Marker Text


Report

The text of the marker for Crispus Attucks High School is, for the most part, accurate. However, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific date of the school’s integration, and 1971 is a more accurate estimate than 1970. The following report clarifies this discrepancy, provides additional context on the history of segregated public education in Indiana from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and describes the school’s contributions to the landscape of culture, education, and athletics in Indianapolis during this period.

In the decades following the American Civil War, many Northern states, Indiana among them, began for the first time to make formal arrangements for the public education of African American children. In 1869 Indiana courts made it legal for blacks to enroll in the public school system. Before this date, according to historian Jayne Beilke, “the only educational opportunities officially open to blacks in Indiana were private schools maintained by the African American community, philanthropic societies, or religious groups such as the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and Baptists.” An 1877 amendment to the 1869 law stated that if no separate facility existed, black children could attend school with white children; this amendment encouraged segregated schools, but did not mandate them. According to historian Emma Lou Thornbrough, under these circumstances, a piecemeal segregation of Indiana public schools unfolded inconsistently over the course of several decades. In Indianapolis, elementary schools were residentially segregated, while black and white children attended high school together at Shortridge, Arsenal Technical, and Emmerich Manual Training.

The 1920s marked a period of increasing national hostility toward African Americans, manifesting in Indiana with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in state politics and a push for segregated movie theaters, parks, schools, and housing. In 1926, Indianapolis’s black newspaper, the Indianapolis Recorder, reflected, “More wicked legislation has been directed against the Negro over the country during the present administration than for a score of years.” In this atmosphere of heightened racial hostility, the 1922 Indianapolis school board proposed the construction of a separate public high school for the city’s black students. On December 9, 1922, the Indianapolis News ran a front page article announcing that “the instruction committee of the Indianapolis school board will recommend to the board next Tuesday night. . .the establishment of a high school for colored pupils,” noting that “the proposal has met with opposition on the part of some colored organizations.” A few days later, the News reported that the school board voted in favor of the proposal “despite vigorous protest by a large delegation of colored citizens.” According to Stanley Warren, a former Attucks teacher and historian, many African Americans in Indianapolis were unhappy with the prospect of segregated high school education, suspecting that a
separate school would create logistical problems and result in inferior facilities and educational opportunities for black children.\textsuperscript{11} The \textit{Indianapolis Recorder} reported, “Whatever the claims for a Negro high school are, the loss of contact with whites and the loss of opportunity for using the best and the most in the way of facilities and equipment cannot be denied.”\textsuperscript{12} In 1923, Indianapolis citizen Archie Greathouse, with the support of the NAACP, sued the school board to prevent segregation, but this effort was defeated in a local court.\textsuperscript{13} For several years Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) proceeded with plans for a segregated high school while prominent local African American activists unsuccessfully pursued legal solutions to prevent it.

While legal battles merely stalled the school’s opening, intervention from several prominent African Americans in Indianapolis did secure a popular name for the school. IPS originally intended to call the new school Thomas Jefferson High School, but amid protests about naming a black high school after a man who held slaves, the name was changed to Crispus Attucks High School.\textsuperscript{14} Although the details of his life are not clear, Attucks, an African American or mixed-race man, was shot by a British soldier during the Boston Massacre and is popularly considered to be the first casualty of the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{15} While Attucks’ legacy was largely forgotten for decades, he was rediscovered and turned into an icon during the American Civil War by African Americans who used his patriotic sacrifice to argue for full rights of citizenship.\textsuperscript{16}

Crispus Attucks High School opened to students in the fall of 1927.\textsuperscript{17} By the end of its first year, the school employed fifty eight African American teachers, recruited from all over the country by Principal Matthias Nolcox.\textsuperscript{18} According to historian Richard Pierce, many of the teachers hired held master’s degrees or Ph.Ds, an unusually high standard for secondary school teachers at that time; as a result, the quality of the education at Attucks was among the highest in the city.\textsuperscript{19} Attucks quickly became a pillar of the black community in Indianapolis. It was located in the center of the city’s largest black neighborhood, just blocks away from Indiana Avenue and the Senate Avenue YMCA. Indiana Avenue served as the cultural and economic center of black life in Indianapolis; at the Senate Avenue YMCA Monster Meetings, well-known black leaders from Indiana and nationwide gave well-attended talks about the political, economic, and cultural lives of African Americans in Indianapolis and across the United States.\textsuperscript{20} Many of the key figures at Monster Meetings, particularly Faburn E. DeFrantz and Freeman B. Ransom, were involved with Attucks since its inception; some Monster Meeting guest speakers also spoke at the school, and the Attucks glee club and band frequently played at meetings.\textsuperscript{21} As the surrounding community rallied around Attucks, “African Americans transformed the school that had been forced upon them into a symbol of black pride and cultural unity,” according to historian Arum Goudsouzian.\textsuperscript{22}

