

# The Greensboro Four: Taking a Stand By Taking a Seat

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Historical Paper

1662 Words

On February 1, 1960, at precisely 4:30 P.M., four African American college freshmen by the names of Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, and David Richmond took a seat at the lunch counter at Woolworth's five-and-dime store, demanding equal service as white people.<sup>1</sup> A black waitress refused to take the students' order.<sup>2</sup> "I'm sorry," she began to say, "we don't serve colors in here." The waitress then proceeded to run off and ignore the four men. But instead of leaving, the four men remained seated until the lunch counter closed at 5:30 P.M.<sup>3</sup> Little did they know that by staying seated, it would trigger a whole movement of continuous sit-ins amongst other states across America. When the Greensboro Four bravely sat down at the Woolworth Lunch Counter in 1960, it sparked a change in the public eye against racial segregation of lunch counters and other southern segregationist policies.

All four were students were from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College located in Greensboro, North Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Ezell Blair describes the Greensboro community at that time as "The right climate. But I thought the white population was more in fear than the black population. We had, so to speak, white leaders. And we would get together at the First Presbyterian Church during brotherhood week, but we never got together at any other time. It was one of those closed things, you know, after that Sunday. Colleges participated and what not. Blacks would go out and sing and possibly a minister would speak for awhile, and this was the end of it."<sup>5</sup>

The four freshmen in the beginning came from different backgrounds. Joseph McNeil was born in Wilmington, North Carolina. He graduated from Williston Senior High School in

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<sup>1</sup> "The Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: 1960=1961." 1993

<sup>2</sup> "C. L. Harris, 94; Allowed Lunch Counter Sit-In." 1999

<sup>3</sup> "The Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: 1960=1961." 1993

<sup>4</sup> "Greensboro Sit-In." 2010

<sup>5</sup> "William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection ." 2019

1959 and proceeded to attend North Carolina A&T State University on a full scholarship.<sup>6</sup> He eventually found it difficult to live in the south, eventually having to deal with frustration after returning to North Carolina from New York after Christmas vacation, and was refused service at the bus terminal in Greensboro. This event led him and his colleagues to stage the sit-in at Woolworth's.<sup>7</sup>

Ezell Blair was born in Greensboro, North Carolina and graduated from Dudley High School.<sup>8</sup> While a student at A&T, he was president of the junior class, the student government association, the campus NAACP and the Greensboro Congress for Racial Equality.<sup>9</sup> Having similar views about racial segregation as McNeil, he thrived for change as well and proceeded to join in with the sit-in movement.

Franklin McCain was born in Washington, D.C. and graduated from Eastern High School in 1959.<sup>10</sup> While being a student at A&T, he roomed with David Richmond, around the corner from Ezell Blair Jr. and Joseph McNeil. Also sharing similar views as the other two, McCain joined in on the idea of a sit-in.

David Richmond was born in Greensboro and graduated from Dudley High School. At North Carolina A&T State University, he majored in business administration and accounting.<sup>11</sup> Also suffering from segregation because of his race, he joined in on the sit-in hoping it would be a good way to help end the problem.

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<sup>6</sup> "McNeil, Joseph (Joseph Alfred), 1942-." 2019

<sup>7</sup> "Independent Lens . FEBRUARY ONE . The Greensboro Four." 2017

<sup>8</sup> "Blair, Ezell Alexander, 1919-1997." 2019

<sup>9</sup> "Independent Lens . FEBRUARY ONE . The Greensboro Four." 2017

<sup>10</sup> "McCain, Franklin (Franklin Eugene), 1941-." 2013

<sup>11</sup> "Independent Lens . FEBRUARY ONE . The Greensboro Four." 2017

The sit-in was carefully planned out. While all four students had considered different means of nonviolent protest, McNeil suggested the tactic of the sit-in to the other three. With all of them being in agreement, they started to plan. It was simple; the students would first stop at Ralph Johns' store so that Johns could contact a newspaper reporter.<sup>12</sup> Johns was a white businessman in which the four freshmen had befriended. He was part of the NAACP and was all for ending segregation. He would put messages against racism and segregation in his storefront window. He also encouraged his African American customers to fight against segregation, along with providing financial support and advice to the Greensboro Four during the sit-in.<sup>13</sup>

