. Ritterhouse studied how children learned race but not how siblings learned from each other.

The Little Rock families reveal something else Ritterhouse hints at but never fully develops: extended family networks as sites of racial learning. Melba's grandmother, India, taught her to read and later organized home defense.[26] Terrence Roberts' Uncle Leady provided financial support during the crisis.[27] Teenage cousins Norma Jean and Bertha Wright babysat Roberts' siblings, exposing them to different racial attitudes within the extended family.[28] Sybil Hampton's

[24] Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York: Tantor eBooks, 2011)
[25] Dr. Sybil Hampton, interview transcript.
[26] Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*.
[27] Terrence Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock* (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2013)
[28] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*.

grandfather owned a grocery store that provided economic independence, when other Black families faced credit cutoffs.[29]

Understanding how children learned about race during the Little Rock crisis requires examining these family networks, multigenerational households, sibling relationships, extended family support systems, and community protection networks. All of these were the primary communication systems where children developed both racial consciousness and the agency to resist.

Family and Community Networks as Sites of Agency Development

Baraldi argued in research focused on schools that agency is created through communication systems. But for Black children during Jim Crow, the family was the primary communication system where agency developed, where they learned whether resistance was possible, and what resistance would cost. Ritterhouse partly recognizes this feature. She focuses primarily on parent-child dynamics. She studies families during "normal" Jim Crow life, not during crisis moments when family networks had to reorganize for survival. She argues that "respectable" black child-rearing must also be understood as a family strategy and one that had particular significance for children.[30] Families protected their children in simple ways, such as keeping them in school and shielding them from racism by softening its psychological impact.[31]

Documented Instances of How Families Experienced the Crisis

The patterns described above emerge from specific documented experiences of each family. This section systematically examines those experiences, showing how family networks functioned in

[29] Hampton interview.
[30] Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*, 85.
[31] Ibid.

practice for each of the Little Rock Nine plus the other students who integrated Central High in 1959.

Melba Pattillo Beals

Melba lived with her mother, Lois, grandmother, India, father, Howell, and brother Conrad in a multigenerational household.[32] Grandmother India taught Melba to read and work multiplication tables by age four through long nights of study together.[33] When the integration started, grandmother India shifted from being an educator to a guard, always positioned to react to any external attack from segregationists.[34] Mother Lois developed emergency evacuation protocols for the family. During one threatening situation, the day the judge ordered schools to integrate, she commanded Melba to leave without her. She says: "Take these keys. Get to the car. Leave without me if you have to."[35] This was a tactical planning that prioritized Conrad's and Melba's survival over maternal instinct to stay together. The family taught one another and prepared for scenarios where splitting up meant staying alive.

Economic pressure targeted Melba's father directly. His boss threatened to take his job away and told him to force Melba to leave Central.[36] When that failed, segregationists attacked through charity and credit. White charity groups withdrew Thanksgiving gifts the family had received and threatened to withhold Christmas gifts.[37] Local stores cut the family's credit.[38] The family paid inflated prices for inferior food; there was a day Grandmother India bought day-old bread and slightly rotten meat for one and a half times the price at which fresh food was sold to white

[32] Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 18.
[33] Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 17.
[34] Ibid, 41.
[35] Ibid, 50.
[36] Ibid, 42.
[37] Ibid, 164.
[38] Ibid, 165.

customers.[39] Conrad once asked his grandmother if he could attend Central High, too. But he was refused.[40] He couldn't play outside without supervision. He walked to school only in groups, never alone.[41] His friend Clark's family told Clark that Melba was wrong for being mistreated every day by staying at Central, and Conrad had to process how his sister's choices complicated his friendships.[42] His movements were restricted and his friendships were policed, all because his sister was one of the Little Rock Nine, even though he never set foot in Central.

The extended family provided financial support. Melba's uncle and aunt helped pay for her mother's college education, investing in the family's long-term economic stability.[43] Neighbors joined the protection network. The Conyers family warned Melba's family about threats and offered firearms for home defense.[44] The family's security depended on networks that extended beyond the household to relatives and neighbors willing to share risk.