As Indianapolis became even more residentially segregated, Crispus Attucks increasingly suffered from overcrowding. The building was intended to accommodate one thousand students, but from its opening actual enrollment exceeded capacity as students flocked to Attucks from all over the city.\textsuperscript{23} While IPS paid lip service to the doctrine of “separate but equal,” in reality the facilities at Attucks were well below
the standard enjoyed by students at the white high schools in the city; teachers and staff maintained a high standard of education in spite of, and not thanks to, the resources they were allotted.

The sports programs at Attucks were also successful and became a rallying point for the black community and a point of unification for the city as a whole. In 1955 and 1956, the school's basketball team, the Crispus Attucks Tigers, won the state championship two years in a row. Its 1955 victory marked the first time in U.S. history that a team from a segregated black school took the state title, and Indianapolis marked the victory with a celebration in Monument Circle. Attucks basketball was a point of pride for the school and provided a forum for debate over race relations in the city. Drawing a connection between the acceptance of the Attucks basketball team and the hostility blacks still faced in the city, the Indianapolis Recorder made a plea to the public: “You don’t like it when you think Attucks is getting a bad deal from the officials in a basketball game; shouldn’t the same standards of fair play and equality be applied to the other fields in this great game of life?”

Desegregation of schools was a key issue in Indiana and nationwide during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Some school districts in Indiana, notably Gary Public Schools, began the push for desegregation as early as 1946. These efforts were met with resistance from the white majority, and white students in several integrating schools went on strike in protest. The Indiana General Assembly passed statewide desegregation legislation in 1949, five years in advance of the United States Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education, which declared unconstitutional the segregation of black and white students in public schools. The Indianapolis Recorder attributed this legislation to the work of local African American political activists, saying, “Never before in Indiana’s history had Negro political leaders of various parties shown such unity on a legislative matter.”

In light of this legislation, the Indianapolis school board approved a gradual integration plan; however, because the measure contained imprecise language and loopholes, segregation in the city continued. Pierce points out, “As school integrationists found in other parts of the United States after Brown v. Board of Education (1954), having a law to end desegregation was far different from actual integration.” While the Indianapolis Times proudly declared “Mission accomplished-- the Indianapolis school system has finished its pupil integration program two years ahead of schedule, “echoing other white newspapers in declaring integration a success, the Indianapolis Recorder reflected the concerns of African American students and parents about continued segregation and resulting overcrowding. Some African American students who lived closer to previously all-white schools successfully transferred, but Crispus Attucks’s student body remained entirely black. Residential segregation ensured that the majority of students in Crispus Attucks’s district were black, and white students whose homes fell within the school's boundaries were permitted to attend other schools. In 1954 the Recorder reported that an NAACP field secretary addressed the city of Indianapolis, saying “The Supreme Court’s decision [Brown v. Board of Education] was fine, but as long as a segregated pattern of housing continues, you know we are going to have segregated schools.” A 1956 school survey of Indianapolis found Crispus Attucks to be the only remaining high school in the city with a single-race student body; other schools were only nominally integrated, with one or two black students attending a previously white school or vice-versa.
Andrew Ramsey, president of the NAACP state conference and a teacher at Crispus Attucks, wrote to the United States Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1965 requesting an investigation into the continued segregation of Indianapolis Public Schools. In 1968, the Department of Justice directed IPS to begin taking voluntary steps toward actual integration. IPS ignored the federal government’s recommendations for implementation, instead proposing various plans which the Indianapolis News reported were met with “the protests of the Attucks community and the white community’s avowed refusal to send its children to Attucks.” Later that year, the Department of Justice filed suit against the Board of School Commissioners, charging them with unlawful racial discrimination. On August 18, 1971, United States District Judge S. Hugh Dillin found IPS guilty of operating a segregated school system and maintaining segregation via zoning changes that created artificially segregated districts. “There have been approximately 350 boundary changes in the system since 1954,” Dillin said in his decision, “and more than 90 per cent of these promoted segregation.”

