Power from the Pedestal: The Women’s Emergency Committee and the Little Rock School Crisis

LORRAINE GATES

In the spring of 1957, Little Rock was, by most accounts, a thriving and progressive southern city. In the postwar decade, the city’s leaders vigorously pursued a plan of economic development, and race relations were considered good and improving. In voluntary compliance with the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown decision, Little Rock School District officials developed a desegregation plan, and an NAACP representative referred to Little Rock as “the bright spot of the South” in terms of school desegregation. Thus, as the first day of school approached in 1957, no one anticipated that Little Rock would become an international symbol of racism and massive resistance.

On September 2, 1957, just hours before the start of the new school year, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus ordered the National Guard to surround Central High School to prevent integration. For three weeks, Faubus defied a federal court order to proceed with integration, and President Eisenhower ultimately had to send troops from the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock to ensure that nine black students would be al-


Lorraine Gates Schuyler is chief of staff to the president, University of Richmond. The University of North Carolina Press published her book, The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s, late last year. This article first appeared in the spring 1996 issue of the Arkansas Historical Quarterly.
owed to attend school. The paratroopers occupied the high school for several months, and federalized National Guardsmen remained in the halls of Central High School for the entire school year.

The end of the school year, however, provided little relief for the city. While school officials worked to delay integration, Faubus traveled the state, campaigning for reelection as an ardent segregationist. Emboldened by his Democratic primary victory in late July, Faubus called a special session of the legislature, which granted him the power to close schools that fall to prevent integration.

On Friday, September 12, 1958, the United States Supreme Court ordered the Little Rock School District to proceed with integration. In response, Governor Faubus immediately closed all of the city’s public high schools. As the governor signed this school closing legislation, three white women gathered in an antebellum mansion just a few blocks from the state capitol. There, beneath the portrait of her father in Confederate uniform, Adolphine Terry sat with Vivion Brewer and Velma Powell, laying the groundwork for the first effective opposition to the city’s segregationists. Four days later, they founded the Women’s Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools (WEC). In the ensuing months, the women of the WEC publicly challenged the segregationists at every turn, and their actions were instrumental in the defeat of the extremists and the reopening of the city schools.

Although the WEC was the first organized white opposition to the city’s segregationists and was central to the resolution of the school crisis, no study of the organization exists. Few accounts have even mentioned the WEC, in part because much of the secondary material on the Little Rock experience is contained in larger works on school desegregation or civil rights. Within such broad surveys, Little Rock is treated as merely one episode in a continuing saga of resistance. Moreover, even in the literature devoted specifically to Little Rock, most studies focus on the first year of the crisis (1957–1958), when federal troops occupied Central High and the dramatic conflict between Governor Faubus and President Eisenhower tested the power of the federal government to en-

---

force the Supreme Court’s decision. Only a few authors have studied the second year of the crisis, when the power struggles were local and the WEC occupied center stage.

In *The Little Rock Recall Election*, Henry Alexander examined the climactic event in the city’s school crisis and provided the first scholarly reference to the WEC in his discussion of the organization’s role in the 1959 recall campaign. However, his study provides little information about the membership of the WEC or its development prior to the election. In “Taken By Surprise,” Elizabeth Jacoway provides an important introduction to the social origins of the WEC, but her focus is on the failure of Little Rock’s civic leadership during the crisis, and she therefore does not provide a full discussion of the WEC’s activities. The only work that addresses the development of the WEC and its relationship with other groups in the community is Irving Spitzberg’s *Racial Politics in Little Rock*. Nevertheless, Spitzberg did not intend to study the WEC itself, and thus he did not answer the principal questions: Who were these women? What motivated them to form the WEC? What did they accomplish, and how did prevailing notions about appropriate gender roles affect their organization?

In the early days of the crisis, some of Little Rock’s leaders attempted to challenge the governor and his segregationist supporters. Mayor Woodrow Wilson Mann condemned Faubus’s use of National Guardsmen, as did fifteen ministers from local white churches. Congressman Brooks Hays arranged negotiations between Governor Faubus and President Eisenhower in an attempt to resolve the crisis and repeatedly called for a return to “the rule of law.” Just days after the crisis began, the editor of the *Arkansas Gazette* lamented:

---


6Jacoway, “Taken by Surprise.”


Until last Thursday the matter of gradual, limited integration in the Little Rock schools was a local problem which had been well and wisely handled by responsible local officials who have had—and we believe still have—the support of a majority of people of this city. On that day Mr. Faubus appeared in Chancery Court on behalf of a small but militant minority and chose to make it a state problem. On Monday night he called out the National Guard and made it a national problem. It is one he must now live with, and the rest of us must suffer under.\(^\text{10}\)

In the ensuing weeks the *Arkansas Gazette* made almost daily appeals for a return to law and order. Meanwhile, Little Rock School District superintendent Virgil Blossom continued to urge compliance with court orders to desegregate. Yet Little Rock’s business leaders remained noticeably silent.

In his study of the actions of these men during the crisis, Spitzberg has persuasively argued that Little Rock’s business leaders “had traditionally exercised a great deal of influence over public policy . . . . These ‘civic’ leaders had established a long tradition of activism in Little Rock and [when they felt secure in their actions] demonstrated the ability to use economic, social and political power effectively . . . . These men ‘could make decisions’ because of their economic and social position in the community.”\(^\text{11}\) As one local minister put it, “These men are the core of the power structure. If they decide to do anything, they can do it.”\(^\text{12}\) Yet with the exception of a single feeble attempt, when faced with the school crisis, these men made the decision to remain silent.\(^\text{13}\)

At the outset of the crisis, segregationists embarked on an intimidation campaign to silence the opposition. Threatening phone calls and hate mail barraged Mayor Mann and Superintendent Blossom. The segregationist Capital Citizens’ Council circulated a petition to recall Mayor Mann and police officials who had assisted in the integration of Central

\(^{10}\) *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), September 4, 1957.

\(^{11}\) Spitzberg, *Racial Politics*, 39.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 70.

\(^{13}\) In early October 1957, nearly a month after Faubus had called out the National Guard, the city’s most prominent business leaders met in an attempt to resolve the crisis. The “Guy Committee” was composed of the past presidents and current board members of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce. Meeting secretly, they disagreed on principles and strategy and could agree only to meet with the governor and issue a public statement in favor of law and order. Grainger Williams, a participant, described the Guy Committee’s activities this way, “We took a picture and that’s about it.” Jacoway, “Taken By Surprise,” 26–27; Grainger Williams, video interview with Arkansas Interfaith Council.
Outspoken ministers risked “decreased contributions, lowered attendance and even removal.” Central High School officials received harassing phone calls, and white students who showed kindness to the black students were often ostracized and threatened.

The most important weapons in the segregationists’ arsenal, however, were economic. They waged a boycott against the *Arkansas Gazette* that cost the paper both a million dollars and its comfortable lead over the rival *Arkansas Democrat*. Any business that advertised with the *Gazette* was explicitly threatened with reprisals, and segregationists even warned mothers of *Gazette* paperboys that some harm might come to their sons if they continued delivering the paper. Businessmen feared segregationist-led boycotts and, more importantly, reprisals from the powerful economic interests surrounding the governor. As editor Harry Ashmore put it, the boycott against the *Gazette* “provided an object lesson for any who doubted the governor’s willingness to use his office to support the Citizens’ Councils.”