Carlotta Walls LaNier

Carlotta's father, Cartelyou Walls, who worked on a construction site, had to find a job outside the state because building contractors in Little Rock refused to hire him.[45] The family faced instant economic warfare. He had to leave the state to find work, separating the family geographically. The violence also escalated to bombing. After the family home was bombed in 1960, three-year-old Tina was sent to live with relatives for safety.[46] In fact, in the acknowledgement of her memoir, Carlota agreed that her sister learned the same lessons she had during the crisis, which eventually

[39] Ibid, 24.
[40] Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 35.
[41] Ibid, 59.
[42] Ibid, 165.
[43] Ibid, 164.
[44] Ibid, 62.
[45] Bates, *Long Shadow*, 159.
[46] Carlotta Walls LaNier, *A Mighty Long Way*¸178 .

led her to participate in the memoir's documentation. It reveals that young children faced the crisis by being separated from their parents and siblings, witnessing their family's economic collapse, and seeing their family's trauma on national television. The bombing incident tore the family apart, sending the youngest members away while Carlotta stayed.

Terrence Roberts

Terrence was the second of seven siblings: Juereta (the eldest), Terrence, Beverly, Janice, William, Jerome, and Margaret "Lisa," who was born in 1957 during the integration crisis.[47] The family faced internal economic strain compounded by external pressure. When Terrence's grandmother sold the house where they lived, she sent his father's share of the money to his workplace rather than giving it to him directly because she knew he had a drinking problem.[48] His father spent all $600 on a drunken spree instead of buying the family a home.[49] His mother worked hard to support the seven children. The extended family compensated for the father's failures. Uncle Leady provided financial support during difficult times and brought musical influence into the household.[50] Teenage cousins Norma Jean Townes and Bertha Wright babysat the younger Roberts children, exposing them to different perspectives within the extended family.[51] Terrence helped his mother care for younger brothers and sisters during the integration crisis.[52] This was done to assist his parents despite facing violence at school.

The strain eventually became too much. The family moved to California.[53] Nine people were indirectly forced to leave Little Rock. Six siblings experienced their brother being faced with daily

[47] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*, 52-53.
[48] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*, 48.
[49] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*, 48.
[50] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*, 62-63.
[51] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*, referenced in source materials.
[52] "Nine Negroes Marking Time Until CHS Dispute Settled," *Arkansas Gazette*, September 16, 1957, 15.
[53] Bates, *Long Shadow*, 159.

violence and had to leave their home, school, and community as the crisis made staying impossible. Lisa, who was an infant then, was born into this same crisis because her brother integrated a school.

Elizabeth Eckford

Elizabeth grew up in a working-class family of six. Her father, a split-shift worker for the Missouri Pacific Railroad, also served three wealthy families. Her mother worked in the laundry and as a maid to support the family.[54] The family lived on the edge of economic stability, even before integration. Elizabeth's mother later became a teacher. She was dismissed from her job at the State School for the Blind, where she worked as a teacher, because her daughter was accepted into Central High.[55] The family lost its most stable source of income. All six children felt the impact of their mother's firing. Working-class families had no cushions. Losing a teaching job meant an immediate economic crisis affecting everyone in the household.

Jefferson Thomas

Jefferson was the youngest of seven children in the Thomas family. His father, Ellis Thomas, was a quiet, resourceful man who had worked at International Harvester for ten years. His mother was a deeply religious woman who believed the students would not suffer serious injuries. Jefferson entered Central at fifteen years old, slim, quiet, and soft-spoken. At age ten, he dreamed of becoming a great architect. By the time he applied to Central, he understood that his dream would probably never become reality because segregation denied him access to schools offering the preparatory courses that he needed.[56] His father volunteered as an armed guard at other families' homes, part of the organized community protection network. On one of the days during the crisis,

[54] Eckford et al., *Worst First Day*, 13.
[55] Bates, *Long Shadow*, 159.
[56] Ibid, 123.

the State Police arrested Jefferson's father while he was leaving Daisy Bates' home after guard duty.[57] They detained him for investigation without any initial charges, which felt like intimidation masked as law enforcement. The family was thrown into crisis: the father was detained, leaving six young children at home, while Jefferson still had to attend Central High. Despite everything, Jefferson was determined to go to school, saying his dad would want him to keep up with his studies.[58]