The historical marker for Crispus Attucks inaccurately gives the year 1970 as the year of desegregation, probably because in this year the Indianapolis school board submitted to the Justice Department a proposal for closing Attucks and rebuilding a new, integrated Attucks in a different location; this plan was rejected as insufficient to promote desegregation district-wide. IPS did open an integrated secondary Attucks campus on Cold Spring Road in 1970 to deal with some of Attucks’s overcrowding issues, but the original campus remained segregated until after Dillin’s decision in 1971. The New York Times reported on September 7, 1971, “The first full-scale integration of the Crispus Attucks High School was put into effect today with no problems reported.” However, the lengthy appeals process dragged desegregation into the 1980s, making the selection of a specific date for the formal desegregation of either Attucks itself or Indianapolis Public School system difficult.

Crispus Attucks High School was repurposed in 1986 amid fervent protest from the Indianapolis African American community. Following the redistricting of several of Attucks's feeder schools (the elementary and junior high schools in the area that sent their students to Attucks), there was no longer sufficient enrollment to keep the school open as a high school. After significant debate, in which many Attucks alumni argued for the preservation of the school’s history and legacy, Attucks transitioned into a junior high school. Crispus Attucks was listed on the State Register of Historic Places on October 26, 1988, and on the National Register of Historic Places on January 4, 1989. The school transitioned back to a high school in 2006, and now serves as a medical magnet school “designed for students who are pursuing a career in the sciences or as a medical professional.” The Crispus Attucks Museum, located at 1140 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Street in Indianapolis, commemorates the school’s history and its many prominent graduates and faculty.


3 Indiana, *Laws of Indiana*, 1877, 124; Beilke, 200. For more information on the history of segregated schooling in the state, see the Indiana Historical Bureau’s essay “African American Education in Indiana.”


6 “Indiana Swayed Entirely By Klan,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 1923, 15; “Inter-Racial Committee Against White League Propaganda,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 30, 1926, 4; “Jim Crow Bill Before Council,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 6, 1926, 1; “Local Conditions,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, September 18, 1926, 4; “Segregates Negro Homes: Indianapolis Divides Races in Residence Districts of City,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 1926, 3; Emma Lou Thornbrough, “Breaking Racial Barriers to Public Accommodations in Indiana, 1935 to 1963,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 83 (1987): 301-343. In her article, Thornbrough provides some context for segregated life in Indiana. Racially segregated public facilities were well in place by 1935, including separate public schools but also separate parks, golf courses, hospital wards, movie theaters, restaurants, and hotels. She says, “It is apparent that in spite of its northern location Indiana was indeed a segregated society. Segregation in public education was authorized by state law, but other forms of segregation and discrimination persisted and increased in spite of a state civil rights law that was enacted in 1885 and never repealed or amended.” The Ku Klux Klan was heavily involved in Indianapolis politics during the 1920s, but secondary sources disagree on whether the KKK directly influenced the creation of Attucks or whether it was merely symptomatic of the same deep-rooted racial prejudice from the white majority which allowed the Klan a foothold in the first place. Thornbrough suggests the latter, pointing out that the Indianapolis school board was not under the control of the Klan until 1924, while Attucks was proposed two years earlier.


colored folks.” In the letter, the group presents four specific objections to the proposed segregated high school. It concludes, “The attempt to carry such class feeling into the public schools, the cradle of American idealism, is to be condemned and we hereby enter our solemn protest and pray you that there be no segregation in high schools of this city other than on the basis of individual merit.”


13 *Fourteenth Annual Report of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for the Year 1923: A Summary of Work and Accounting* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1924): 24-25, accessed via archive.org; Thornbrough, “Segregation in Indiana,” 605. According to Thornbrough, in *Greathouse v. Board of School Commissioners of the City of Indianapolis* Greathouse argued that the school violated the doctrine of “separate but equal” because the new school could not match the range of subjects taught by local existing high schools. The court found that the suit was premature and based in a fear that had not yet become a reality.

