

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

SIXTEENTH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 1530 6th Avenue North at 16th Street

Not for publication:

City/Town: Birmingham

Vicinity:

State: Alabama

County: Jefferson

Code: 073

Zip Code: 35203

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: ___

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

Noncontributing

___ buildings

___ sites

___ structures

___ objects

___ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ____ Entered in the National Register
- ____ Determined eligible for the National Register
- ____ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- ____ Removed from the National Register
- ____ Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Religion Sub: Religious facility

Current: Religion Sub: Religious facility

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Romanesque

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Stone

Walls: Brick

Roof: Asphalt

Other: Stained glass windows

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**Summary**

Built between 1909 and 1911, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is an eclectic building with Byzantine and Romanesque characteristics. The church is rectangular in shape and two stories high over a raised basement. Character defining features include the brick, rusticated stone, limestone water table, sills, lintels, and coping, arched loggia, stained glass windows, towers with clay tile roofs, centrally located dome and drum, low relief moldings, louvers, central stair, and ornamental brickwork and corbels. The church is located in an urban setting at the intersection of 16th Street and 6th Avenue North. The setting is characterized by commercial establishments, vacant land, parking lots, a park, and institutions. The church parsonage is located in the adjacent lot west of the church. The St. Paul United Methodist Church is located at the southwest corner of the same block. Paved parking separates the two churches. A funeral home is located at the northwest corner of the block. The area to the north of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church consists of vacant lots. Kelly Ingram Park, a focus of the 1963 protests, is located diagonally across the street southeast of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The contemporary Civil Rights Institute and the A. G. Gaston Motel, where Martin Luther King stayed during the 1963 protests, occupy the block south of the church.

Architect

The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was designed by African-American architect Wallace A. Rayfield. His formal education includes a certificate in architecture from the Pratt Institute in 1898 and a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Columbia University in 1899. Thereafter, Booker T. Washington, then president of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, invited Rayfield to teach architectural drawing at the school. Tuskegee, a well-known black college in Macon County, Alabama, is where a number of African-American architects received their professional education. At Tuskegee, Rayfield worked with Robert R. Taylor, one of the first African Americans to earn an architecture degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Upon his departure in 1907, Washington praised Rayfield in a recommendation, "He was a valuable man His qualifications are such as to fit him for doing any work of an architectural nature that he accepts. I am glad to bear testimony to this effect."¹ After he left Tuskegee, Rayfield opened the first architectural practice in Alabama headed by an African American (outside of Robert Taylor's work at Tuskegee), where he had a successful career in architecture. Much of his work was in designing churches and in 1909 he was designated the official architect for the A.M.E. Zion church in the United States and Africa. In Birmingham he designed many residences and was known as "the architect of Birmingham's African-American middle class."²

Church Exterior

A carved cornerstone is located at the southeast corner of the church at the level of the raised basement. The cornerstone reads: "*Sixteenth St. Baptist Church, Windham Bros. Cont.rs, W.A. Rayfield & Co. Arch.ts.*"

The south and east elevations of the church, including the towers, face the street and are clad in the same, more expensive materials while the west and north elevations of the church are clad in the same, less expensive

¹ National Park Service, *Sixteenth Street Baptist Church*, Historic American Buildings Survey, HABS No. AL 898, Library of Congress (Washington, DC: 1993), 2, quoting from Booker T. Washington, letter to whom it may concern regarding Wallace Rayfield, Tuskegee Institute, 15 August, 1908, in "Wallace A. Rayfield, 1874-1891: A Pioneering African-American Architect in Alabama," *Faith and Form*, Vinson E. McKenzie, (Fall 1993). The HABS documentation reflects the current appearance of the church.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

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materials. The brick at the west and north elevations of the church is dark brown in a common bond pattern with five rows of stretchers between rows of headers. Above the water table, the main walls of the south and east elevations are clad with variegated brown brick in a running bond pattern. At the south and east elevations, the raised basement is clad with rusticated stone and separated from the main walls of the church by a limestone water table. Reminiscent of the Byzantine "cross-in-square" church plan are the cupola on a tiered drum and the two front towers topped by arched pyramidal roofs.

All of the windows of the church are stained glass except for those at the north (rear) side and those at the raised basement level. All of the arched windows have brick lintels and limestone sills. The rectangular windows have limestone sills and lintels. All the windows at the west, south, and east sides of the raised basement are double hung with one-over-one sashes and arranged in pairs. There are sixteen windows at the east elevation of the raised basement. There are fifteen windows at the west elevation of the raised basement and one metal louver.

Roof There are four different roofing conditions on the church. The primary roof over the sanctuary is a low-pitched hipped roof with a ballasted, built-up roofing membrane. The roof of the cupola is covered with composition shingles. Originally, the cupola was covered with Spanish tile. The two towers have curved pyramidal roofs clad in French tiles. The roof over the loggia is a ballasted built-up roof.

Cupola A two-tiered cupola is located at the center of the building. The first tier is a square drum, and the second tier is octagonal. The cupola is wood framed and clad in pressed metal. Windows are positioned in the upper and lower tiers of the cupola, which is topped by an octagonal dome. The first tier includes sixteen windows, four on each side. The fixed, single-sash windows have fifteen lights each. The second tier includes eight windows, one on each side. The single-sash windows have eighteen lights each.

South Elevation

The south (front) elevation is five bays wide, with a tower comprising each end bay. These two corner towers rise three stories over a raised basement and flank a grand central stair leading to a single-story loggia. Three double-hung windows are on this side of the church: two at the southeast tower and one at the southwest tower. One window at the southwest tower was replaced with a door when the elevator was installed. The parapet wall is capped with stone coping.

This elevation contains seven stained glass windows. Six are located at the first story under the loggia. The arched-top, double-hung, stained glass windows occur in groups of three on both sides of the central doorway. Centrally located at the second story above the loggia is the Wales Window, a rectangular stained glass window depicting Christ on the cross. It replaced the original window after the 1963 bombing. Five stained glass arched transom windows are located above the three doorways at the loggia and the two doorways to the loggia roof.

