

First Minnie Howard School (1954-2024)

In the fall of 1954, the Alexandria School Board opened a new school on this site serving grades one through seven with twenty classrooms staffed by nineteen teachers. The campus was named for Minnie Howard (1868-1950), who helped establish the Alexandria Parent Teacher Association and served as the city's first juvenile probation officer. The school opened in the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled against the segregation of public schools. After several local Black families successfully sued the school system, the first Black students began to integrate Alexandria public schools that had been reserved for whites.

Breaking Barriers

When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that it was unconstitutional for public schools to bar children from attending based on race, Virginia and other southern states refused to comply with the new law. Alexandria's longtime school superintendent, Thomas Chambliss "T.C." Williams, an avowed and vocal segregationist, used the power of his position to fight against the integration of Black students into Alexandria's white-only schools. With the school system refusing to comply, individual Black families took the initiative and filed lawsuits against the Alexandria School Board to force them to integrate public schools for students of all races.



NAACP attorneys Frank D. Reeves, left and Otto L. Tucker, right, outside Federal Court, Alexandria, Va., September 17, 1958 (Associated Press).



Maydell Casey Belk (Courtesy of the Belk family).

At Minnie Howard, two young Black families with deep roots in the nearby Seminary community: Stanley O. and Julia Adams Bradby, and Maydell Casey Belk, tried to enroll their children for the 1959 term. The families sought better facilities, textbooks, materials, equipment and closer schools, which Black children had been denied. At the time, Black students as far away as Fairfax County were bused to mandated and under-resourced segregated schools in the Old Town section of the city. The school rejected their enrollment applications

based on dubious grounds, including the false notion that Black students lacked "academic preparedness" and were "intellectually" unfit for white public schools. With the help of Frank D. Reeves and Otto L. Tucker, two NAACP attorneys working pro bono on their case, the Bradbys and Belks courageously stepped up and took the Alexandria School Board to court. In late December 1959, the court ruled in favor of the families, and on February 1, 1960, Judy Belk (1st grade), Deborah A. Bradby (1st grade), Vickie Belk (3rd grade), Marie A. Bradby (4th grade), and James O. Bradby (7th grade) walked through the doors of Minnie Howard School as enrolled students.

The Bradby and Belk families—like countless others involved in the Civil Rights Movement—took a stand for racial justice and equity, paving the way for future generations. The heroes of desegregation at this school were five brave elementary school children and their supportive parents. Despite enduring racial discrimination at school, they persevered, which has allowed other students of color to receive access to a quality public education. All five students became successful professionals.



Timeline



Minnie Howard School (Yearbook photo, 1967).

1952 Alexandria School Board approves plans for a new school on this site.

1954 Minnie Howard School opens.

1960 Five Black children in the neighborhood are admitted after a successful lawsuit.

1965 The city school system assigns all Alexandria students to their nearest neighborhood school. Minnie Howard becomes a middle school for seventh and eighth grades.



Stanley O. Sr. and Julia Adams Bradby (Courtesy of the Bradby family).

1971 Gilbert Mays, the first Black school principal in the post-integration era, is hired to head Minnie Howard Middle School.

1993 Minnie Howard reopens exclusively for ninth graders.

2024 After 70 years of service, the original Minnie Howard School building is torn down and replaced by a new state-of-the-art building. Playing fields now cover the foundations of the old school.



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