After having Johns contact a newspaper reporter, they would then go to Woolworth's five-and-dime store to purchase items, saving their receipts. After shopping, they would sit down at the lunch counter and courteously request service, and they would wait until service was provided. The protest occurred on February 1, 1960, just as planned. When they were refused service at the lunch counter by a waitress, they remained seated in their seats until the lunch counter closed.<sup>14</sup>

Police eventually arrived at the scene, but were unable to do anything due to the lack of provocation. By that time, Johns had already alerted local media, who have arrived to cover the event and broadcast it on television.<sup>15</sup> By media coverage and word-of-mouth, the news swept the south, resulting in others wanting to defy segregation.<sup>16</sup>

“A group of 20 Negro students from A&T College occupied luncheon counter seats, without being served, at the downtown F. W. Woolworth Co. store late this morning-starting

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<sup>12</sup> “Greensboro Sit-In.” 2016

<sup>13</sup> “Johns, Ralph, 1916-1997.” 2013

<sup>14</sup> “Greensboro Sit-In.” 2016

<sup>15</sup> “Greensboro Sit-In.” 2010

<sup>16</sup> “Civil Rights Movement History 1960.” 1960

what they declared would be a growing movement. The group declared double that number will take places at the counters tomorrow.”<sup>17</sup> By February 5th, 300 students had joined the protests taking place at Woolworth’s and other local businesses. The Woolworth counter sit-in sparked a movement of sit-ins throughout college towns in the south and eventually to the north. Both young blacks and whites joined in this form of peaceful protest against segregation in other public places like libraries, beaches, and hotels.<sup>18</sup> An estimated 1,000 protesters and fill Woolworth’s on February 6th. The sit-in continued to spread to the nearby Kress department store, bringing downtown Greensboro to a virtual standstill.<sup>19</sup> “Both stores were scenes of potentially explosive racial tensions Saturday until a fake bomb scare prompted the closing of the Woolworth store early in the afternoon.”<sup>20</sup>

By the end of February, there have been sit-ins in more than thirty communities in seven states and by June, sit-ins had spread across the South as far as Kansas City.<sup>21</sup> As the protests grew, opposition grew vociferous. White men began to harass the protesters, often by spitting, uttering abusive language, and throwing eggs.<sup>22</sup>

Even with the amount of hate the protesters were getting, it didn’t stop them from continuing sit-ins. By the end of March, the movement had spread to 55 cities in 13 states. Though many were arrested for trespassing, disorderly conduct or disturbing the peace, media coverage of the sit-ins brought attention to America about the civil rights movement.<sup>23</sup> People began to realize how big the problem of segregation really was. By the end of 1960, more than

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<sup>17</sup> “Woolworth Made Target For Demonstration Here.” 1960

<sup>18</sup> “Greensboro Sit-In.” 2010

<sup>19</sup> “Independent Lens . FEBRUARY ONE . The Greensboro Four.” 2017

<sup>20</sup> “Counters To Remain Closed.” 1960.

<sup>21</sup> “Civil Rights Movement History 1960.” 1960

<sup>22</sup> “Greensboro Sit-In.” 2016

<sup>23</sup> “Greensboro Sit-In.” 2010

70,000 men and women- mostly African American, but a few White- have participated in sit-ins and picket lines. More than 3,000 people were arrested. On July 26th, 1960, Woolworth's integrated its lunch counter.<sup>24</sup> Four black Woolworth's employees—Geneva Tisdale, Susie Morrison, Anetha Jones and Charles Best—were the first to be served.<sup>25</sup>

During the sit-ins, C. L. Harris, Woolworth's manager at the time, spoke bitterness about the incident in an interview: "They cost me \$150,000 in lost business," he said. "Wound up I lost one-third of my profits, and I lost one-third of my salary." At the same time though, he had sympathy for the boys, mentioning how he was on their side.<sup>26</sup>

So why are sit-ins so important? For one thing, young people are able to take the lead. It establishes leaders in the African American community, without having to follow adult leaders, teachers, and/or officials of the NAACP.<sup>27</sup> According to TIME, the sit-ins, "attracted sympathy from white college students, as well as those in Northern cities" and "mobilized tens of thousands of people to participate in an assortment of confrontational acts that made up the civil rights movement."<sup>28</sup> The Greensboro sit-ins continued and escalated day after day as more and more students joined the protest. Previous student actions such as those in Orangeburg in May of 1956 and Durham in June of 1957 occurred just as school was ending for the term, so there could be no campus-based follow up. Greensboro occurs in the middle of the school year just after students return from winter break, which resulted in better participation in sit-ins.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Independent Lens . FEBRUARY ONE . The Greensboro Four." 2017