Towers The two towers are identical. The towers are square, one bay wide on each side, and three stories in height above the raised basement. The towers are clad in the same materials as the south and east elevations of the church - rusticated stone at the raised basement level topped by a limestone water table with variegated brick walls in a running bond pattern. Openings are located at each story of the south and west sides of the west tower and the south and east sides of the east tower. The towers have six stained glass windows and four wood louvers. The south side of each tower includes: at the raised basement - paired, one-over-one, double-hung windows; at the first story - paired, arched top, double-hung, stained glass windows; at the second story - a rectangular, single-sash, stained glass window; and at the third story - paired, arched-top, wood louvers. This

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same window pattern occurs in the west side of the west tower and the east side of the east tower.

Decorative brickwork is the same at the south and west sides of the west tower and the south and east sides of the east tower. At the first story of the south elevation of the towers, decorative brickwork consists of alternating rows of raised brick banding extending from the lower part of the wall, just below the windows, up to the spring of the loggia arches. From the brick banding, a raised brick arch extends over the paired, arched, stained glass windows. A single panel of recessed brick topped by corbels offsets the second and third stories of the south elevation of the towers. At the third story of the towers, raised brick arches (hoods), that terminate in a horizontal row of raised brick, accent the arched louver openings. The third story of the east side of the west tower and the west side of the east tower feature a recessed panel of brick with a limestone base and a corbel top.

The tower cornices include dentil molding on all sides. Decorative, low relief moldings (projections of a form on a flat background) are located at the third story of the towers on the south and west side of the west tower and the south and east side of the east tower. The relief moldings flank the arched louver openings and depict a garland wreath tied with a ribbon.

Central stair At the south elevation, a grand, central stair is located between the two towers. From the sidewalk, the central stair leads up to a single-story loggia. The steps are covered with square, glazed, quarry tile. The cheek walls of the stair are rusticated stone capped by a limestone coping. Two metal, pipe handrails divide the central stair into thirds and are in line with the loggia columns.

Loggia Between the two towers, the single-story loggia projects out from the main wall of the sanctuary. The south wall of the loggia includes three bays with arched brick openings topped by a parapet wall with limestone coping. The north wall of the loggia (or south wall of the church) includes three bays with openings. The central bay includes double doors flanked on each side by three grouped windows. Three sets of single-panel, wood, double doors are centered on the west, north, and east walls of the loggia. Two doors, one at the east side and one at the west side, lead to the roof of the loggia. The doors at the loggia are pressed metal with six raised panels each.

The arches of the loggia at the parapet wall are accented by a row of raised brick in a series of seven horizontal rectangles. Above the loggia, the south wall of the church is divided into three bays. The window of the central bay is framed on each side by alternating rows of raised brick depicting columns topped by an arch. A raised brick circle is located in the center of the arch. In the bays to each side of the window, there are raised brick rectangles. Above the window, brick corbels create a raised pediment that spans the width of the wall. A series of brick corbel arches is located at the parapet wall above the pediment.

Entrance vestibules Vestibules at each side of the central stair at street level lead into the basement. The walls of the vestibules are rusticated stone with flat seamed metal roofs. The doors at the vestibules leading to the basement are glass and aluminum. The vestibules are not original to the building.

West and East Elevations

The west and east side elevations are symmetrical in window placement and configuration. The elevations are eight bays deep. The southern-most bay includes the tower, and the northern-most bay includes offices and halls. The remaining bays correspond with the two-story sanctuary and have six double-height arched stained glass windows. The fourth bay from the south projects slightly from the wall forming a transept. The fourth bay and window (at the transept) are double the width of the other bays and windows. Above the stained glass

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window of the transept are three rectangular louvers. The basement doors at the west and east elevations and southwest tower are single-panel metal. There are three single-sash, single-light windows at the west wall of the west entry vestibule and the east wall of the east entry vestibule. The parapet wall at the west elevation is topped by a thin layer of concrete, while that on the east elevation is capped with stone coping.

The east elevation facing 16th Street has decorative brickwork and corbels. Raised brick arches (hoods) accent the arched windows at the second through seventh bays from the south. A rusticated stone and brick buttress separates the sixth and seventh bays. The fourth bay from the south with the large arched window projects from the wall forming a transept. Hanging buttresses at the corners of the bay support the raised brick pediment spanning the bay. At the transept, brick corbel arches are located above the pediment. Brick corbels define the top and bottom of the parapet wall at bays two, three, five, six, seven, and eight from the south. These bays are separated by hanging buttresses, and each bay includes a raised brick rectangle.

The west elevation facing the parsonage has less ornamental brickwork than the south and east elevations. At the west elevation, a brick buttress is located between the sixth and seventh bays from the south. Also at the west elevation, hanging buttresses at the level of the parapet wall separate the bays.

North Elevation

The north (rear) elevation is seven bays wide with fourteen one-over-one, double-hung windows at three levels for the offices and rear halls of the church. Four former window openings have been filled with brick. The rear of the church or the north elevation does not include any decorative brickwork. However, there is a brick chimney located between bays three and four. The parapet wall is topped by a thin layer of concrete.

Church Interior

Basement The basement includes a large, open central room surrounded by smaller, perimeter rooms on the east and west sides. The south side of the central room contains what the church calls the “memorial nook” – an area to commemorate the civil rights movement and the bombing of the church that killed four little girls. The nook consists of three, three-quarter-height walls enclosing the south wall of the church. The north wall of the nook is divided into four bays with single-pane windows in each bay. The nook is accessed through doors at the east and west sides. Displayed inside the nook on the south wall are photographs of the civil rights events that took place in Birmingham in 1963. A raised platform at the north end of the central room functions as a podium for group events.