Gloria Ray Karlmark

Gloria was the youngest of her family's three children.[59] Her mother worked at the Welfare Department. From Terrence Roberts' book, it was not certain what exactly transpired, but it was rumored that Gloria's parents were not keen on her enrolling at Central High and actually forbade her from doing so.[60] Gloria dismissed this parental directive and joined our group of nine.[61] This complements the second dimension of agency that Ritterhouse described. Sometimes agency developed in opposition to, not just through, family wishes. Gloria's mother was forced to resign from her job in the Welfare Department after a series of unpleasant incidents following her coworkers' discovery that her daughter was one of the nine.[62] The family paid for the economic consequences of Gloria's choice to integrate, even though her parents had opposed it. Her two older siblings witnessed both the family conflict over Gloria's decision and their mother's resulting job loss. The crisis created family tension that compounded external pressure. Gloria's family

[57] Bates, *Long Shadow*, 166-167.
[58] Bates, *Long Shadow*.
[59] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*, 183.
[60] Ibid, 184.
[61] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*, 184.
[62] Bates, *Long Shadow*, 159.

attended Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church with other families of the Little Rock Nine, part of the church network that provided community support.[63]

Minnijean Brown Trickey

There is little documentation on Minnijean's family compared to the others, which shows how stories are preserved or lost. Her parents were Mr. and Mrs. W.B. Brown. When Minnijean was suspended in November 1957 and expelled in February 1958, the suspension notice was addressed to "Mr. and Mrs. W.B. Brown" with their home address listed in the *Arkansas State Press*.[64] The singular act of sharing and publishing the family's address exposed them to segregationist threats. Hanson believed that segregationists had specifically targeted Minnijean because her confidence was unrivalled.[65] Part of the white children's connivance was to provoke and taunt the Little Rock Nine, so that they either retaliated and were suspended or expelled.[66] The strategy worked on Minnijean. After her expulsion, the family had to arrange her transfer to New York, displacing her from her family and community.

Her sister Phyllis experienced the crisis as a sibling witness. She shared that she lost her sister, who always danced with her. Some years after she missed this activity with her sister and asked who was going to dance with her. She says, "Who is going to dance with me?" - a question that shows how segregationist policies broke family bonds, not just educational ones, and opportunities.[67]

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[63] Hampton interview.
[64] "Bias School Board Members Expel Negro Girl," *Arkansas State Press*, February 21, 1958.
[65] Richard J. Hanson, "*Crisis in Little Rock: Race, Class & Violence During the Desegregation of Central High School, 1957-1958*" *Historia* (2019).
[66] Hanson, 2019.
[67] Phyllis Brown, interview by Noah Adebanjo and Emily Housdan, at the Central High Historic Site, Little Rock, Arkansas, April 30, 2024.

Ernest Green

Ernest was the only senior among the Nine in 1957. His mother, Mrs. Lothair Green, was very good friends with Sybil Hampton's mother.[68] Both families attended Bethel AME Church, part of the network of churches connecting families of the Little Rock Nine.[69] Ernest graduated in May 1958, becoming the first Black graduate of Central High School. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported that Ernest was worried about falling behind in classes during the crisis, highlighting the academic pressure students also faced along with physical stress and danger.[70] The available information about Ernest's family is quite limited, especially compared to the more detailed memoirs written by students like Melba, Carlotta, or Terrence.

Thelma Mothershed Wair

Thelma had three siblings: Grace (her older sister), Lois, and Karen (her younger sister).[71] Thelma had rheumatic fever as a child, which left her with a heart condition.[72] The integration crisis exacerbated her medical vulnerabilities. Terrence Roberts remembered asking himself if her heart could endure, wondering whether she would be able to withstand the daily struggles, and if she had enough strength to get through the ordeal.[73] Thelma's family had to balance her participation in integration with constant vigilance about her health. According to Roberts, Thelma came from a very supportive family that bolstered her energy for daily survival at school.[74] During the Lost Year of 1958-1959, when Little Rock schools were closed, Thelma's family covered the costs of

[68] Hampton interview.
[69] Ibid.
[70] *Arkansas Gazette*, September 16, 1957, 15.
[71] *The Worst First Day* biographical information.
[72] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*, 180-181.
[73] Roberts, *Lessons from Little Rock*.
[74] Ibid.

correspondence courses and textbook rentals to ensure she could keep learning.[75] This was an additional financial burden at a time when the family likely faced economic retaliation for their daughter's participation.