<sup>25</sup> "Greensboro Sit-In." 2010

<sup>26</sup> "C. L. Harris, 94; Allowed Lunch Counter Sit-In." 1999

<sup>27</sup> "Civil Rights Movement History 1960." 2019

<sup>28</sup> "Civil Rights Sit-In at the Woolworth's Lunch Counter: Why It Worked." 2015

<sup>29</sup> "Civil Rights Movement History 1960." 2019

The Woolworth sit-in that happened more than 50 years ago is still very relevant today. In a speech with President Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States of America, he thanks the Greensboro Four. “The lessons taught at that five-and-dime challenged us to consider who we are as a nation and what kind of future we want to build for our children. We know the rest of the story. One year later, the Freedom Riders made their brave trek across the South. Two summers after that, the same Montgomery preacher who inspired the Greensboro Four would stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and pronounce his dream for America. One year later came the Civil Rights Acts, and the next year, the Voting Rights Act, which helped secure for African Americans — and all Americans — a fundamental right to share in the blessings of this country.”<sup>30</sup>

Around the same time of the sit-in, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded in Raleigh, North Carolina, in April. Over the next few years, the SNCC became one of the leading forces to help push the civil rights movement, including organizing freedom rides and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech.<sup>31</sup>

The Greensboro Four broke barriers by taking a seat. Overall it sparked a movement of events that led to big changes in the civil rights movement. It encouraged people, mostly in the African American community, to take a stand for equal rights as the white community. There were other sit-ins before this one, but this one was much more impactful than the previous ones. By seeing young people take the lead, both adults and younger people were able to have an impact. Today, segregation at lunch counters and other facilities isn’t as big as a problem

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<sup>30</sup> “President Barack Obama to the Greensboro Four: Thank You.” 2014,

<sup>31</sup> “Greensboro Sit-In.” 2010

because of this. America thanks the Greensboro Four for taking a stand and improving the future for America.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Chafe, William, et al. "William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection ." Oral History Interview with Ezell and Corene Blair by William Chafe, 1972, libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/CivilRights/id/751/rec/1. Accessed 24 Oct. 2019.

**During my research, I used this interview with Ezell Blair to get information about how he felt at the time about segregation. He talked about the Greensboro community and how it was different between being a black vs a white man. He also talked about the relationships between the African American community and the white community.**

Greensboro Record. "Counters To Remain Closed." 8 Feb. 1960.

**This newspaper article explained the impact the sit-ins. It was a good source to use of why Woolworth and Kress how to shut down early one of the days. It showed significance of how other people reacted to the Greensboro Four sit-in, whether it being a negative or positive reaction.**

Obama, Barack. "President Barack Obama to the Greensboro Four: Thank You." Greensboro News and Record, 1 Feb. 2014,

[www.greensboro.com/news/local\\_news/president-barack-obama-to-the-greensboro-four-thank-you/article\\_805557ca-8aed-11e3-a995-0017a43b2370.html](http://www.greensboro.com/news/local_news/president-barack-obama-to-the-greensboro-four-thank-you/article_805557ca-8aed-11e3-a995-0017a43b2370.html).

**By using this article of Barack Obama thanking the Greensboro Four, he explains how it is still relevant to today. I felt like this was a good source to use to relate back to the real world connections in the present day. It shows how even what the Greensboro Four did back in 1960 helped shape the future of America today.**

## Secondary Sources

“Blair, Ezell Alexander, 1919-1997.” Civil Rights Digital Library, 2019,  
[crdl.usg.edu/people/b/blair\\_ezell\\_alexander\\_1919\\_1997/](http://crdl.usg.edu/people/b/blair_ezell_alexander_1919_1997/).

**I used this source about Ezell Blair to get some background information about him. I think it is important to share how he got involved with the sit-in and where he stood overall. It also mentioned how he in general was always involved with change for racial equality.**

“Civil Rights Movement History 1960.” Civil Rights Movement History & Timeline, 1960, 2019, [www.crmvet.org/tim/timhis60.htm#1960sitins](http://www.crmvet.org/tim/timhis60.htm#1960sitins).