Although the moderate business leaders who had helped Little Rock earn its reputation for racial tolerance remained in positions of authority, a McCarthyite atmosphere pervaded the city. Few men had the courage to oppose the well-organized, vocal segregationists, who attacked a desegregationist stance, even a public stand for law and order, as unpatriotic and communistic. Integrationist was an epithet applied to anyone advocating desegregation, and integrationists risked their reputations, their livelihoods, and even their physical safety.

It was in the context of this repression that Adolphine Terry invited Vivion Brewer and Velma Powell to her home to discuss the worsening school crisis. In 1958, Mrs. Terry was seventy-six years old. The daughter of a slaveholder and Confederate officer, she was the wife of a New Deal congressman and a member of Little Rock’s most prominent family. She was by far the most influential woman in the community. Born and
raised in Arkansas, Terry attended Vassar College and lived for several years in Washington. Though she worked for various national causes, including the women’s suffrage movement, she had a particular commitment to improving her home state of Arkansas. Her devotion to the state was so strong that she was said to have described it as “holy ground.”

In Little Rock, she was a leader in the founding of the symphony orchestra, public libraries, and the juvenile court system. She was also one of the few white women willing to serve as an advisor to the local black chapter of the YWCA and was active in many interracial organizations designed to promote tolerance. One close friend recalled that Terry “felt community issues more strongly than most,” which led her to assume a leading role in the resolution of the school crisis.

Throughout the first year of the crisis, she had worked behind the scenes, meeting with school officials, business leaders, and the governor’s wife to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict. By September 1958, however, she had wearied of the “prolonged silence of the city fathers.” Using the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching as a model, Terry recruited Brewer and Powell to form an interracial organization to educate the community in racial tolerance.

In calling for the creation of such an organization, Terry became the segregationists’ primary target. They had succeeded in silencing the city’s traditional civic leadership and intended to use a campaign of intimidation to prevent the organization of a moderate opposition. Terry’s unique status in the community, however, made her virtually immune to such tactics. In fact, her unrivaled influence was essential in the success of the opposition. As one WEC member put it, “Mrs. Terry had money, family, power and guts, and it took somebody in that position to get the WEC going.”

---

21Ibid.
23Like the women who had worked in the anti-lynching campaigns, Terry believed that women could be most effective by educating community members in racial tolerance. However, as C. Vann Woodward and others have shown, their view of segregation as a relic of the Old South perpetuated by the ignorance of poor whites denied the reality that segregation had been created in the early twentieth century and sustained by each succeeding generation of white leaders, including Terry’s peers. Brewer, “Embattled Ladies,” 7; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign against Lynching (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 213; C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).
few believed the segregationists’ attacks against her. One local attorney noted, “Even though people didn’t agree with what she was doing, they didn’t want to come out against her because she’d done so much good in the community.” There was perhaps no other person in Little Rock who could have organized the first stand against the segregationists and made such opposition legitimate.

On September 16, 1958, over fifty women gathered at the Terry mansion for the first meeting of what was to become the WEC. Through determined effort, the membership of the WEC grew from an initial fifty-eight to nearly fourteen hundred by May 1959. In early 1960, the WEC conducted a survey of its members, most of whom had joined the organization during the first few months of its existence. More than half of the members responded to this anonymous survey, and the leaders’ diligence in their efforts to ensure accuracy yielded a very useful profile of the general membership. According to this survey, the vast majority of WEC members were under fifty years of age, married, had children, and had lived in Arkansas or the South for over twenty years. Most WEC families had annual incomes of over eighty-five hundred dollars and owned their own homes. Twenty percent reported incomes of over fifteen thousand dollars. More than a third were country club members, and nearly all were active in civic or religious organizations. An amazing 82 percent of the members had attended at least one year of college, and 20 percent had done some post-graduate work. Interestingly, the majority of those members who had attended college had done so outside the state, as had their husbands. The vast majority of members had also held jobs outside the home before they were married, although fewer than one quarter of the members were employed at the time of the survey.

---

25One example of her unique prominence occurred in 1958 after Faubus launched one particularly vicious attack against her. Dozens of the city’s most prominent citizens rallied to her defense, flooding the local papers with letters of support; series 2, box 5, file 2, Fletcher-Terry Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Ottenheimer Library, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.


28Minutes of WEC meetings, September 23, 1958 through May 5, 1959, box 2, file 1, WEC Papers, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock.

29Information related to the membership survey can be found in box 1, file 6, ibid. Brewer also included a copy of survey results in the appendix of her manuscript.

30Interestingly, only 65 percent of the respondents said that they had actually volunteered for the WEC; the others had apparently just given money. Moreover, though membership climbed throughout the year, attendance at monthly meetings remained steady at 60–100 members.
These statistics stand in sharp contrast to the census figures for Arkansas. In 1959, the average Arkansas family earned $3,184, less than half of the average WEC family earnings. Even when compared with the average family income for white Americans during this period, WEC family incomes are nearly 33 percent higher. Furthermore, the median years of school completed for white females in 1959 was eleven, whereas more than 80 percent of WEC members had attended college. Given that Arkansas traditionally ranks well below the national average in measures of education, the educational attainment of the WEC members was probably even more unusual than these figures suggest.

The survey also indicated that WEC members differed from the rest of the community in their religious affiliations. The most striking revelation is that only 9 percent of the members were Baptist, although nearly half of all the white congregants in Little Rock belonged to a Baptist church. The majority of WEC members were Methodist or Presbyterian. While Methodists joined the WEC in proportion to their numbers in the community, Presbyterians, who represented just 7 percent of the city’s white churchgoers, constituted nearly a third of the membership. Little Rock’s tiny Jewish and Episcopalian communities were also overrepresented in the WEC.

WEC leaders conducted this membership survey to counter accusations that the organization was composed of outsiders who had no children in the schools and no legitimate interest in the school crisis. Finding that the vast majority were mothers and longtime residents, WEC leaders felt they had “justified the Committee position in community disagreements on school affairs.” However, the survey also confirmed critics’ assertions that the WEC represented a small minority of the entire community. As noted above, WEC members were better educated and wealthier than the vast majority of Arkansans. Critics accurately charged that most lived in the exclusive Heights section of Little Rock, an area they referred to as the “silk stocking district.” Alluding to their wealth and status, Faubus and other segregationist leaders described the WEC members as the “charge of the Cadillac Brigade.” Women's Emergency Committee leaders responded, “If it is to be argued that we are only a small group in the community, it can also be argued that we are a group whose opinion should

32Although 15 percent of the members were from outside the city or state, most of these members provided only financial support, and the survey refuted the primary accusation that the WEC members were northerners; membership files, WEC Papers.
have considerable weight.”\textsuperscript{35} That may have been true, but the WEC undeniably represented a small minority of the city’s women.