Church Sanctuary The church sanctuary is two stories in height with a U-shaped balcony that extends around the room’s west, south, and east sides. Round, steel posts support the balcony. The face of the balcony is finished with wood paneling. The pews are arranged in an arch with no center aisle. The altar, baptismal pool, choir seats, and organ are elevated above the main floor level at the north side of the room. The floor of the church is covered in red carpet. The perimeter walls of the sanctuary are painted plaster with wood wainscot. The coffered ceiling is painted with a stained glass window at the center coffer. The church has a seating capacity of approximately 2,000. Offices are located behind the altar area.

Integrity

The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church retains a high level of integrity relative to its period of significance. The building’s original location at the intersection of 16th Street and 6th Avenue North remains unchanged. Some

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change in the overall setting has occurred around the park, such as the introduction of new construction and the addition of commemorative statutes and paved pathways to the park. Despite changes over time, the church maintains its historic relationship with the park and the streets used in the youth marches.

Renovation of the building after the 1963 bombing changed some material and design. The bomb was planted next to the basement window under the metal stairs at the north end of the east side of the church. The stairs were destroyed. Most of the windows located in the last four bays of the church were completely blown out, while parts and pieces were blown out of the rest of the windows. The worst of the destruction was a 7' x 7' hole into the women's lounge that destroyed a paired window, its concrete sill, and the foundation.

After the bombing, renovations were made to the building. On the exterior east wall, window and door openings were either restored or altered. The stairs and landing leading to the second level were not replaced. Instead, the entrance was removed and filled with a double-hung window and bricks. At the actual blast site, the paired double-hung basement windows and foundation were replaced. At the first level of the last bay, a metal door and awning were added where a basement window had been. Church members report that the damaged stained glass windows throughout the church were replicated and replaced to match the originals. In addition, the Wales Window replaced an original window at the front elevation. On the front elevation, metal awnings over the basement entrances that flank the central stair were removed and replaced with the present street level vestibules. Renovations to the basement interior included the addition of perimeter rooms along the east and west walls, and modification of the restrooms. The memorial nook was also added.

In 1991-1992, the church conducted a rehabilitation project. L. L. Samms and Sons Company of Waco, Texas did the work. The first phase of work included the installation of a new heating and air conditioning system. Carpet was added to the sanctuary. An elevator was added to the southwest tower. At the basement level of the southwest tower, a window was removed and replaced with a metal door to provide access to the elevator. The sanctuary pews and the paneling at the choir loft were refinished. Brass railings and a glass barrier were installed along the top of the balcony wall. New, flush paneling was installed on the face of the balcony. It's possible that the original rail and style paneling still exists under the new paneling. The altar was removed and rebuilt. The new altar is semicircular like the previous one, but has stairs on all sides whereas, the previous altar had stairs on the east and west sides. The baptismal pool was replaced. The pipe organ was restored. The beaded board ceiling was covered with sheetrock and painted. In Phase Two, wiring and sound systems were updated, and the memorial nook was renovated. Phase Three consisted of limited exterior repairs, painting, and outside lighting. At some time, glazed quarry tile was applied to the front steps of the church, the interior faces of the cheek walls were painted, and new brick pavers replaced the original sidewalk.

Overall, important character-defining architectural features and spaces of the church have been rehabilitated, maintained, or restored. The rooms and nook that were added to the basement reduced the size of the room's original space, however, the space remains a very large open room. Doors and windows replaced or altered were all secondary entrances and openings. The sanctuary, altar, and balcony are intact as evidenced in historic photographs. Hence, the building's architecture and significant spaces in the sanctuary and the basement retain the feeling, association, design, materials and workmanship associated with the church's use as a headquarters and rallying point for the Birmingham Movement and the September 15, 1963 bombing.

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**Summary Statement of Significance**

The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is closely associated with a pattern of events that defined the modern civil rights movement as it reached the height of its influence in desegregating public accommodations in the mid-1960s. The church served as the staging ground for the youth marches of the 1963 Birmingham Campaign that proved to be one of the most dramatic confrontations with segregation in the nonviolent movement. Later, on a Sunday morning in September of 1963, a dynamite blast devastated the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church killing four school-aged girls. The bombing shocked the world as one of the most egregious events of the civil rights movement and underscored the need for change in race relations. Events in Birmingham spurred the introduction and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In 1963, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) jointly initiated the Birmingham Campaign. As part of the campaign in April and May 1963, leaders of the civil rights movement recruited and trained youths to march against segregation. Thousands of youths participated and went to jail. Birmingham law enforcement reacted violently to the marches using fire hoses and attack dogs to stop the marchers. The media captured the event bringing national and international attention to the civil rights struggle in Birmingham and the United States. Four months later, in reaction to court ordered desegregation, vigilantes bombed the church killing the four girls.

The church is significant under NHL Criterion 1 (events) for the association of this building with the Birmingham Campaign and the church bombing in 1963. The church is also being nominated under NHL Exception 1, for its historical significance in association with the Birmingham Campaign and the church bombing; and under NHL Exception 8, for its extraordinary national importance associated with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

National Civil Rights Background

On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing segregation in public schools. The Court's decision "was the most monumental and far-reaching of the century in civil rights. . . . [and] marked the beginning of the end of Jim Crow segregation."³ In the following years, the civil rights movement transformed from a northern-led national movement to a church-led protest movement in the South. Prior to the *Brown* decision, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a northern organization founded in 1909, served as the primary national organization for civil rights. After *Brown*, indigenous groups in the South sought civil rights themselves and leadership emerged through the black churches. "They modified the institutional framework of the black church and the shared religious culture of the black community to create a new movement culture."⁴ Ultimately, local movements, national organizations, and federal intervention coalesced to attain racial democracy.

The first major church-led movement took place in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger. Black civic groups and churches organized the

³ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 147.

⁴ Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 15.

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Montgomery Improvement Association to lead a bus boycott. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. served as the organization's president. The year-long boycott met with success on November 13, 1956, when the U.S. Supreme Court found Montgomery's segregated bus seating ordinance unconstitutional.⁵ This event showed "that masses of people could force social change by participating in organized disruptive protests."⁶ Spurred by the success of the boycott, movement leaders across the South met in January and February of 1957 to organize the SCLC as a national movement that would "coordinate efforts for racial justice throughout the South."⁷ The organization designated Martin Luther King as its president.