The integration-related stress affected Thelma's long-term health. Thelma never wrote her own memoir, except for her contribution to Hansen's work, which appeared in the latter part of the book.

Sybil Jordan Hampton

Sybil was ten years old in 1957 and enrolled at Central High in 1959 at age twelve in tenth grade.[76] Her family included her mother, father, grandfather, who owned a grocery Store, and a brother who enrolled in 1960.[77] The family's church network was central to their experience. They also attended Bethel AME Church with Ernest Green's family, Carlotta's family, Melba's family, and Gloria's family.[78] Sybil's mother was very good friends with Ernest's mother.[79] Sybil emphasized that "my life experience was very much centered at that church and with relationships with families in that church."[80] This church network provided organizational infrastructure, mutual support, and collective decision-making across multiple families.

Sybil's grandfather built their home on 7th and Park and owned a grocery Store on the southeast corner.[81] An Anglo grocery stood on the southwest corner. The neighborhood was "integrated at

[75] Carlotta Walls LaNier, *A Mighty Long Way*.
[76] Hampton interview.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Hampton interview.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.

the street level but segregated at the social level."[82] Owning the family business gave Sybil's family economic independence that protected them from some forms of retaliation other families faced.

When only two students were initially admitted to Central High in 1959, Sybil's father and other second-wave fathers sued the school board.[83] The NAACP Legal Defense Fund took over the case. Both of Sybil's parents attended school board interviews with their attorney present.[84] Two school board members specifically opposed admitting Sybil, calling her a "troublemaker."[85] The second-wave parents had learned from watching the first wave. They came with lawyers and used collective legal action rather than facing the system individually.

Sybil's parents taught her two simultaneous lessons: "how to be safe and how to live without drama in a segregated society" and that "life is not always going to be this way."[86] They gave her survival skills and hope for change. Sybil reflects that "the strength of being able to do what we did was because we had hope. And I'm not sure that there are young people today who could do what we did because there is a lot more anger and resentment. And I did not grow up with anger and resentment."[87] This balance between realism and optimism enabled agency that could withstand sustained trauma.

Sybil's brother enrolled at Central High in 1960, the year after Sybil. His experience revealed gendered dimensions of integration trauma. According to Sybil, "as a boy, as a male, the experience was much more injurious to a male than to a female."[88] Decades later, her brother

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Hampton interview.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

remained a very angry human being while Sybil found peace.[89] The same family, the same preparation, but gender shaped how siblings processed and carried the integration trauma across their lifetimes.

Sandra Johnson and Franklin Henderson

Sandra Johnson and Franklin Henderson enrolled at Central High in August 1959 alongside the returning Carlotta Walls and Jefferson Thomas.[90] Almost no detailed family information exists for either student in the available sources. There is evidence that they enrolled. We know they faced similar harassment and economic retaliation that affected the first children who integrated the schools. But their family stories remain largely undocumented. These students were less famous than the original Nine. But their families also definitely absorbed costs and made sacrifices, as an implied statement, even though there is currently no record of it. The absence of their family stories demonstrates exactly what this thesis argues: the absence of a systematically written family network from the Little Rock crisis narratives.

Conclusion: Why Family Networks Matter for Understanding Children's Agency

The Little Rock Nine were more than just nine children; they were integral parts of family networks spanning generations. Older siblings absorbed trauma, while children developed their agency through family teachings, sacrifices, and protection. Integration became a family crisis, leading to job and home losses, restricted freedoms, displacement, and ongoing trauma. Extended families supported one another financially and through childcare. Communities organized protection networks that crossed family boundaries, sharing and distributing risks collectively.