As native southerners, however, they shared widely held expectations about the proper role and duties of a southern white woman. As Sara Evans noted in \textit{Personal Politics}, “The bonds of white womanhood had stretched enough [by the 1930s] to allow a growing level of public activity and social concern, but they were far from broken.”\textsuperscript{36} Interviews with Little Rock women indicate that most of these white women were raised with the belief that their primary roles in life would be wife and mother.\textsuperscript{37} Several remarked that college was just a way to spend time before marriage, and all stressed the importance of community good works.\textsuperscript{38} Irene Samuel, an officer in the WEC, remembered that she and her sister were such good students that her father used to say, “It’s a shame you were born girls.”\textsuperscript{39} Kathryn Lambright, a WEC volunteer, described the expectations of a southern woman: “I was never encouraged to pursue anything other than [to] be a wife, mother, have lovely manners . . . . Training in all the social amenities but nothing on training your mind for skills in other areas . . . . A Southern lady is . . . . submissive, always gentle spoken, well groomed, versed in social amenities . . . [and] Southern ladies should be conformists.”\textsuperscript{40} Given these societal expectations, it at first seems surprising that a group like the WEC would form with a membership of upper-class southern white women. However, the membership and work of the WEC conforms to a pattern of reform movements throughout American history that have been dominated by white women of the leisure class.\textsuperscript{41}

At first glance, it seems incongruous that elite women have dominated social reform movements, as their class status ensured that they had more to lose by challenging the status quo. However, as Evans and other scholars have noted, working-class women were struggling with issues of basic subsistence and often lacked the luxury to devote time and attention to

\textsuperscript{35}Preliminary survey results, September 28, 1960, box 1, file 6, WEC Papers.
\textsuperscript{37}Jean Gordon interview; Mary Sandlin Fletcher Worthen interview; Kathryn Lambright interview; Pat House interview; Dottie Morris interview, Oral History Collection, UALR.
\textsuperscript{38}Worthen interview; Lambright interview.
\textsuperscript{39}Irene Samuel, interview by author, Little Rock, Arkansas, January 5, 1993.
\textsuperscript{40}Lambright interview, 15, 41–42.
\textsuperscript{41}Most scholars describe women reformers as middle class. Generally, the women they refer to did not have to work outside the home. Thus, for purposes of this essay I will refer to middle-class and upper-class women as members of the leisure class, as compared with women in the working class.
changing their society.\textsuperscript{42} It was not simply an increase in leisure time that led elite women to work for social reform, however. An emphasis on women as moral guardians led many to social action as an outgrowth of the church, and increasing opportunities for education led women to work for social reform as an intellectual outlet.\textsuperscript{43} For southern reformers, education played a particularly important role, as it afforded women the opportunity to experience life outside the rigid confines of the segregated South.

Though denied access to traditional means of political action and limited by contemporary sex role proscriptions, these women used race, class status, education, and an expanded notion of women’s role as moral guardians to justify their participation in social reform. Like women reformers of the past, members of the WEC were well educated, upper-class white women with strong connections to Protestant churches. Conforming to traditional patterns of women’s reform movements, the intersection of race, class, and gender placed the women of the WEC in a uniquely powerful position in the fall of 1958.

Faced with harassment, threats, social ostracism, and severe economic reprisals, Little Rock’s traditional male leadership had been intimidated into silence. Rev. Dunbar Ogden had lost his pulpit as a result of his outspokenness, and the segregationist-led boycott of the \textit{Arkansas Gazette} had served as a strict warning to others. As one WEC member recalled: “For a man to endanger his business and jeopardize his family to all of the threats and things that went on . . . they would have been thought to be foolish to put their family at such risks, and irresponsible.”\textsuperscript{44} Upper-class white women, however, had little to fear from such economic reprisals. They were not employed outside the home and were not responsible for the economic well-being of their families. Though their husbands were occasionally told, “shut your wife up,” most employers accepted that husbands did not have complete control over their wives.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42}Sara Evans, \textit{Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America} (New York: Free Press, 1989), especially chapters 4, 6. However, labor unions were a major exception to this rule. Women in labor unions were predominantly working class. Middle- and upper-class women generally avoided labor unions in favor of less radical associations.


\textsuperscript{44}Pat House, interview by author, Little Rock, Arkansas, January 9, 1993.

\textsuperscript{45}The husbands of most WEC members faced virtually no economic repercussions, but the leaders’ husbands were subject to serious reprisals. Irene Samuel’s husband was an obstetrician, and, as a result of her actions, nearly all of his patients chose another doctor. Vivion Brewer’s husband lost his job with the Veteran’s Administration Hospital during this period, and Brewer was convinced it was the result of her work with the WEC. Other sources have since disputed that notion, but it is clear that the leaders’ husbands were targeted economically, while the husbands of less prominent members were not held financially responsible for their wives’ actions.
In addition to this protection from economic reprisals, class status provided the women of the WEC with tools for organization. As with earlier women reformers, it provided them leisure time to devote to the organization. Their wealth also ensured the financial stability of the group. Not only could WEC members personally contribute more to the organization, but they could raise money more easily because they knew wealthy people. This issue of access is perhaps the most important benefit of class. As wives of the civic elite, they could make personal appeals to community leaders for funding and eventually for a public stand against the segregationists.

Their wealth could not protect them, however, from threats, harassment, and social ostracism. As soon as the WEC was formed, its leaders began to receive harassing phone calls. Irene Samuel was on the Wednesday and Saturday night hate list, and on those nights she received threatening phone calls every fifteen minutes. The women were accused of being “nigger lovers,” “race mixers,” and “communists.” The hate mail poured in, and one woman even threatened to burn down Terry’s home. Brewer was a favorite target of the segregationists, not only because she was president of the WEC, but also because she lived in a rural area outside of Little Rock and had no children, her only child having died very young. Perceived by segregationists as an outsider, she received numerous death threats, which were all the more troubling because she lived in an isolated area.

Though the hate mail, death threats, and harassing phone calls were directed primarily against the WEC leaders, most of the women who joined faced social ostracism. Given the importance of hospitality and social networking among elite white women in the South, this was not an insignificant repercussion. In the membership survey, fully one-third of the women responded that relations with their neighbors had been changed by the crisis, suggesting that few or none of their neighbors shared their views on the school crisis. Every member interviewed recalled losing long-time friends over this issue, as well as being subjected to a “great coolness” in social settings. Many women who were sympathetic with the cause refused to join or gave only anonymous cash donations for fear of community reprisals. The membership files indicate the

46 Samuel interview.
47 Adolphine Terry, “Life is My Song, Also,” manuscript, Charlie May Simon Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Ottenheimer Library, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 240.
48 Membership survey data, box 1, file 6, WEC Papers.
49 House interview; Mendel interview; Sara Murphy, interview by author, Little Rock, Arkansas, January 4, 1993; Samuel interview.
degree of intimidation women faced, as members were divided into categories of regular members, members who did not want anything mailed to their homes, and anonymous members whose affiliation with the WEC was not even known to other members.50

Many of the women in these anonymous membership categories were hiding their affiliation not only from their neighbors but also from their husbands. Though WEC members were largely exempt from economic and physical reprisals, they were subject to a unique form of pressure from their husbands. Only 6 percent of members surveyed stated that their husbands disagreed with them about the school crisis, but many husbands feared that they would be targeted for their wives’ outspokenness.51 As one WEC officer recalled, “A lot of wives could not use their names because of their husbands.”52 In a very real sense, these women could not use their names because they were not their names. This was perhaps most clearly evidenced in the organization’s membership lists, in which each married member was listed by her husband’s full name — Mrs. David Terry, Mrs. Joe Brewer.53 Thus, anonymous membership categories offered women an opportunity to participate in the WEC without their husbands’ knowledge. As one member put it, “A lot of women were folding pamphlets and licking envelopes in their homes, and nobody knew they were doing it.”54 For a few women, participation in the WEC against their husband’s wishes resulted in divorce.55

Pressure from husbands prevented other women from joining at all. One of Terry’s closest friends, an educator in complete sympathy with the cause, refused to join the WEC, “because my husband asked me not to” for fear it would ruin his business.56 In her efforts to recruit new members, Jane Mendel encountered numerous women in similar circumstances. Many were solidly in favor of the committee’s work but could not join the WEC because their husbands had told them to “hold off.”57 Yet, despite pressure from their husbands and the community at large, a surprising number of women found the courage to oppose Faubus.

