

Ruby Bridges

Ruby Bridges was born on 8th September 1954 in Mississippi, USA. She was born during the US **civil rights movement**. The year that she was born, racial **segregation** in schools across America was ended. When she was six years old, Ruby became the first African-American child to go to an all-white elementary school.

Segregated Schools

Before 1954, black children and white children in the USA had to go to separate schools. In 1954, a Supreme Court ruling was made to **desegregate** schools. As a result, it became law for black and white children to be able to go to the same school. However, some parts of America, especially the southern states, resisted this law.



A protest against desegregation, 1959

Despite resisting, in 1960, Louisiana was ordered to **desegregate** its schools. At that time, Ruby was living in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was attending an all-black kindergarten that was a long distance from her home.

The school district created an entrance exam to test African-American children. Ruby's father was worried about her safety if she passed because many local, white Americans were angry about **desegregation**. However, her mother wanted her to have a better education than she had had.

Ruby and five other African-American children passed the test. Consequently, Ruby was able to join a local all-white school, William Frantz Elementary School, close to her home.

Her First Day at School

On her first day of school, Ruby and her mother were escorted into the building by American police officers called, 'US Marshals'. When they arrived, lots of people were protesting. Ruby did not fully understand what was happening, but people shouted offensive words and called her names. Many angry white parents kept their children at home and there were no lessons on that first day.



Ruby's First Day



Did You Know ...?

In 1964, the artist Norman Rockwell created a painting to show Ruby Bridge's first day at school. It is called: 'The Problem We All Live With'.

The First Year

Most of the existing teachers at the school refused to have Ruby in their class. There was only one who was willing to teach Ruby. Barbara Henry was a white teacher originally from Boston, MA, in the north of the USA. She had recently moved to New Orleans after teaching abroad and was new to the school.

On that first day, some parents stormed the school to take their children home. Some permanently removed their children. In fact, for one whole year, it was only Ruby and Mrs Henry together in one classroom. Ruby ate lunch alone and played alone, or sometimes with her teacher. Despite this, she did not miss one day of school in that whole year.

What Happened Next?

Ruby went on to graduate from a **desegregated** high school, to marry, have four sons, and she is now a civil rights activist. She created the Ruby Bridges Foundation, which aims to promote "the values of tolerance, respect, and appreciation of all differences".

In 2001, she was awarded the Presidential Citizen's Medal from President Bill Clinton and in 2011, she visited the White House again. There, standing beside President Barack Obama, she looked at the Norman Rockwell painting showing her bravery on that day in 1960. Turning to her, the then President of the USA – the first black person to hold that title – said to her,



"I think it's fair to say that if it hadn't been for you guys, I might not be here".

In 2014, a statue of Ruby was unveiled outside William Frantz School to celebrate and remember her courage and determination.

Glossary

activist

A person who campaigns for change.

civil rights movement

A movement to end treating people differently based on the colour of their skin, and to improve the lives of African Americans.

desegregate/desegregation

The ending of a policy of segregation.

segregate/segregation

The separation of different racial groups.

Questions

1. When was Ruby Bridges born? Tick **one**.

- 8th September 1945
- 8th September 1954
- 8th September 1854
- 8th September 1845

2. What did Ruby Bridges do that made her famous when she was six years old?

3. Who walked with Ruby to school to make sure she was safe?

4. Look at the 'Her First Day at School' section. Why did people shout offensive words and call her names?

5. What was the title of the painting that Norman Rockwell created? Tick **one**.

- The Problem We All Live With
- The Problem Today
- The Girl Going to School
- The Walk to School

6. Which two American presidents has Ruby met?

7. People say that Ruby was very brave. Do you agree? Why?

8. How was Mrs Henry different from the other teachers?