A new phase of the civil rights movement occurred when college students launched the sit-in movement. In February 1960, four black college students conducted a sit-in at the F. W. Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Youths in other southern cities quickly followed suit. Financial and technical help came from established national organizations including the SCLC and in April 1960, student leaders of the sit-in movement formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and, like SCLC, became a major organization of the civil rights movement.

In 1961, the SCLC and SNCC joined together in protests in Albany, Georgia. In October 1961, SNCC opened an office in Albany and joined with the NAACP, civic groups, laborers, and religious organizations in the Albany Movement. The SCLC joined the Albany Movement on December 15, 1961, when Martin Luther King arrived in Albany and spoke at a mass meeting. The next day King, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, King's long time confidant in the civil rights movement;⁸ and Dr. William Anderson, president of the Albany Movement, led a march of more than 250 black activists. They were all arrested. After vowing to stay in jail until an official agreement was reached, King and the other arrested activists were released with their cash bonds waived in exchange for ending demonstrations. No formal statement was signed. By January of 1962, the truce had collapsed, so SNCC launched new demonstrations against segregation. On July 10, King returned to Albany for sentencing, and protest activities such as sit-ins, kneel-ins, marches and mass meetings resumed. King was jailed and later released. On August 10, King left Albany for Atlanta. The Albany campaign ended with a moratorium on protests and a refocusing of efforts on voter registration drives. However with no formal focus, agreement, or achievement, the event was considered a failure.⁹

At the federal level, the Kennedy administration monitored civil rights events, but resisted direct federal intervention. The administration preferred a hands-off approach, referred to as federalism, where cities and states independently resolved their civil rights issues. Prior to 1963, the administration had intervened in two chaotic civil rights events. The first event was in 1961, when Kennedy sent in federal troops to gain admittance for James Meredith as the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi. The mayhem resulted in two deaths.

The second event was the 1961 Freedom Ride when the Kennedy administration first came in conflict with student protesters. Despite the Federal Interstate Commerce Commission's ban on segregation on interstate trains and buses in 1955 and the November 13, 1956 Supreme Court ruling that segregation on buses was illegal, black passengers throughout the south were beaten, thrown out, or jailed when they tried to sit in the front seats. The Freedom Rides challenged segregated interstate transportation in the South. The Freedom

⁵ The case was *Browder v. Gayle*. An earlier boycott had taken place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in June of 1953, black patrons boycotted buses for one week until the city agreed to provide better, but still segregated, seating arrangements.

⁶ Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 229.

⁷ Ralph E. Luker, *Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997), 7.

⁸ Between 1955 and 1968, Abernathy was arrested with King a total of 19 times. Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 7.

⁹ Garrow, *Birmingham*, 44-50.

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Rides began on May 4, 1961, when thirteen black and white men and women took two buses on a trip from Washington D.C. to New Orleans with stops planned along the way. The riders gained national attention when they were brutally attacked by white segregationists in three Alabama cities – Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery. On Mother’s Day, May 14, 1961 at the Birmingham Trailways Station, several Ku Klux Klansmen used iron bars, lead pipes, and chains to assault civil rights activists and innocent bystanders “leaving blood-splattered and crumpled bodies about the station.”¹⁰ The Associated Press carried a photograph of the attack across the world confirming “Birmingham’s national reputation as a racially intolerant city.”¹¹ Martial law was declared in Montgomery, where the riders were met by an angry mob. Attorney General Robert Kennedy intervened to enable safe passage of the Freedom Riders out of Alabama. The situation later concluded after Robert Kennedy required the Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce its restriction on segregated interstate transportation.

In his study on the dynamics of the civil rights movement, sociologist Aldon Morris described how the administration strove to avoid disruptive protest movements after the Freedom Rides by steering efforts of civil rights organizations into voter registration activities. “Indeed,” Morris states, “the Kennedy administration was adamant in opposing wide-scale civil disobedience. President Kennedy thought that low-key voting activities would result in peaceful change and provide additional votes for the Democratic Party.”¹² As historian David Garrow concludes, “The primary involvement of the Kennedy administration in civil rights prior to the spring of 1963 was through events rather than planning, through necessity rather than philosophy, through emergency rather than deliberation.”¹³

Birmingham, Alabama

On June 1, 1956, Alabama Attorney General John Patterson petitioned the circuit court to enjoin the NAACP from operating in the state and won.¹⁴ Fred Shuttlesworth, then membership chairman of the NAACP in Birmingham and pastor of Bethel Baptist Church since March of 1953, initiated change, meeting with other ministers to plan for a proposed organization to continue the fight against discrimination. On June 5th, at a mass meeting at Sardis Baptist Church, some 1,000 attendees approved the new organization, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), and elected Shuttlesworth as its president.¹⁵ Hereafter, Shuttlesworth emerged as the leader of the local civil rights movement and a constant target of violence for vigilantes and segregationists. As historian Glenn Eskew assessed: “The formation of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights in 1956 marked a clear departure from traditional black protest in Birmingham. . . . Though retaining the legalistic strategy of the NAACP, the ACMHR added an urgency evidenced by confrontational protest. The advent of nonviolent direct action radically altered race relations in Birmingham.”¹⁶

As the leader of the ACMHR, Fred Shuttlesworth made several attempts at integration in Birmingham. Despite being met with anger and violence, Shuttlesworth remained undeterred. His home was bombed on Christmas day in 1956. About the bombing Shuttlesworth said, “I was not afraid. I knew I wouldn’t get killed.” He went on to explain how a policeman then advised him to leave town. Shuttlesworth responded that “if God could

¹⁰ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 153-54.

¹² Morris, *Origins*, 234.

¹³ David J. Garrow, ed., *Birmingham, Alabama, 1956-1963: The Black Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989), 238.

¹⁴ Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 92.

¹⁵ Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 94-99.

¹⁶ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 121.