When asked why they joined the WEC, every member interviewed cited frustration with the inaction of the city’s male leadership. As Irene

50Membership lists, box 1, file 2, WEC Papers.
51Membership survey, box 1, file 6, WEC Papers.
52Samuel interview.
53Membership lists, box 1, file 2, WEC Papers.
54Samuel interview.
55Vivion Brewer interview, Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
56Gates interview.
57Mendel interview.
Samuel put it, “The men were afraid . . . . There were no leaders. They all chickened out . . . . They were afraid of losing money.”58 Another WEC leader recalled simply, “We felt frustrated . . . . The situation began to get more and more out of hand.”59 This frustration with a lack of male leadership was closely tied to an understanding of the broader effects of the crisis on the city.

In accordance with their commitment to community service, more than 70 percent of the WEC members were active in civic organizations, and Little Rock’s reputation was a matter of serious concern to them. In a typical response, Sara Murphy said that she joined the WEC because, “I felt like the community was going in the wrong direction . . . . This [integration] is where the country is going and we want to go with it. We want to be in the twentieth century.”60 Adolphine Terry echoed this sense of community humiliation: “We had been disgraced by a group of poor whites and a portion of the lunatic fringe that every town possesses. I wondered where the better class had been while this was being concocted.”61 One local attorney put it more simply, “We were getting no new industry. We were the laughingstock . . . of the universe.”62 Raised in a tradition of civic volunteerism, the women recognized the devastating effect of the crisis on the community and wanted to restore Little Rock’s good name and return the city to a path of prosperity.

Self-interest was also an important motivation. The future of the community was of great concern to women raising a family. The vast majority of members had school-age children, and closed schools drastically affected the lives of women, who were their primary caretakers. Fully one-fifth of those members who responded to the survey reported having children who would have attended the closed high schools.63 As one woman put it, “The schools were closed and their kids were out of school . . . . They were scared to death that [Faubus] might close all of the schools.”64 Thus, in some ways these women were propelled to take a controversial stand by very traditional definitions of a woman’s proper role.

Significantly, none of the members cited social justice as a primary reason for joining the WEC. Though membership itself indicated at least a tolerance of integration, there is little evidence to suggest that members

58 Samuel interview.
59 Murphy interview.
60 Ibid.
61 Terry, “Life is My Song, Also,” 231.
63 Membership survey data, box 1, file 6, WEC Papers.
64 Samuel interview.
viewed the issue as a moral imperative. Some have argued that the leaders of the organization were more liberal than the general membership; however, few if any of the women involved with the WEC could be considered racial liberals. The membership survey indicates a wide variety of opinions on issues of race relations, but none of the results suggest the presence of a strong liberal contingent within the organization. When asked how they would react if public eating places were opened to black customers, only 37 percent said they would approve. Fifteen percent believed that desegregation would permanently harm public education and that the school board ought to reject “all but a handful of Negro applicants.” One-quarter believed that the school district ought to “discourage Negroes from requesting transfers to desegregated schools.” When asked how they felt about school integration, sample responses included

- Believe integration can’t work
- Believe school integration will have to be slower
- Prefer segregation but feel law must be obeyed
- Prefer segregation but not to closed schools

This final comment perhaps best describes the WEC members and southern moderates in general. The women of the WEC and the men who would follow them opposed the segregationists because of what their actions were doing to the community’s economy and reputation, not because of any commitment to racial equality. This support for desegregation as a civic issue rather than a moral issue was evident at the WEC’s first public meeting.

When Terry, Brewer, and Powell met to organize an opposition to Faubus, he had not yet closed the schools. They envisioned an interracial organization with the goal of educating for racial tolerance. However, by the time the first public meeting was held, Faubus had closed the schools, changing the nature of the school crisis. At that first meeting, as Brewer began to outline plans for studies of local race relations and the formation of an interracial committee, a slow but steady trickle of women out of the meeting forced Brewer to “throw away all . . . notes and start over.”

65In recent interviews, WEC members and local businessmen claim that the WEC leaders were more integrationist than the general members. In their analyses of the school crisis, both Jacoway and Spitzberg assert this as fact. However, the evidence is inconclusive. Archival sources offer little information about the attitudes of general members toward issues of race, and recent interviews with WEC leaders are colored by the passage of time.

66Membership survey data, box 1, file 6, WEC Papers.

women who attended that first meeting were frustrated by the school closing and were insistent that the primary goal of any new organization should be to address this emergency. Interracial organizations had never been popular, and the repressive atmosphere in Little Rock only exacerbated this tendency. Fearing that the WEC might be an integrationist organization, three women who attended that first meeting later asked that their names be stricken from the list. As one historian has described it, “Conceived originally as an organization to work for racial justice, the Women’s Emergency Committee quickly scaled down its objectives when the leaders realized the timidity of the ladies and the possibility of using the schools issue to build a broad base of support for a more enlightened position on the race question.”

Central to the construction of this broad base of support was the WEC policy to maintain a segregated organization. Political effectiveness dictated that the organization avoid overt challenges to the racial status quo. As Vivion Brewer later recalled, “We could afford no hint of being an integration group if we were going to win any election in the hysterical atmosphere which our governor knew so well how to foment.” Thus Velma Powell was forced to resign her new post as secretary because of her affiliation with the interracial Arkansas Council on Human Relations. Brewer appointed Dottie Morris as the new secretary, and the next day the WEC released a statement outlining its position: “We stand neither for integration nor against integration. We are not now concerned with this . . . . Our sole aim is to get our four high schools open and our students back in their classes.” Again borrowing a strategy from the anti-lynching campaigns, WEC members hoped to use their position as “impeccably respectable Southern white women” to persuade voters that education and the future of the community were at stake, while avoiding the emotionally charged issue of race relations. Although monthly meetings typically included guest speakers and a general discussion of racial issues, the organization that Terry ultimately founded bore little resemblance to the interracial educational panel she had envisioned. In accordance with the wishes of

---

68Ibid., 7–8.
69Although I think Jacoway overstates the founders’ original commitment to social justice, her description of that first meeting is otherwise very apt. Jacoway, “Taken By Surprise,” 31.
71Ibid., 11.
72Hall, Women’s Campaign against Lynching, 181.
73The WEC Papers include files of secondary material that were part of the WEC library on issues of racial tolerance. Moreover, the minutes of nearly every meeting include references to a speaker or film educating the group on racial issues; boxes 2, 17, 18, 20–23, WEC Papers.
most of its members, the Women’s Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools was formed as an exclusively white organization with the immediate goal of restoring Little Rock’s public high schools.\footnote{Brewer, “Embattled Ladies,” 8.}

The group’s first project was to campaign against the segregationists in the school-closing vote. Governor Faubus had scheduled a special election for September 27, 1958, in which the citizens of Little Rock would vote for or against “integration of all schools within the Little Rock School District.”\footnote{“Once More a Showdown,” Newsweek, October 6, 1958.} Of course the issue was not integration versus segregation, but rather open schools with token desegregation versus closed schools. However, the women of the WEC faced a tremendous challenge in encouraging people to vote “for integration.” With only two weeks to organize and the deck heavily stacked against them, it is not surprising that the women of the WEC lost this first battle by a large margin. However, during this campaign the WEC adopted the goals and strategies that would guide it throughout the school crisis.