[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.

From their stories, it is evident that children agency emerged from family networks, not despite them. Families taught the dual message Sybil Hampton's parents exemplified: survival skills for navigating segregation plus hope that life would change.[91] Families created conditions where resistance was possible by absorbing economic costs so children could participate. Families also negotiated constant tensions between protection and empowerment, for children like Melba and her brother, Conrad. Existing scholarships did not highlight these dynamics. Varpanen and Baraldi stopped a studying agency in contemporary educational settings not within ignored family networks.[92] Ritterhouse documented how Jim Crow children learned race through family strategies, but never examined siblings as witnesses and learners.[93] She also didn't study extended family networks or analyze families during crisis moments, when normal strategies had to transform into military defense. In all, there was an absence of missed crisis moments when agency questions became matters of survival from their research. Jane Elliott's "A Class Divided" experiment showed how quickly children internalize discrimination through experience.[94] But it was a two-day classroom exercise with no family consequences, no siblings watching, no parents losing jobs, or even an indelible effect on emotions and memories. The experiment did not capture the family dimension of racial learning or the generational transmission of trauma. This is the gap this research has attempted to fill.

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[91] Hampton interview.
[92] Varpanen, "What Is Children's Agency?,"; Baraldi, "*Facilitating Children's Agency in the Interaction: Challenges for the Education System*".
[93] Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*.
[94] Peters, *A Class Divided*.

Methodology

This research uncovers hidden family stories from the Little Rock School Integration Crisis by combining traditional historical methods with digital preservation technology. The approach addresses two issues: the historiographical gap in which families have been overlooked in Little Rock crisis narratives and the preservation gap in which these stories could be lost forever. The method is straightforward: gather what's missing from the historical narrative on this topic, identify sources with family information, organize it systematically, and ensure its long-term accessibility through a digital exhibit.

Primary Sources

The foundation of this research is based on sources that historians have already used. Detailed information about families and siblings was published in memoirs, newspaper clippings, and oral histories. Previous scholars examined these sources for insights about the Little Rock Nine or major political events. This research uses the same sources to examine what they reveal about parents' and siblings' experiences and the support that the Little Rock Nine received from family.

Published Memoirs/Biographies

Much of this research was drawn from memoirs, which offer the most detailed family accounts. Melba Pattillo Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry*, Carlotta Walls LaNier's *A Mighty Long Way*, Terrence Roberts' *Lessons from Little Rock*, and Elizabeth Eckford's *The Worst First Day* all narrate their families' experiences and provide details that helped shape the narrative framework of this study. Daisy Bates also experienced the crisis in unique ways. Her memoir, written several years later, provided relevant information for this research. She was the president of the Arkansas NAACP, and she and her husband, L.C. Bates, published the *Arkansas State Press* newspaper. Her account

documents specific family impacts because she worked directly with each of the Little Rock Nine families. As an NAACP leader, she coordinated the selection and support of the students, and her home served as the organizing center and meeting place for the families involved. She arranged transportation, legal support, and protection for the students. Additionally, she faced retaliation when advertisers boycotted their newspaper, forcing it to close. Her memoir complements the other accounts used in this work. One thing to note is that the memoirs also vary in how much family details they include. These variations only reflect different authorial choices rather than indicating that some families experienced the crisis more intensely than others.

Newspapers Clippings

The *Arkansas Gazette* and *Arkansas State Press* covered the integration crisis. The clippings used in this research were only to complement facts already obtained from the memoirs.

Oral History Interviews

Two interviews were conducted in April 2024 at the Central High National Historic Site in Little Rock, Arkansas, and one via Zoom. These interviews focused specifically on family and sibling experiences rather than the integration experience itself.