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keep me through this, that the war is on, the battle has just begun, and I'll be around for the duration."¹⁷ In March 1957, Shuttlesworth and his wife entered a white waiting room at the Birmingham train station. They were able to wait and board a train, but a white mob beat a sympathetic white man who had joined them while waiting. In September 1957, when Shuttlesworth and his wife attempted to enroll their children at the all-white Phillips High School, he was beaten with chains, and she was stabbed.¹⁸

In the 1960s, Birmingham had an international reputation as the most segregated big city in the United States plagued by racial turmoil and fanatical resistance to integration, whatever the cost. The U.S. District Court ordered the city to integrate its recreational facilities by January 15, 1962. Rather than integrate, the city commissioners closed the facilities, which included sixty-eight parks, thirty-eight playgrounds, six swimming pools, and four golf courses.¹⁹ Municipal authorities including the police and fire department were in collusion with the Ku Klux Klan and vigilantes leading to an atmosphere of unpunished violence. About fifty "unsolved" dynamite bombings occurred in Birmingham between 1947 and 1965 earning it the nickname Bombingham. As black people moved into what had traditionally been a white area, vigilantes bombed their houses, giving the neighborhood the nickname Dynamite Hill.²⁰ In a 1960 *New York Times* article titled, "Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham," reporter Harrison E. Salisbury described Birmingham: "Every channel of communication, every medium of mutual interest, every reasoned approach, every inch of middle ground has been fragmented by the emotional dynamite of racism, reinforced by the whip, the razor, the gun, the bomb, the torch, the club, the knife, the mob, the police, and many branches of the state's apparatus."²¹ Reflecting the racial atmosphere in Birmingham at his inaugural speech in 1963, Governor George Wallace declared, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!"²²

In Birmingham, the person who personified segregationist sentiments was Eugene "Bull" Connor. Connor was elected Commissioner of Public Safety on June 4, 1957. "Consensus between the political and economic elites for segregation was so pervasive and complete that it 'gave Connor carte blanche to pursue his campaign against segregation's enemies with whatever methods he chose,' dominating the city's three-man commission form of government with his brand of racial politics. His mission and apparent mandate were to enforce strictly all segregation ordinances."²³ In a later film documentary, Howell Raines, then a *New York Times* editor, described Connor as "the manifestation of the perversity upon which segregation depended for its life. Bull was like the walking id of Birmingham, the dark spirit of Birmingham . . . It sounds dramatic, but it was a dramatic time."²⁴

There were three components to Birmingham's white power structure. The first component included "the business and industrial elites, which ran the city's economy." The second included the political elites who were "in charge of maintaining the status quo and the traditional patterns of race relations. The job of the political elites was to ensure that Birmingham's blacks remained exploited economically, politically, and personally." The third component included "the white extremist organizations and the general white population of Birmingham." There was overlap between the organizations, and they worked together to maintain segregation,

¹⁷ Spike Lee, *4 Little Girls* (VHS) (an HBO documentary film in association with 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, director, producer, Spike Lee; producer, Sam Pollard, 1997).

¹⁸ Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Viking, 1987), 181.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁰ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 53, 55. As Eskew writes, "White vigilantes saw their acts of terrorism as a defense of white supremacy," 53.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 150, quoting from *New York Times*, April 12, 1960.

²² Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 183.

²³ Bobby M. Wilson, *Race and Place in Birmingham: The Civil Rights and Neighborhood Movements* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 33.

²⁴ Lee, *4 Little Girls*.

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racial hate, and social superiority.²⁵ In the 1960s, Birmingham's leaders were at "a stalemate over race relations" with business elites divided over desegregation. Due to financial pressures, those financial elites geared toward a service-consumer economy were willing to consider alternatives to the status quo.²⁶

In an effort to ease racial tension in the city, several of Birmingham's leaders suggested changing the city government system from a three-man commission to a mayor-council form. On November 8, 1962, Birmingham citizens voted for the mayor-council form of government. The existing commissioner government challenged the legality of the new government. The lower court upheld the new mayor-council government with the election for mayor and council members scheduled for March. In March of 1963, Albert Boutwell, also a declared segregationist, ran against Bull Connor for mayor and won; Connor came in second. A run-off was held in April and Boutwell prevailed. However, Connor and the other commissioners refused to leave office while they continued to fight the legality of the mayor-council government. In a confusing turn of events, Birmingham had two mayors and two city governments.²⁷

Divisions among blacks also existed in Birmingham. Differences existed between two main components of the black community: the working class members of the ACMHR who espoused direct action, and the upper class members of the traditional Negro leadership class who practiced the ideology of accommodation. Thus, the black community lacked a unified voice. "Skirmishes among the different interest groups during 1962 steadily heightened racial tensions in Birmingham. Biracial negotiations obstructed black militancy without seriously addressing the demands of the movement or compromising segregation." By involving King and the SCLC in the fight for civil rights in Birmingham, "Shuttlesworth sought to break the deadlock through an engagement with the defenders of racial discrimination."²⁸

After the earlier failure of the Albany Movement, "Shuttlesworth recognized the vulnerability of King and the SCLC." In January 1963 at an SCLC meeting, Shuttlesworth invited King and the SCLC "to come to Birmingham to assist the local movement in its struggle for race reform. Although hesitant at first, King realized that he had no alternative but to go to Birmingham and he accepted. Indeed, but for Birmingham, the SCLC might never have known success."²⁹ In a filmed interview at the time, King said, "Birmingham is the symbol of hard core resistance to integration. It is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States."³⁰ On going to Birmingham, civil rights activist and SCLC member Andrew Young said, "It was the last place that I wanted to go with Martin Luther King in 1963 and yet it was the place we had to go."³¹ Historian David Garrow explained, "By 1963, Birmingham stood as the symbolic stronghold of the enemy: segregation. King reasoned that if he generated enough 'creative tension' in Birmingham, then the national press would swing public opinion behind the movement and thus force the Kennedy administration to intervene on behalf of the SCLC."³²

The Birmingham Campaign, April & May, 1963

The Birmingham Campaign began on April 3, 1963 and lasted for five weeks. Along with King and Shuttlesworth, four other principal architects of the Birmingham Campaign were: Wyatt T. Walker, executive

²⁵ Morris, *Origins*, 257-58.