During the first days of the group’s existence, the WEC had begun devising an effective election strategy. They rented office space downtown and relentlessly pursued publicity. Media exposure was essential to refute the false charges of the Citizens’ Council and to explain to voters that a vote for integration was really just a vote for open schools with token desegregation. They prepared leaflets for distribution door-to-door and planned informational parties at which local attorneys would explain the effects of a vote against integration. Four days before the election, the WEC held its second meeting with more than one-hundred-fifty women in attendance. At that meeting, the women divided up the poll tax books in an attempt to contact every registered voter by phone. Aware of the need to get every supporter to the polls, they also organized an elaborate carpool system.\footnote{Minutes of WEC meeting, September 23, 1958, WEC Papers;}\footnote{Brewer, “Embattled Ladies,” 1–33.}

In the days before the election, the women of the WEC were the only members of the white community to organize in opposition to Faubus.\footnote{The only other white opposition came over the issue of football. Furious at the effect closed schools would have on the football season, citizens had quickly forced the governor to restore football practice at the closed high schools. But no civic leaders organized to protest the effect closed schools would have on education or the economic health of the community.} At the urging of the WEC, several local attorneys bought advertisements in the local papers that criticized Faubus’s actions as unconstitutional and called for a return to law and order. Yet in the repressive local atmosphere,
organizers had difficulty mustering support for even this measured statement. One attorney who signed the ad and spoke at a few of the WEC’s informational parties lost twelve major clients as a result.78

After a televised speech by the governor, the WEC sought equal time but was refused by two of the three local networks. The third agreed to sell the WEC a half-hour segment, but given the atmosphere in the community, the women faced great difficulty finding community leaders who were willing to make public statements. Two local attorneys, a minister, the president of the Central High PTA, and a member of the governor’s Committee on Education finally agreed to speak. This first televised appearance went so well that the WEC purchased additional time on the night before the election. However, this election-eve program was not as successful as the first, primarily because of greater difficulties in finding willing panelists.79

Under these circumstances, the lopsided results of the school-closing election came as no surprise. Nevertheless, the efforts of the WEC in this election laid the groundwork for the segregationists’ defeat a few months later. Moreover, the events of the school-closing campaign suggest some of the ways in which gender dynamics dictated the goals and strategy of the organization. Though they were the first group to organize in opposition to the segregationists, and their actions were instrumental in the eventual moderate victory, the women of the WEC could not replace the silent leadership of the men. Southern white women were responsible for the home. They were expected to care for their husbands and children and participate in church and worthy civic organizations. Politics was not their domain. In fact, WEC leaders were distressed to find that a large number of their female supporters could not even vote in the first school-closing election because their husbands had not paid their poll taxes.80

Although their gender helped protect them from the economic and physical threats that had silenced their husbands, the WEC members were forced to design their strategies in accordance with a male-dominated society. One example of this occurred shortly after the WEC was founded when, as Brewer recalled, “Husbands vetoed night and Sunday work at the office.”81 On another occasion, Marguerite Henry had to obtain “permission from her husband to make a public statement” about the crisis during the WEC’s televised special.82

78Spitzberg, Racial Politics, 87.
80Samuel interview.
82Ibid., 21.
In such a male-dominated society, many of the WEC efforts were necessarily designed to encourage the men of the community to declare their opposition. As one outspoken liberal recalled years later, “If the damned men didn’t have guts enough to do it [oppose the segregationists] then they were going to make them do it.”\(^8^3\) In the aftermath of the school-closing election, the women began with a letter-writing campaign, commending those men who had taken a public stand in favor of law and order and encouraging public officials to open the schools.\(^8^4\) Volunteers met with business leaders to discuss the crisis, and although these men refused to take a public stand, many supported the WEC with anonymous cash donations. Jane Mendel, who was an active fundraiser for the WEC, remarked that of all the donations she solicited, “only two gave me personal checks, and one was my husband.” Though she admitted that money from any source was essential, “what we really needed were their names.”\(^8^5\)

One of the WEC’s major projects was the research and publication of the *Little Rock Report*, an analysis of the effects of the school crisis on the economic health of the city. This project was undertaken specifically to persuade the city’s businessmen to oppose the segregationists. Aware of its own limitations as an all-female organization, the WEC hoped to persuade Little Rock’s male leadership to take a stand against the city’s segregationists. Knowing that appeals to social justice would fail and not motivated by a commitment to racial equality themselves, they sought to convince the men that their economic well-being was at stake.

Raised in a society in which women were subordinate to men, the WEC members also employed time-honored traditions of manipulation to achieve their goals. In a discussion of Terry’s unique effectiveness as leader, Pat House focused particularly on her ability to manipulate traditional male responses in order to get what she wanted for her organization. According to House, when the WEC needed the cooperation of the men for one of its early projects, Terry insisted that they have the men over for dinner, arguing that “southern gentlemen have been taught to be courteous to their hostess, so when you give men food to eat they cannot be impolite to you and they must do a favor in return.”\(^8^6\) Working within the reality of female subordination, the WEC used similar tactics in selecting its researchers for the *Little Rock Report*. In order to elicit maximum cooperation from city businessmen, “we were very careful to select Southern girls, and girls

\(^8^3\) Dunaway interview.
\(^8^4\) Minutes of WEC meeting, October 7, 1958, WEC Papers.
\(^8^5\) Mendel interview.
\(^8^6\) House interview.
who didn’t have their hair dyed blond, and dressed very modestly, and not pushy.”

But in an interesting subversion of gender dynamics, the WEC also organized a SEX committee “composed of beautiful young women who ‘knew how to act dumb and at the same time get the answers that they want’” to encourage businessmen to oppose the segregationists. Similarly, during the first days of the WEC, the leaders “hastily found eight young women who were willing to be publicized as our steering committee,” because Brewer and others believed that younger, more attractive spokeswomen would make their publicity more effective.

Finally, since many of the WEC members were married to prominent businessmen, Irene Samuel encouraged wives to withhold sex from their husbands unless they agreed to take a public stand. Although Samuel made sure that the record showed she was kidding in this statement, Jane Mendel recently said of the WEC’s use of this method of persuasion, “I don’t know how widely used it was, but it was mentioned at meetings, and everyone laughed, but they were more than a little serious.”

From October 1958 to April 1959, as the WEC grew in strength, events in Little Rock continued to worsen. The public high schools remained closed, and the private Raney High School opened its doors to displaced white students in late October. The Arkansas Education Association pledged in early November to preserve the Arkansas public school systems, and in retaliation the Arkansas legislature delayed consideration of the Department of Education budget and ordered all teachers polled as to their opinions on the AEA statement.

That same month, just one week before election day, segregationist school board member Dale Alford announced that he would oppose incumbent congressman Brooks Hays in the general election. Hays had urged moderation throughout the school crisis and had served as an intermediary between Faubus and Eisenhower immediately following Faubus’s mobilization of the National Guard. Alford ran a vicious campaign, accusing Hays of being an integrationist with communist leanings, and, as such, unresponsive to the wishes of his constituents. Neither the minutes of the WEC meetings nor the memoir of WEC president Vivion Brewer details the extent of WEC activities during this week-long campaign. Neverthe-

87 Samuel interview.
88 Spitzberg, Racial Politics, 87.
90 Spitzberg, Racial Politics, 87.
91 Mendel interview.
less, the WEC clearly gained further political experience by supporting Hays in this election, although it was again on the losing side. Despite the fact that he was a write-in candidate and campaigned for only a week, Alford defeated Hays in the general election.