The interview with Phyllis Brown, younger sister of Minnijean Brown Trickey, provided a unique sibling perspective on how the crisis affected children in the family who never attended Central High. Phyllis was young during the crisis years but remembered specific impacts. Her memories focus on emotional and relational impacts rather than political events, revealing dimensions of the crisis that do not appear in sources focused on the Little Rock Nine. The interview with Dr. Sybil Jordan Hampton gave solid context to this research. This conversation focused more specifically on family decision-making processes, her grandfather's role in providing economic stability

through his grocery store, the church network that connected multiple families of the Little Rock Nine, and her brother's experience with integration trauma. Hampton's perspective is unique as someone who integrated Central High at age twelve (younger than any of the original Little Rock Nine). Both interviews were conducted, allowing participants to emphasize what they remembered as most significant, while I followed up on specific aspects of family experience, sibling relationships, economic impacts, and community support networks. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and were recorded with participants' permission. One of the conversations took place at the Central High National Historic Site, which provided crucial poetic context. Phyllis could recall specific details about the physical spaces and emotional experiences of the integration period, as she passed through the artifacts engraved at the site. Both participants were generous with their time and candid in their responses. The value of these interviews is that they gave patterns that corroborate evidence from other sources, while adding dimensions that do not appear elsewhere.

Secondary Sources: Identifying the Gaps

Secondary scholarship provides the theoretical framework for understanding children's agency and the historical context for the Little Rock crisis, but more importantly, it reveals what's missing from existing historical accounts.

Jan Varpanen's and Claudio Baraldi's work on childhood agency establishes that agency emerges through communication systems and social interactions, rather than being an inherent trait. Both scholars study contemporary educational settings, rather than family networks, as sites where agency first develops. This gap matters because their theories help explain how the Little Rock Nine developed the capacity to sustain resistance under extreme pressure. The answer lies in the family systems that taught survival strategies, absorbed economic costs, and created conditions

where resistance was possible. Jennifer Ritterhouse's work demonstrates how Black children learned race through family strategies during the Jim Crow era. Her work is crucial for understanding racial socialization as a family process. But Ritterhouse does not systematically examine siblings as witnesses and learners, nor does she analyze extended family networks as support structures. Existing Little Rock scholarship, such as Hansen's, provides essential historical context but focuses almost exclusively on the Little Rock Nine and the political dimensions of the crisis. This research treats family networks as the central unit of analysis, rather than treating individual children as isolated historical actors.[95]

Website Development: Making Hidden Histories Accessible

The digital component of this research serves dual purposes: it systematically organizes evidence to support the historical argument, and it creates a preservation mechanism that makes these family stories permanently accessible in ways that traditional scholarship cannot.

Website Architecture and Design

The exhibit, although still in progress, is being built with React for the frontend and Strapi CMS for content management. This technical structure allows for flexible organization of family materials, while maintaining rigorous documentation standards. Each family has a dedicated profile containing biographical information, time period, location, children's names, descriptive narrative, and attributed photographs where available.

[95] Jan Varpanen, "What Is Children's Agency? A Review of Conceptualizations Used in Early Childhood Education Research," *Educational Research Review* 28 (November 2019), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100288. Claudio Baraldi, *Facilitating Children's Agency in the Interaction: Challenges for the Education System* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 23. Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

The website's organizing principle differs from traditional civil rights archives. Instead of organizing materials by famous individuals or political events, the archive organizes by family networks. Users can explore the Eckford family, the Pattillo-Beals family, or the Walls-LaNier family, seeing all the information about parents, siblings, extended family, and community connections in one place. This organizational choice reflects the research argument: children's agency emerged from and reshaped family systems, so families should be the primary unit of documentation.

The interactive timeline integrates historical events with family experiences, demonstrating how personal and political timelines intersect. Legal milestones, like *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954), appear alongside family events like Elizabeth Eckford's August 1957 battle with her family over attending Central High. Federal interventions like Eisenhower deploying the 101st Airborne appear next to family experiences like Terrence Roberts helping his mother care for six siblings during the crisis. This juxtaposition makes visible what traditional timelines obscure: families weren't passive recipients of historical change but active participants whose decisions and sacrifices made integration possible. The Search functionality allows users to find information across families, stories, and timeline events. Someone researching economic retaliation can search that term and find every documented instance across multiple families. Someone interested in sibling experiences can search "brother" or "sister" or any other custom word they deem fit and access all relevant materials in this narrative. This searchability addresses a practical problem with traditional archives, where family information is scattered across multiple sources and difficult to locate.