²⁶ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 193.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 193-94.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁰ Lee, *4 Little Girls*.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² David J. Garrow, *Birmingham, Alabama 1956-1963* (New York: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989), 91.

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director of the SCLC; James Bevel, a veteran of the student sit-ins in Nashville who was hired by the SCLC from SNCC; Andrew Young, a member of the SCLC; and Reverend Ralph Abernathy, SCLC secretary. The campaign had two main goals: to have the “white power structure yield to a specific set of demands . . . [and] to score a victory that would serve as a pivotal example to be used by other black communities and would force the federal government to take a firm stand against racial domination.”³³ Demonstrations were to be conducted until white leaders agreed to all of the objectives set forth below.³⁴

1. desegregation of lunch counters and all public facilities in all downtown stores
2. immediate establishment of fair hiring procedures in these stores, including employment of qualified Negroes for white collar jobs
3. dropping of all charges against those who have been arrested during sit-ins
4. establishment of fair hiring practices in all city departments
5. reopening of city parks and playgrounds, all of which are now closed to avoid desegregation
6. establishment of a biracial group to work out a timetable for desegregation of all Birmingham public schools³⁵

The Birmingham Campaign began with a strategy for achieving its objectives. From previous experience, it became apparent that the success of the civil rights movement depended upon dramatic confrontations that would generate publicity and support for the movement eventually bringing about social change. Thus, the campaign became known as Project “C” for confrontation with Birmingham’s white power structure. In order for the movement to succeed, SCLC chose a dual focus for its strategy: economic boycotts to impact the business community and the demonstrations to disrupt normal city operations.³⁶

On the first day of the Birmingham Campaign, Wednesday, April 3, 1963, black integrationists conducted sit-ins at several stores and lunch counters in the city. Calvin Woods described his experience at Brittling’s, saying that white men came up to him as he sat at the lunch counter: “When I looked around, one of them spit in my face. I just looked at him and smiled.” A total of twenty-one integrationists were arrested that day for trespassing after warning. As Eskew describes, “No fanfare announced the Birmingham Campaign . . . just the quiet dignity of African Americans demanding their civil rights.”³⁷

Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy arrived in town that day and set up their headquarters at the A. G. Gaston Motel, the only motel open to African Americans in Birmingham. A. G. Gaston, a local black millionaire, owned the motel. Although he let King and the SCLC use his motel, Gaston and other prominent blacks had reservations about the demonstrations. “In 1963, a large number of Birmingham black leaders shared the view of the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, the White House, and southern racists that the planned demonstrations of SCLC were badly timed.” Their view was that the mayoral election could get Connor out of office. Some white and black leaders thought that race relations might improve with Boutwell in office. “After the runoff in early April the SCLC decided to go ahead with its planned demonstrations, but once again King and his associates encountered widespread opposition among Birmingham’s black leaders. Some leaders contended that the new administration deserved a chance to bring about change without the pressure of demonstrations, especially as the SCLC had not given sufficient notification about the planned demonstrations.”³⁸

³³ Morris, *Origins*, 250-51.

³⁴ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 222.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, quoted in *New York Times*, April 5, 1963, 16.

³⁶ Morris, *Origins*, 257, 258.

³⁷ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 217, 218, 219.

³⁸ Morris, *Origins*, 255.

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On the campaign's first night, a mass meeting was held at St. James Baptist Church. For nearly every night over the next five weeks, the Reverend Ed Gardner, first vice president of the ACMHR, coordinated the mass meetings at various churches for the SCLC-ACMHR, starting them around 6:00 P.M., keeping them on schedule, and ending them after 9:00 P.M. Indicative of the Christian influence on the movement, the mass meetings followed the order of a church service: prayer, hymn, collection, sermon, altar call, and benediction.³⁹ The meetings ended with singing, usually "We Shall Overcome." At the first mass meeting, Shuttlesworth introduced King and urged people to join in the fight. Setting the tone for the Birmingham Campaign, King described the Gandhi inspired strategy of "nonviolent direct action [used] to 'create enough tension to cause attention' to the oppression."⁴⁰ "At those meetings people were recruited and trained in the techniques of the nonviolent protest. They were informed also that demonstrations were needed because all previous methods had failed."⁴¹ On the meetings, King wrote, "Through these meetings we were able to generate the power and depth which finally galvanized the entire Negro community."⁴²

The Birmingham Campaign continued for several days in the same pattern as the first. Every day, protestors conducted sit-ins, boycotts, and pickets with between ten and thirty people getting arrested. Every night, mass meetings would take place. This pattern changed on Saturday, April 6, when Fred Shuttlesworth led the first march of the Birmingham Campaign in protest of being denied a permit for picketing. From the A. G. Gaston Motel the demonstrators marched in pairs along Fifth Avenue toward Woodrow Wilson Park for a prayer meeting. The protestors came up against a barricade erected by Bull Connor at the Federal Building. Police advised the protestors that they were parading without a permit, whereupon they fell to their knees and prayed. The twenty-nine demonstrators were then arrested.⁴³

Sunday April 7, 1963 – First day of violence

On Palm Sunday, April 7, 1963, a determined A. D. King, Martin Luther King's brother, directed marchers out of St. Paul Methodist Church, on 6th Avenue North, toward town singing. Bull Connor and his police officers were stationed along the route. When twenty integrationists were arrested, black spectators, a common presence at the protests, got upset by the interruption in the march. In an effort to control the crowd, Connor called out the police dogs. "Leroy Allen, a non-movement nineteen-year-old black male wrestled with one dog. As Leroy reached into his pocket, the policemen unleashed two more dogs on him. As a knife flashed, a German shepherd tore his arm and police knocked him to the ground and kicked him. Suddenly onlookers, officers, and other dogs rushed over the fallen man." Eventually, the police, dogs, and billy clubs dispersed the crowd. The national media captured and distributed images of the day's violence. Walker recognized the power of appearances and the media's portrayal of events. Thereafter, he "promoted coercive nonviolence in a bid to generate creative tension that the newspapers and television cameras could record as police suppression. Project C was born."⁴⁴

Monday, April 8, 1963 – Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Joins the Campaign

Although eager to put forward a unified front, the black community was highly divided along socioeconomic lines. The traditional Negro leadership was opposed to protests and much of the rest of the black community

³⁹ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 219.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 220-21.