Two weeks after Hays’s defeat, the five moderate school board members bought out Superintendent Blossom’s contract and then resigned out of frustration. Fifteen candidates ran for the six vacant school board positions. A group of segregationists endorsed by the Capital Citizens’ Council was the first to file for candidacy. Several younger business leaders worked behind the scenes to encourage the presidents of six banks to run on a single slate for the six school board positions. Acknowledging the local atmosphere, these businessmen believed that if all of the bankers ran as moderates, then they would not risk reprisals, because the segregationists could not boycott all of the banks. However, farmers in the eastern part of the state threatened to remove their deposits from Little Rock and place them in Memphis if any of the bankers deviated from the racial status quo. Thus, the slate of bank presidents fell apart. The traditional civic leadership had failed yet again to oppose the segregationists. Grainger Williams, vice president of the Chamber of Commerce and husband of an active WEC member, reported the failure to a meeting of the group’s officers. With only twenty-four hours left to organize an opposition slate, Adolphine Terry set to work.

This incident shows once again the limitations that gender placed on the effectiveness of the WEC. Instead of simply running for office themselves, the WEC leaders were forced to convince reluctant men to take a stand. Ted Lamb, owner of a local advertising agency and a liberal, had already agreed to run, but the moderates needed five more brave candidates for their slate. Armed with a list of potential candidates given to her by Williams, Terry began calling Little Rock’s silent civic elite. By the time she reached the last name on the list, she had a total of only four committed candidates. Though Russell Matson was in Fayetteville for a football game, Terry tracked him down there and persuaded him to join the “businessmen’s slate.” He agreed, and, while WEC volunteers worked furiously to obtain enough signatures for the candidates to file, Terry forged Matson’s name to a courthouse document in order to hold his candidacy until he returned from Fayetteville. Thus, with the help of the WEC and with one WEC member as a candidate, the city’s business leaders finally offered some opposition to the extremists.93

93WEC member Margaret Stephens ran for school board position II against segregationist candidate Robert Laster. Laster, a municipal traffic judge, defeated Stephens; Brewer, “Embattled Ladies,” 45.
During this campaign, Billy Rector, a powerful local businessman, quickly became the leading spokesman for the businessmen’s slate. Immediately, he requested that the alliance between the candidates and the WEC be kept secret. The segregationists had successfully labelled the WEC an integrationist organization, and Rector feared that the public support of the WEC would only help the Citizens’ Council. The WEC agreed. Brewer privately endorsed the businessmen’s slate at the December meeting and asked members to volunteer for the campaigns. Although they were careful to minimize the WEC connection, the women employed the same type of ward organization they had used in the school-closing election on behalf of the businessmen’s slate. Meanwhile, Faubus and the segregationist leaders continued their intimidation campaign, charging that the businessmen’s slate was composed of “integrationists.” As Vivion Brewer put it, “Billy Rector’s attempt to counteract this by an announcement that he had given $100 to the Capital Citizens’ Council in 1957 . . . did not cheer us.” On December 6, Little Rock voters elected three members of the businessmen’s slate (Lamb, Matson, and Everett Tucker) and three segregationists to the school board, setting up a stalemate that would climax in a recall election just five months later.

In late November, the state Democratic party sent letters to every principal and superintendent asking them to solicit five-dollar donations from their teachers. The letter also requested that the principals keep “a complete record of these contributions so that a letter of appreciation can be written to each individual donor.” This list of contributors also conveniently allowed Faubus to identify possible opposition from those who refused to contribute. The Arkansas Gazette and the WEC denounced these pressure tactics, but, as usual, they were lone voices. The state legislature passed a bill prohibiting members of the NAACP from public employment and authorized local school districts to abolish public schools to avoid integration. Furthermore, Governor Faubus vetoed a bill that would have required the automatic reopening of Little Rock schools in September.

Early in 1959, though, there was reason for renewed hope regarding the school crisis. On January 15, Grainger Williams, whose wife was an officer in the WEC, took office as the president of the Little Rock Chamber

---

94 Minutes of WEC meeting, December 2, 1958, WEC Papers.
95 Crisis in the South: The Little Rock Story; A Selection of Editorials (Little Rock: Arkansas Gazette, 1959), 99.
97 Arkansas Gazette, November 27, 1958.
of Commerce. Frustrated by the ongoing school crisis and encouraged by his wife to take a public stand, Williams spoke to the cause of public education:

It is my feeling that the time has come for us to evaluate the cost of public education, and the cost of the lack of public education. I would urge that no matter what our personal feelings might be, each of us encourage the reestablishment of all areas of communication so that we may be able to discuss our principles, our feelings, our differences, our problems, without anger or hatred, without fear of reprisal, but with understanding, tolerance, intelligence and respect for others.98

Will Mitchell, a respected local attorney and a moderate, recalled, “There was a gasp of surprise that Williams would dare even mention the topic, but then there was a burst of applause in respect for his courage and position.”99 That an audience of businessmen would gasp in response to such an innocuous statement is testament to the success of the extremists in intimidating the community into silence. Nevertheless, Williams’s statement marked the beginning of the end of segregationist control in Little Rock. Though the Gazette and a few prominent men had opposed the segregationists for months, for the first time the businessmen of the community were becoming involved in the resolution of the crisis.

In the weeks following Williams’s speech, the Chamber polled its members, and 71 percent favored the “reopening of the Little Rock public schools on a controlled, minimal plan of integration.”100 With the support of its membership, the Chamber of Commerce for the first time began to work publicly for a solution to the school crisis. Yet according to Williams, “Even as mild as our statements were in the Chamber, we lost a third of our membership.”101

By early March, the segregationists were beginning to fear a growing moderate coalition. Thus they tried to intimidate the most outspoken moderate organization, the WEC. The city board of directors demanded that the WEC submit a list of its members in accordance with state law. The Bennett Ordinance, as it was commonly known, had been passed in February 1957 as part of a series of anti-integration measures designed to intimidate

98Grainger Williams Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Ottenheimer Library, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.
99Spitzberg, Racial Politics, 105.
100Ibid., 106; Grainger Williams Papers.
101Grainger Williams, interview by author, Little Rock, Arkansas, January 6, 1993.
the opposition. After Brewer denied keeping such records, city officials sent two police officers to secretary Dottie Morris’s house to demand the list.\textsuperscript{102} Having promised to protect the names of their members, however, the WEC officers refused to submit a membership list. They did, however, submit financial statements, a policy statement, a list of executive committee members, and a profile of the organization.\textsuperscript{103} The city board of directors, citing newspaper ads and leaflets in which the organization requested a one dollar membership fee, found this inadequate and threatened to send the officers to jail if they did not comply.\textsuperscript{104} However, as John Pagan has argued, “The prospect of dragging a dozen Southern white ladies to jail in the middle of the night was a bit much for even the most ardent extremists, so the WEC leaders were never prosecuted.”\textsuperscript{105} In this case, the gender and social prominence of the WEC’s membership clearly protected the members and the organization.

In the end, though, it was perhaps in victory that the limitations of gender were most obvious. On May 5, 1959, the ongoing school crisis climaxed in a purge of more than forty city teachers. At a regular meeting of the school board on that day, the annual renewal of teacher contracts was on the agenda. After several hours of stalemate, the three moderate members walked out of the meeting to deny the school board a quorum. The remaining segregationist members continued the meeting and proceeded to fire forty-four teachers and administrators who were known to have been sympathetic to integration. After nearly a year without public high schools and almost two years of school crisis, it was the firing of forty-four teachers that finally rallied Little Rock’s civic elite and led to the defeat of the extremists.