**This source was very helpful in proving my information about qualitative data about the sit-ins. I was able to find out the impact of the sit-ins, including how many people participated in a given time and where they took place. It also helped me explain why the Greensboro sit-in in particular was so impactful.**

Cohen, Sascha. “Civil Rights Sit-In at the Woolworth's Lunch Counter: Why It Worked.” Time, Time, 2015, [time.com/3691383/woolworths-sit-in-history/](http://time.com/3691383/woolworths-sit-in-history/).

**By using this article, it also helps me elaborate on the idea of why the sit-in worked. It helped me explain the idea of it spreading and it being an easy way for people in the African American community to make a difference. People also used the idea of sit-ins to try to help with segregation in other public places.**

History.com Editors. "Greensboro Sit-In." History.com, A&E Television Networks, 4 Feb. 2010, [www.history.com/topics/black-history/the-greensboro-sit-in](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/the-greensboro-sit-in).

**This source was very helpful in the explanation of the overall event of the sit-in. It gave me basic information to go off of and helped me plan on writing the history section of my essay. It also helped me provide information about the SNCC and how the organization was impactful for further events in the civil rights movement.**

"Independent Lens . FEBRUARY ONE . The Greensboro Four." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 2017, [www.pbs.org/independentlens/februaryone/four.html](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/februaryone/four.html).

**This website was helpful in providing some information about the Greensboro Four individually. I was able to talk about each member of the group and this source helped me with that. It also did provide me information on the sit-in itself as well.**

"Johns, Ralph, 1916-1997." Civil Rights Digital Library, 2013, [crdl.usg.edu/people/j/johns\\_ralph\\_1916\\_1997/](http://crdl.usg.edu/people/j/johns_ralph_1916_1997/).

**By using this website, I was able to learn more about John Ralphs and how he played a part in the sit-in. He played a significant role of the sit-in by helping it spread to local news, which helped in the process of getting the word around. It was interesting to read and learn about him, because at first I didn't know he played a part and helped so much.**

Kaufman, Michael T. "C. L. Harris, 94; Allowed Lunch Counter Sit-In." The New York Times, The New York Times, 15 July 1999, [www.nytimes.com/1999/07/15/us/c-l-harris-94-allowed-lunch-counter-sit-in.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/15/us/c-l-harris-94-allowed-lunch-counter-sit-in.html).

**This article was very helpful by describing the other point of view on the sit-in. Since**

**Harris was the owner of Woolworth's at the time, it was interesting to see how the sit-in affected him and his business. It was also interesting to find out that in the end he was on their side, even though at first it didn't seem like it.**

“McCain, Franklin (Franklin Eugene), 1941-.” Civil Rights Digital Library, 2013,  
 crdl.usg.edu/people/m/mccain\_franklin\_franklin\_eugene\_1941/.

**By using this source, I was able to find out more about Franklin McCain, an original member of the group. It helped me explain how he shared similar views with the rest of the group. It also helped me explain a little bit about his previous life before the sit-in.**

“McNeil, Joseph (Joseph Alfred), 1942-.” Civil Rights Digital Library, 2019,  
 crdl.usg.edu/people/m/mcneil\_joseph\_joseph\_alfred\_1942/.

**Using this website helped me explain more about Joseph McNeil. By already having to deal with problems because he was an African American man, he joined in on the idea of the sit-in. The site also helped me explain more about him before the sit-in as well.**

The Civil Rights Movement: An Eyewitness History Book

Wexler, Sanford, and Julian Bond. “The Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: 1960=1961.” The Civil Rights Movement: An Eyewitness History, Facts on File, Inc, 1993, pp. 109–114.

**This book was very helpful with specific details about the sit-in. It really helped introduce my essay about the sit-in creatively. By reading this section, it also helped with the outline in my essay, by what events happened in what order.**

Website design and web development by Mango Web Design <http://mangowebdesign.com>.

“Greensboro Sit-In.” North Carolina History Project, 2016,

[northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/greensboro-sit-in/](http://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/greensboro-sit-in/).

**This source helped me explain some of the negative impacts the sit-in had, especially from the white community. It also helped explain more of the outline for the sit-in. It showed me how the group put the idea into place and how they carefully executed it.**