⁴¹ Morris, *Origins*, 263.

⁴² *Ibid.*, quoted in Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1963), 60.

⁴³ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 225.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 227-28.

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“appeared too alienated or disinterested to get involved.”⁴⁵ However, SCLC-ACMHR leaders felt the appearance of a unified black community was crucial to the success of the campaign. On Monday, April 8, King met with two hundred of Birmingham’s black ministers to convince them of the need for demonstrations. King told the ministers: “I’m tired of preachers riding around in big cars, living in fine homes, but not willing to take their part in the fight.” Even though Reverend John H. Cross, pastor of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, disliked Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR, he chose to help the SCLC campaign. Cross did not take a leadership role in the movement, but he made his church available for the campaign’s use.⁴⁶ Sixteenth Street was a large and prominent church, referred to by some as the “silk stockings” church.⁴⁷ Like other upper class blacks, some of its members were reluctant to get behind the movement for fear of jeopardizing their lifestyle or due to philosophical differences. The black middle class and the working class members of ACMHR remained at odds in their approach to segregation in Birmingham. “King stood in the middle,” David Garrow explains, “and used them to the advantage of the SCLC.”⁴⁸ Garrow further explains King’s role in Birmingham:

King failed to convince many members of the black middle class to join the movement, but he succeeded in neutralizing the opposition to the movement within the Negro community. King solicited the help of two black middle-class churches headed by John Cross (16th) and John Thomas Porter (6th Avenue Baptist Church). Cross and Porter joined the movement because of King. . . . Neither of the churches had apparently supported the ACMHR in its struggle before King’s arrival. Therefore King’s appeal, while bolstering the morale of the movement’s activists, achieved tacit approval from the black community’s business leaders and professionals, moral support for the boycott from the overwhelming majority of the city’s black ministers and the assistance of at least two middle class churches. As a whole, Birmingham’s black community recognized King as the leader of the civil rights movement, and they revered him as a charismatic minister, but few people volunteered to support the campaign because of King.⁴⁹

With its size and location, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church became the departure point and “the staging ground for the major mass demonstrations.” Located on Kelly Ingram Park and just blocks from the commercial district and City Hall, the church was also close to SCLC headquarters in the Smith Building and the A. G. Gaston Motel where Reverend King and SCLC staff stayed and often met in planning sessions. Thus, the church could hold a multitude of marchers, was immediately adjacent to march routes, and was close to SCLC operations. Walker later described the church as their “headquarters” for the upcoming marches: “Learning from the Albany experience, I targeted three downtown stores. Since the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was going to be our headquarters, I had timed as to how long it would take a youngster to walk down there, how long it would take an older person, how long it would take a middle-aged person.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 229.

⁴⁷ National Park Service, “*Historic American Building Survey*,” 17.

⁴⁸ Garrow, *Birmingham, Alabama*, 80.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁰ For staging ground quote, Smith Building identification, and downtown map see Marjorie White, *A Walk to Freedom: The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, 1956-1964* (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Historical Society, 1998), 52, 57. Walker quote from Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1995). The Smith Building at 5th Avenue and 17th Street no longer exists. The Gaston Motel is also referred to as a headquarters and meeting place in the campaign. Sources identify the motel as “King’s headquarters” (Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 708), the “movement’s headquarters” (Andrew Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 350), and “SCLC’s headquarters,” (David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 239). Brian Ward, in *Radio in the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*, states that the motel was the “site of many of the strategy meetings among the civil rights leadership in the city” (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 207. (Ward’s book is also a good source for describing the important role radio played in the campaign).

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Friday, April 12

Despite an injunction against demonstrations issued on April 10, 1963, integrationists continued the Birmingham Campaign and associated protests. With the SCLC running out of money, King decided he would march in an effort to raise money and generate awareness and interest. On Good Friday, April 12, 1963, King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth led the march. Eventually, Shuttlesworth left the march to manage the campaign.⁵¹ Forty-six people were arrested that day, including King and Abernathy, who were put in solitary confinement. It was during this period of incarceration that King wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" which "stands in modern literature as a beautifully crafted statement on the obligation of all moral men to support the rights of the oppressed."⁵² The letter was released to the press on April 18. On Saturday, April 20, King and Abernathy were released from jail on bond.

After King and Abernathy were arrested, some white business leaders began to meet with movement leaders, but only in secret meetings early in the day or late at night. "The fact that these businessmen had to meet in secrecy reflects the degree to which the political leaders dominated the business community in issues concerning race relations."⁵³ Negotiations were discussed during the meetings but without resolution.

Movement Flounders

The efforts of the Birmingham Campaign continued, but with over 300 people arrested, human resources, money, involvement, and interest were dwindling. The ACMHR-SCLC staff struggled to keep the movement alive. Concern over a possible collapse of the campaign prompted King to convene the ACMHR-SCLC Central Committee in an emergency meeting on April 29.⁵⁴ King expressed great concern that the press was losing interest and leaving town. Something needed to be done to reinvigorate the campaign and the attention of the press. James Bevel suggested that the campaign enlist school children.⁵⁵ King withheld authorization to use student protesters, but agreed for the staff to hold a student meeting on Thursday.

By that Monday afternoon, staffers had distributed hundreds of leaflets at the black high schools telling students to meet at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church by noon on Thursday heedless of opposition from teachers and parents.⁵⁶ Bevel later described the method and theory of recruiting children:

We started organizing the prom queens of the high schools, the basketball stars, the football stars, to get the influence and power leaders involved. They in turn got all the other students involved. The black community as a whole did not have that kind of cohesion or camaraderie. But the students, they had a community they'd been in since elementary school, so they had bonded quite well. So if one would go to jail, that had a direct effect upon another because they were classmates.⁵⁷

The ACMHR-SCLC staff was successful in recruiting a large group of black high school students interested in demonstrating. For several days, SCLC staff members worked with students to involve them in the movement.