The WEC was, as usual, the first organization in the city to denounce publicly the actions of the school board. The \textit{Arkansas Gazette}

\textsuperscript{102}In recent interviews, Samuel and Morris asserted that there was no membership list at all, and thus they were not lying to the city authorities when they denied keeping such records. Vivion Brewer, in her memoir, wrote not only of having a list, but of keeping it at a different woman’s house each night to protect the identity of the WEC members. It seems likely that Morris and Samuel were correct in asserting that there was no membership list, and that Brewer was talking about the mailing lists that were kept. The difference between a membership list and a mailing list seems to be only semantic, however, as the mailing lists that remain in the WEC archives divided the members into anonymous members, night members, etc. Dottie Morris, interview by author, Little Rock, Arkansas, January 5, 1993; Samuel interview.

\textsuperscript{103}Letter from Mrs. Woodbridge Morris, secretary, to Little Rock city clerk, April 1, 1959 (including enclosures), box 2, file 2, WEC Papers.

\textsuperscript{104}Letter from Letcher Langford to Morris, April 26, 1959, box 2, file 2, WEC Papers.

followed with an editorial that read in part: “Those who have complacently said that things had to get worse in the Little Rock school crisis before they could get better now have another grim occasion on which to ponder whether things are finally bad enough.”\(^{106}\) In contrast to the events of the preceding two years, however, the WEC and the *Gazette* were not the only voices denouncing the segregationists. That night, at an emergency meeting of the PTA at Forest Park School, four hundred parents demanded the recall of the segregationist school board members. The next day, the local chapter of the American Association of University Women called the teacher purge “un-American,” and the executive committee of the Little Rock PTA Council condemned the school board members for “attempting summary dismissal of school personnel without cause.”\(^{107}\) The local chapter of the League of Women Voters and the Little Rock Ministerial Alliance also criticized the firings, as did the Chamber of Commerce. The most important protest, however, began with three young husbands of WEC members and a *Gazette* reporter over coffee.

On May 6, 1959, the day after the teacher purge, Edward Lester, Maurice Mitchell, and Robert Shults met with Gene Fritz of the *Arkansas Gazette* at Brier’s Restaurant. There the four resolved that this latest action by the segregationists should not go unanswered. They were buoyed by the numerous public statements that had already been made in favor of the teachers, especially the statement by the Chamber of Commerce. They each contacted several important local businessmen, and two days later they formed the Committee to Stop This Outrageous Purge (STOP) to recall the segregationist school board members.

It is important to note that not only were three of the four founding members of STOP (Lester, Mitchell, and Shults) married to WEC members, but so were the majority of STOP’s general members.\(^{108}\) Throughout the three-week campaign, the relationship between STOP and the WEC was close, if complicated, and most participants credit the WEC with STOP’s success.\(^{109}\) According to Ed Lester, “STOP could never have been successful if the Women’s Emergency Committee had not been organized and ready to work.”\(^{110}\) Another STOP member put it

\(^{106}\) *Arkansas Gazette*, May 7, 1959.


\(^{108}\) The membership of STOP drew so heavily from the husbands of WEC members that two membership lists were kept— those whose wives were WEC members and those whose wives were not; box 7, file 5, WEC Papers.

\(^{109}\) Dunaway interview; Mitchell interview; Williams interview. Spitzberg, *Racial Politics*, 18, cites other interviews that support this claim.

simply, “We could never have done it without them.”111 The men of STOP directed the recall campaign from above, but it was the women of the WEC who did the work, and it was the WEC’s ward organization that ultimately made the difference on election day.

In the week following the teacher purges, WEC members solicited over nine thousand signatures in support of recalling the segregationist school board members. Meanwhile, the White Citizens’ Council and the Mothers’ League of Central High School organized an opposition group to recall the moderate school board members. They called their organization the Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools (CROSS). The names of the two campaigns reveal much about their respective strategies. CROSS supporters argued that the election was not simply about the teachers, but that the maintenance of segregated schools was at issue. STOP organizers, by contrast, argued that the teacher purge was the only issue. Of course STOP organizers realized that school desegregation was at issue, but they also knew that they would lose if voters believed that the election was a referendum on school integration.

The climate of intimidation fostered by the segregationists throughout the school crisis had not diminished by 1959. Immediately following the formation of STOP, the Capital Citizens’ Council issued a boycott list that included the names of all known STOP supporters. Maurice Mitchell, who had just launched his own law practice, lost a number of clients and regularly received harassing phone calls.112 In such an atmosphere, citizens could not rally in support of integration. Moreover, there is no real evidence to suggest that STOP members favored integration. Like their WEC counterparts, STOP members simply favored reopening the schools, and they were willing to accept token integration to achieve that end. However, the teacher purge allowed STOP to avoid even token integration as an issue. Fairness to the teachers was an issue everyone could fight for. As Grainger Williams later recalled:

A lot of people would work for STOP who wouldn’t work with the WEC because the WEC was associated with getting black children in the schools and the STOP campaign was associated with getting those teachers back their jobs. And the nice thing about the STOP campaign was that it gave some people who couldn’t come out and do anything an opportunity to do some-

111Mitchell interview.
112Ibid.
thing . . . because the cause wasn’t integration. Of course the teachers were being purged because they were integrationist.\(^{113}\)

STOP leaders thus appealed to voters’ sense of fairness and strenuously avoided the issue of integration.

In keeping with this strategy, STOP publicly avoided any association with the WEC, although they were dependent on WEC volunteers and organization. Vivion Brewer bitterly recalled the treatment she and Irene Samuel received at the first full meeting of STOP at the Union National Bank auditorium:

Averted glances as we entered the hall made it very clear that we were personae non gratae. A few of the men whom we knew best hastened to turn their backs to avoid speaking . . . . There followed a discussion of groups they hoped to involve in the campaign . . . . The WEC was conspicuously absent from the list, and Dr. John Samuel made bold to rise and add our name. There was an enormous silence which spoke like thunder.\(^{114}\)

Pat House and Irene Samuel have since disputed this account of the relationship between STOP and the WEC. Both agree that STOP attempted to distance itself publicly from the WEC for political reasons, but they believe Brewer exaggerated the extent of STOP’s actions—and its success in disavowing the WEC.\(^{115}\)

Although participants dispute the significance of STOP’s decision to avoid public association with the WEC, there is considerable evidence that suggests the existence of a gendered division of labor. As one WEC member has noted, the relationship between STOP and the WEC conformed to a societal pattern of male dominance: “Men wanted work done by the women, but didn’t want them to get any of the credit . . . . We wouldn’t put up with that today. We wouldn’t do all that work behind the scenes and then get kicked in the teeth for it, too.”\(^{116}\) Pat House, a WEC officer who worked closely with the STOP leaders during the campaign, described this division of labor as simply a matter of practicality, as most of the women were not employed outside the home and thus had more time to work on the project.\(^{117}\) Jane Mendel has sug-

\(^{113}\) Williams interview.


\(^{115}\) House interview; Murphy interview; Samuel interview.

\(^{116}\) Murphy interview.

\(^{117}\) House interview.
gested, however, that many women simply “didn’t recognize this gender
dynamic. We were so used to doing what our husbands wanted us to do.”