14 Indianapolis Board of School Commissioners (Office of the Board, Indianapolis), “Minutes, Book AA,” June 30, 1925: 84; Warren, *Crispus Attucks*, 31. F. E. DeFrantz, then the secretary of the Senate Avenue YMCA, was the first name on a petition calling for a rejection of the name Thomas Jefferson High School. He and the co-signers of the petition were dubbed the “Colored P.T.A.” and were thereafter heavily involved in the school.

15 Mitch Kachun, “From Forgotten Founder to Indispensable Icon: Crispus Attucks, Black Citizenship, and Collective Memory, 1770-1865,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 29 (2009): 249-286, accessed via JSTOR. In this article, Kachun discusses the limited and circumstantial evidence with which historians must reconstruct Attucks’s life. Kachun notes that Attucks’s race and the emotional and highly politicized nature of the Boston Massacre means even the sources published immediately after the event were not necessarily accurate.

16 Kachun 284-285. According to Kachun, “the first printed reference to Attucks by a black American appeared in 1839 in a brief description of an August First commemoration of West Indian emancipation, held in Boston and reported in a letter to [William Lloyd] Garrison’s *Liberator*.” By the 1860s, however, “African Americans used the image of an unequivocally ‘negro’ Attucks to exemplify their identity with the nation and its founding, and to support their argument for black citizenship. The incorporation of Attucks into black collective memory and commemorative traditions during the 1850s had become an effective tactic for pursuing abolition and citizenship rights. Meanwhile, the persistence of Attucks’s symbolic power from the mid nineteenth century through to the early twenty-first century makes the absolute silence about him prior to 1839 all the more intriguing.”


20 Stanley Warren, “The Monster Meetings at the Negro YMCA in Indianapolis,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 91 (1995): 57-80. Warren recounts how the Monster Meetings “served as focal points for protest and constituent education . . . and played a central role in galvanizing the community around such important issues as the relaxation of racial restrictions at Indiana University, the opening of downtown theaters to blacks, the integration of the Indiana High School Athletic Association, preparation of the Anti-Hate Bill that became law in 1947, employment of blacks in the city administrations, and preparation of the Anti-Segregation Bill that became law in 1949.” For more information on Monster Meetings, see the Fall Creek YMCA Collection at the Indiana Historical Society.

21 “Dr. E.W. Moore Monster Meeting Speakers Sunday,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, November 17, 1928, 1; “Native African Will Address Monster Meeting,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 26, 1929, 2; “F.B. Ransom ‘Y’ Speaker Next Sunday,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 16, 1929, 1; “Moton Recalls Major Feats, Bus. League,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, August 17, 1929, 1-2; Warren, “Monster Meetings,” 59, 61, 64. Additionally, according to Warren, by 1931 all men on the staff of Crispus Attucks were members of the YMCA, and “the faculty of Crispus Attucks and the YMCA presented a united front in attempts to persuade the central school administration to improve both academic and athletic facilities at the school.”


23 “Students Barred From High Schools,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, September 24, 1927, 2; “Civic League Wants Local People Hired,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 15, 1929, 1; Warren, *Crispus Attucks*, 34-35, 39; Robert G. Barrows, “The Local Origins of a New Deal Housing Project: The Case of Lockefield Gardens in Indianapolis,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 103 (2007): 125-151. Barrows discusses the origins of Lockefield Gardens, an exclusively black public housing project that opened in Indianapolis on the present campus of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, less than a mile away from Crispus Attucks. A similar public housing project for low-income white families, to be located just south of the city, was also considered. These locations reflected pre-existing residential patterns, and the overcrowding problem at Attucks was so acute that within two years, the adjacent School 17 was made a part of the high school to accommodate the extra students.


26 Goudsouzian, 6. According to Goudsouzian, “The basketball team mobilized the black community, furnished role models for black youths, and provided an arena where African Americans could witness their representatives literally confronting and vanquishing teams composed primarily of whites.”


32 Pierce, 47-48.


37 Warren, *Crispus Attucks*, 64; Pierce 50.