AI Chatbot: Personalized Access to Hidden Histories

The most innovative component of the digital exhibit is Dr. Archives (still tentative), an AI-powered chatbot that allows users to interact with the historical materials through natural language queries. The chatbot, although it seems fancy, is designed to address a fundamental accessibility problem: traditional archives require users to know what questions to ask and where to look for answers. Hidden histories remain hidden partly because people do not know what they do not know. The chatbot function synthesizes information across multiple family accounts to answer specific questions. A middle school student can ask, "what was it like to be a sibling?," and receive an answer drawn from Phyllis Brown's memories of losing her sister, Conrad Beals' restricted childhood, and Sybil Hampton's observations about her brother's lasting trauma. An advanced researcher can ask about protection strategies and get a synthesized analysis of how families organized armed guard networks, developed evacuation protocols, and coordinated community defense efforts. The chatbot does not replace human historical analysis, but it makes the patterns visible in ways that traditional research tools cannot. An important fact to note is that the chatbot includes explicit disclaimers that it does not replace traditional archival research or professional historians. Users are advised to verify chatbot responses against primary sources, as the bot synthesizes information based on available data in the exhibit, but cannot evaluate historical nuance or resolve interpretive ambiguities the way trained historians can.

The bot implementation uses React for the interface and is designed to call the Anthropic API for natural language processing, though the current version operates with rule-based responses using keyword matching rather than full API integration. The chatbot draws three data sources: family profiles from the Strapi CMS, individual story documents, and the complete timeline of historical and family events. When a user asks about a specific family or person, the system searches across

all three data sources and provides relevant information with appropriate context. The chatbot's responses are designed to maintain historical accuracy while being conversational and accessible. It cites sources appropriately, distinguishes between documented facts and interpretations, and acknowledges when information is limited or unavailable. For example, when asked about families for whom we have minimal documentation, such as Sandra Johnson or Franklin Henderson, the chatbot acknowledges the gap in the historical record rather than inventing details. This technology serves the research argument about hidden histories. The Little Rock Nine are famous precisely because their stories have been told and retold in accessible formats. Family stories remain hidden, in part, because they're scattered across archival materials that require specialized knowledge to access. The AI chatbot is only an innovative approach that makes these hidden stories accessible to anyone who can ask a question, democratizing access to historical knowledge that traditional archival structures have inadvertently gatekept.

Image Attribution and Ethical Considerations

The website, when completely finished, will incorporate photographs where available, with rigorous attribution standards. Each image will include fields for photographer or source, date, collection, and usage rights. When attribution information is incomplete or unavailable, the website will explicitly note, "attribution pending," rather than using images without proper documentation. This attention to attribution reflects ethical commitments that are particularly important when working with family materials.

These photographs will be largely cropped faces of the children to fit into their families' stories tab. Privacy concerns will be addressed and respected. This is particularly important, considering Sandra and Franklin's story, as they are currently not in mainstream media. The website will display images in ways that honor their historical significance, while making attribution

information readily visible to users. Similarly, it can be that some families/children have limited or no photographic documentation in the archive, not because photographs don't exist, but because locating them, securing proper permissions, and establishing clear attribution proved impossible within this project's timeframe and resources. Currently, the federal government shutdown prevents the Central High Historic Site from granting permission to use some photographs on the website. This is a limitation, but not one that is uncommon in historical research.

Limitations and Constraints

This research operates under several constraints that shape what can be accomplished and what claims can be made.

One factor is source availability; not all family voices can be recovered in detail or may not be recorded at all. This project relies on available sources. The uneven documentation across families means some stories receive more attention than others, not because those families' experiences are more important, but because more sources exist for them. The Pattillo-Beals family is well-documented because Melba wrote a detailed memoir. The Brown family has minimal documentation because Minnijean did not publish a memoir and because Phyllis was too young during the crisis to remember many details. This unevenness is a limitation but also highlights what the research argues: without systematic efforts to preserve family stories, they fade away. That’s why a personal interview was conducted to help prevent this loss.