Regardless of how the participants perceived it, a sexual division of
labor did exist. The women of the WEC did most of the actual work with
the direction and financial support of STOP. As a STOP member put it
simply, “The STOP campaign was based on petitions, and the women
were the ones who got out and got those petitions signed.” In addition,
they made handbills, ran newspaper ads, and carried out the plans made
by male leaders. Vivion Brewer described the WEC office as “the center
for hurried, excited men offering advice, directing plans [and] supplying
badly needed equipment . . . . Reporters and photographers filed in and
out, assuming this to be the STOP headquarters, ignoring the WEC
staff.” Yet it was the WEC’s ward organization, assembled during the
earlier campaigns, that mobilized voters for the STOP campaign. Work-
ing around the clock, WEC members and volunteers who came to the
campaign through STOP typed the name, ward, precinct, telephone
number, and address of nearly every registered voter onto an index card.
They then labelled each card “saint,” “salvable,” or “sinner.” STOP and
WEC members as well as those who signed the STOP petition were la-
belled saints. Citizens’ Council members, Mothers’ League members,
and those who had signed the CROSS petition were labelled sinners. All
of the others were labelled salvable. The women then began calling all
of the salvables and saints.

WEC members set up carpools, as they had during the school-clos-
ing election, because in such a close election getting out the vote would
be essential—especially the black vote. They organized a rally in sup-
port of the teachers, and STOP staged an expensive media campaign.
Earlier work done by the WEC researching the positions of judges and
clerks proved invaluable in getting friendly appointments to election
commission vacancies. However, the opposition was also well orga-
nized, and the margin of victory was slim, with high-income white vot-
ers allying with the city’s black voters to defeat the segregationists. Yet
after months of work and an intense three-week campaign, it was the

118 Mendel interview.
119 Mitchell interview.
120 Brewer, “Embattled Ladies,” 126.
121 Interviews with participants, Brewer’s manuscript, and papers in the WEC collec-
tion all attest to the organization of the WEC and the work the women performed; Murphy
interview; Samuel interview; Brewer, “Embattled Ladies,” 125–133; Box 7, WEC Papers;
Spitzberg, Racial Politics, 21–22.
men of STOP who were publicly credited with the election victory. As Vivion Brewer recalled, “It was STOP’s night.”

Following STOP’s victory, the *Arkansas Gazette* editorialized:

Perhaps the best description of Monday’s election is a phrase borrowed from Winston Churchill: “This could be the end of the beginning . . . . [The election demonstrated] that we will not entrust our fortunes to reckless men who seek to dominate our public affairs by character assassination, economic coercion and even physical intimidation . . . . The air is clearer today and the future brighter.

Indeed, the STOP victory and the subsequent appointment of three more moderates to the school board paved the way for the reopening of city high schools in September. STOP disbanded immediately after the election, but STOP leaders, together with WEC leaders, formed the Committee for the Peaceful Operation of the Public Schools, which worked closely with the WEC and business leaders throughout the summer to ensure a peaceful reopening of the schools. Late in July, the school board adopted a pupil placement plan and devised a plan to open the schools three weeks early, which prevented Faubus from calling a special session of the legislature. The WEC researched the opinions of local police officers so that no segregationist officers would be placed on duty around the schools.

On August 12, 1959, the Little Rock public high schools reopened, with three black students enrolled at each of the white high schools. A segregationist mob rallied on the steps of the state capitol and then marched toward Central High, but the police and fire departments turned them away and made several arrests. As Spitzberg has argued, “The events of August 12 confirmed the moderates in their position of influence in the community and finished completely the political power of segregationists in Little Rock.”

For the next five years, the Women’s Emergency Committee continued to oppose Faubus and work in support of public education. WEC leaders

---

122 Brewer, “Embattled Ladies,” 131. Newspapers and magazines across the nation hailed Little Rock’s moderate victory and portrayed STOP leaders as heroes of their community. Few even mentioned the work of the WEC. An article in the *Progressive* listed the WEC with the PTA and “other organizations [that] voiced protests.” A *Time* article omitted any reference to the WEC, but mentioned that “To STOP’s support came an overwhelming majority of Little Rock’s 13,000 member PTA council.” Colbert S. Cartwright, “HOPE Comes to Little Rock,” *Progressive*, August 1959, pp. 7–9; “Counter-Revolution,” *Time*, May 25, 1959, p. 69.


124 Spitzberg, *Racial Politics*, 118.
helped found similar organizations in Atlanta and New Orleans and encouraged city officials to establish a committee to address problems in local race relations. Most of their efforts, however, were directed toward electing moderate candidates and supporting public school legislation. But with the school crisis resolved, the WEC lacked focus, and members who had been drawn together by a common desire to reopen the schools disagreed about the future of the organization. On November 5, 1963, the Women’s Emergency Committee voted itself out of existence. Many of the women who had first become involved in politics through the WEC went on to become leaders in all aspects of civic life. In the tumultuous years to come, they founded organizations to promote public education and civil rights. A few even ran for office. Yet an editorial that ran in honor of the WEC reveals much about the place of these women in their community:

If the men of Arkansas had more self respect, they would bow their heads at the demise of the Women’s Emergency Committee of Little Rock. But if the men of Arkansas had more self respect, the Women’s Emergency Committee would never have had to come into existence in the first place. It was a desperate organization by a handful of ladies who knew not what they should do about it but who were dead certain that the State of Arkansas should not be turned over to racists and allied wreckers. . . . The ladies now pass the seals of leadership back to their conventional custodians.  

Like the author of this editorial, many scholars have attributed the extent of the Little Rock school crisis to the lack of civic leadership.  The men who had, in the postwar decade, attracted new industries, an Air Force base, and new prosperity to Little Rock remained silent throughout the crisis. Segregationists filled the power vacuum left by their inaction. Immediately, the extremists had “established a ‘right opinion’ which could not be violated.” There was no middle ground, and those who opposed Fausbus were socially ostracized, harassed, threatened, and economically destroyed. In this climate, elite southern white women occupied a uniquely powerful position.

Though apparently models of deferential southern womanhood, these women were the only individuals in the community who were independent

126.Bartley, Jacoway, and Spitzberg provide the most extensive analyses of this abdication of civic leadership.
127.Spitzberg, Racial Politics, 95.
enough and prestigious enough to oppose Faubus. As upper-class women who were not employed outside the home, they were hard to intimidate economically. Moreover, their class status guaranteed them access to the civic elite and financial security for their organization. As white women, they were too prominent to harm physically, and, while avoiding any direct challenge to the racial status quo, they had a much more powerful impact on white public opinion than a biracial or black protest movement could have had. Race, class, and gender thus afforded these women a protective status from which to launch the opposition.

Frustrated by the inaction of the men in their community and motivated in part by traditional notions of an upper-class woman’s proper role, the women of the WEC took the first organized stand against the extremists. Yet, as elite southern white women, the WEC members faced unique obstacles. Though largely free from the economic reprisals that had silenced the men of their community, they faced enormous pressure from their husbands. Fearful for their reputations and their businesses, many men refused to allow their wives to associate publicly with the WEC.

Not only did these women have little freedom to act against their husbands’ wishes, they also were in no position to permanently replace the city’s traditional civic leadership. Thus, the WEC’s major goal was always to convince the men of the community to take action. Though the organization and efforts of the WEC were central to the defeat of the segregationists, that victory could never have come without the public support of the city’s male leadership.

In a time of crisis, the women of the WEC were empowered by the very traits that traditionally isolated them from politics. However, just as race, gender and class protected these women from the reprisals that had silenced the rest of the community, these factors also dictated the goals and strategy of the Women’s Emergency Committee and limited its effectiveness.
Copyright of Arkansas Historical Quarterly is the property of Arkansas Historical Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.