

Leander Perez Starts A Riot 1963

On November 14, 1960, federal marshals escorted four little black girls into their classrooms at McDonough 19 and Franz schools in relative peace and quiet.

It was an unlikely scene: a poll in May had shown that 82% of white parents in the parish would prefer to close schools rather than integrate them. Deep concerns persisted over the choice of the two Ninth Ward schools as the first to integrate; the neglected working-class area was home to some of New Orleans' poorest whites and neighbored the St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parish fiefdoms of arch-segregationist Leander Perez.

Those concerns were longstanding and acute. Save our Schools, an activist group of elite white women in favor of integration, had brought Ralph McGill of the Atlanta Constitution to speak to the school board. He warned that limiting integration to lower income sections of town would fuel resentment. The parent-teacher associations of two wealthy Uptown schools, Lusher and Wilson, had even voted to voluntarily integrate first. Both warning and offer were soundly rejected by the school board, which instead embraced a volatile mix of race and class politics in selecting schools for their token integrationist effort.



Ruby Bridges integrates William Frantz. Source: Leona Tate Foundation for Change, Inc.

Despite these factors, and an eight-year court battle that had forestalled integration, there were no major protests that first day. White parents simply withdrew their children, en masse. The next day was a different matter entirely. Groups of angry white mothers and young men had gathered at both schools, screaming at the children and at McDonough 19, surrounding the building. Police Chief Joseph Giarrusso, eager to prevent an outbreak of violence like that in Little Rock, ordered his officers to contain and disperse the crowds. Much to the frustration of the segregationists, NOPD arrested twenty-one people for heckling and threatening the little girls.



Students protest the integration of William Frantz School. Source: "50 Years Later, students recall integrating New Orleans public schools." The Times-Picayune/NOLA.com. Katy Reckdahl.

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That night, the White Citizens Council held a rally at New Orleans' Municipal Auditorium urging 'massive resistance' against school integration. One opening speaker was State Senator William Rainach, a Citizens Council leader who had run for Governor in 1959 after trying to purge blacks from the voter rolls. The speaker invited to wind up the rally was Leander Perez. After attacks on Mayor Chep Morrison and Chief Giarrusso for keeping the previous day's integration peaceful, Perez demanded action, telling the crowd "now you have to take matters into your own hands." John Wright, president of the Jackson, Mississippi Citizens Council echoed Perez; linking resistance to integration to the Confederate legacy, he told those gathered there that the "battle for your sacred heritage depends on what you do in the next few hours."

The next day, hundreds of white teenagers took to the streets of New Orleans' Central Business District. In an echo of the previous century's riots and massacres, black residents who happened to be on the streets became targets of the mob's violence. Donald Campbell was heading to work when the mob grabbed him; he was beaten and stabbed. Theodore Lagarde was running an errand when he was surrounded and beaten. Breaking free, he ran to Dryades and Lafitte, where black residents poured out of their homes with makeshift weapons to stand down the mob. From there, the crowd split into two parts, one storming into the State Supreme Court building and the other headed towards City Hall for Mayor Morrison. Met with police on horses and fire hoses, they were eventually driven back.



Perez addressed a crowd of picketers protesting the integration of Our Lady of Good Harbor Catholic School in Buras. Source: "Leander Perez: The Times-Picayune Covers 175 years of New Orleans History." The Times-Picayune/NOLA.com. Mark Waller.

Perez's efforts to block integration would extend much further than the unleashing of rioting teenagers or orchestrating protests. Recognizing that white parents would only boycott for so long if their children were not in school, Perez donated a building and money to create the 9th Ward Cooperative School, a private school, and thereby immune from the desegregation order, to serve kindergarten through third grades. For the older children from McDonough 19 and Frantz schools, he convinced the public schools of St. Bernard Parish to make room in fourth through sixth grades.