Temporal Scope

The research focuses on the formative years of the crisis from 1954 (*Brown v. Board* decision) through 1960 (Carlotta Walls' graduation), with primary emphasis on 1957-1960, when integration was finally occurring. This temporal boundary means the research doesn't extend far into the long-

term impacts on children born after the crisis or on how trauma integration shaped the next generation. The decision to maintain this boundary keeps the research focused on family experiences during the crisis itself, rather than attempting to trace intergenerational impacts that would require different methodological approaches, as that would expand this research beyond available resources.

Interview Limitations

The two oral history interviews conducted for this research represent a small sample. Time constraints and resource limitations prevented conducting interviews with additional siblings, extended family members, or students who integrated in 1959. The interviews with Phyllis Brown and Dr. Sybil Hampton provide crucial evidence but cannot fully represent the diversity of family experiences across different backgrounds/family structures or integration waves. Both interviews involved participants recalling events from decades ago, with all the limitations memory entails. Dr. Hampton was young during integration, and Phyllis Brown was even younger, so their memories necessarily reflect childhood perspectives shaped by subsequent experiences and by family narratives told over the years. The interviews provide valuable evidence about sibling experiences and family impacts, but must be understood as retrospective accounts rather than contemporary documentation.

Digital Website Scope

The digital archive represents an initial framework rather than a comprehensive collection. The website currently documents families for whom substantial source materials exist but has not yet incorporated all available oral histories/archival photographs/documentary evidence. The exhibit is designed to be expandable, as additional materials are located and permissions are secured, but

the current version reflects what could be accomplished within the constraints of a thesis project. The AI chatbot functionality represents proof of concept rather than a fully realized implementation. The current version uses keyword-based responses drawing on the documented families, stories, and timeline events in the archive. Full integration with advanced AI capabilities would require resources beyond this project's scope. However, the current implementation demonstrates how technology can make hidden histories more accessible, while providing a foundation for future development.

Community Engagement

Ideally, this project would include mechanisms for community members to submit feedback, corrections, and additional stories directly through the website. The Little Rock community includes many people whose families experienced the crisis but whose stories have not been formally documented. Creating structured pathways for community contribution would strengthen the archive's comprehensiveness and ensure family voices shape how their stories are preserved. However, implementing effective community engagement requires careful infrastructure design, moderation systems to evaluate submissions, and ongoing maintenance to respond to community input. The logistics of creating these systems exceed what can be accomplished within a master's thesis timeline. The exhibit is designed with community engagement in mind as a future development phase, but the current version does not include active submission mechanisms.

Conclusion: Why This Methodology Matters

This methodological approach addresses the two gaps identified at the outset: the historiographical gap where families have been systematically overlooked in civil rights narratives, and the preservation gap where family stories risk being lost entirely. Traditional historical methods work

well for studying political events, legal battles, and famous individuals. They work less well to recover the intimate experiences of families who made historical change possible but didn't hold political office, argue court cases, or write memoirs. This research demonstrates that recovering hidden histories requires reading familiar sources differently, conducting targeted oral histories that center on family experiences, and deploying digital technologies that organize scattered evidence and make it accessible.

The digital exhibit is a research tool that enables analysis that would be impossible with traditional methods. Organizing materials by family networks rather than by famous individuals makes patterns visible: how many families lost income, how siblings absorbed trauma, how extended family provided support, and how community networks organized protection. The searchability and the AI chatbot make these patterns accessible not just to historians but to students, teachers, descendants, and community members.

The methodology also creates a replicable framework for recovering other hidden histories. Children's experiences during major historical events are systematically under documented across many contexts. Family impacts of social movements rarely receive sustained historical attention. The methods developed here - reading sources for family information, conducting family-focused oral histories, organizing materials by family networks, using technology to synthesize scattered evidence - can be applied to other historical moments where children's agency and family networks have been ignored. The limitations acknowledged above do not invalidate this research. They reflect the reality of working with historical records and attempting to recover stories that were not systematically preserved. Historical methodology requires working rigorously with available evidence, while being honest about what remains unknowable. This research does both: it

demonstrates what can be learned by attending systematically to family networks while acknowledging that many family voices remain irretrievably lost.