⁵¹ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 241.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵³ Morris, *Origins*, 266.

⁵⁴ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 261.

⁵⁵ Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home, Birmingham, Alabama, The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 359.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 364.

⁵⁷ Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 131.

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They held after school rallies where they conducted workshops to help students understand what they were marching for and why. Later, Wyatt Walker credited James Bevel for the success of the student effort because Bevel had an instinctive understanding of the youths. The children were ideal for the marches because they had cohesion, camaraderie, and a lack of financial obligations that their parents and other adults didn't have.⁵⁸ Andrew Marrisett, an SCLC staffer recruited in Birmingham, spoke about his role in the demonstrations as a workshop leader: "We would meet at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church . . . and have workshops and make sure that students and people that was involved knew what they were marching for, knew why they were marching."⁵⁹

On Wednesday, May 1, 1963, King, Shuttlesworth, Walker, and Abernathy attended the mass meeting at St. Paul's AME church, where William Dothard, arrested twice during protests in the past two months, spoke about the student march. "We are going to break Birmingham wide open," he declared. The movement was "going to give the employees of the Negro schools a holiday tomorrow because the students are going to march." Plans were announced for the schoolchildren to meet at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, listen to Bevel, and then march into the city. Shuttlesworth reassured the parents, "Don't worry about your children. They're in good hands."⁶⁰

Thursday, May 2, Youth Marches Begin

On Thursday, May 2, referred to by Jim Bevel as "D-Day," King was meeting in Room 30 of the Gaston Motel, and "thousands of black students skipped school to attend the meeting at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church." Although Parker High School principal R. C. Johnson locked the gates of the school and with other educators tried to prevent the students from leaving, they were unsuccessful. The students climbed over the gates to join the movement.⁶¹ "While Bevel and other staff members worked the youngsters into a frenzy, King confronted angry members of the black middle class who opposed the use of schoolchildren by the movement."⁶² In a later interview, Abraham Wood, a minister active in the movement stated: "Some of the black parents did have some misgivings about it. I remember some of the criticisms which came up."⁶³ King contemplated on how to proceed. As the deadline for the prayer march came, Bevel and Walker made the decision to proceed even though King was not present. Glenn Eskew in his book, *But for Birmingham*, describes the schoolchildren's jubilant nature upon leaving the church:

As they emerged from under the orange brick arches filling the air with freedom songs, the youngsters raised picket signs, walked down the cement steps, and headed toward town. Orderly groups of ten to fifty students attempted to reach different targets: the city hall or the downtown shopping district. Laughing and clapping, the young activists numbered in the hundreds as they peacefully surrendered to policemen. Linked by walkie-talkie, ACMHR-SCLC members coordinated the campaign. Down on Fourth Avenue at Metropolitan AME Zion Church, students received the signal to march in one direction as a group at the Apostolic Overcoming Holiness (AOH) Church of God on Seventeenth Street took off on another route. Simultaneously ten groups headed to city hall. Hand in hand the boys and girls, some as young as six, announced "We Shall Overcome." From the crowd of cheering onlookers,

⁵⁸ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 262.

⁵⁹ Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: The History of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 147.

⁶⁰ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 263.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 264; See McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, pg. 366 for D-Day reference.

⁶² Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 264.

⁶³ Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 150.

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one woman shouted: “Sing, children, sing!”⁶⁴

As Bull Connor watched the schoolchildren pour out of the churches, he “began to crack.” Initially, policemen loaded the children in squad cars and took them to Southside Jail. Then paddy wagons and school buses arrived to take the children away. The children were overwhelming officials. All the city’s policemen had been ordered to the area between Kelly Ingram Park and downtown, and the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department was put on standby. For the first time in the campaign, Connor utilized firemen by ordering them to block the paths of groups of children. By afternoon, hundreds of juveniles, but only a few adults were arrested, including A. D. King. The number of those arrested exceeded one thousand. *Newsweek* called it the “children’s crusade.”⁶⁵

That night, the Sixth Avenue Baptist church was packed for the mass meeting, as “two thousand people celebrated the march of the school children that had resuscitated the movement.”⁶⁶ Martin Luther King summarized the day, “I have been inspired and moved today. I have never seen anything like it.”⁶⁷

Friday, May 3

On Friday, May 3, 1963, termed “Double D-Day” by Bevel, tension was high as Bull Connor prepared for another encounter.⁶⁸ He stationed officers at the eastern edge of Kelly Ingram Park and positioned fire trucks at the primary intersections of the area. Barricades and fire hoses were set up. Martin Luther King spoke to the two thousand children assembled at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, “If you take part in the marches today you are going to jail but for a good cause.” At about one o’clock, the church doors opened and students streamed out chanting, “Freedom...freedom...freedom.” Almost seventy teenagers were arrested within the first hour and there was no “apparent end in site.”⁶⁹

Because the jails were full and there was no more space to put anyone, Connor attempted to end the demonstrations by force. Connor ordered the firemen to turn on the hoses. The students, aged thirteen to sixteen, covered their heads and faces with their hands, “and then embraced holding their ground for a few seconds before sprawling across the sidewalk. Those trying to flee were pinned against doorways, and a group leader took the high-powered spray until his shirt was ripped from his body. The marchers who continued to pour out of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church were sent skittering down the gutters.”⁷⁰ “Turning the hoses on a group of teenage girls, the water lifted several of the girls off the ground and over a parked car. One girl received cuts around her eyes and one woman a bloody nose.”⁷¹

Black businessman A. G. Gaston was on the phone with Attorney David Vann as he watched Connor brutally spray the demonstrators with water from his office across the street.⁷² “Gaston ‘was expressing a great deal of resentment about King coming in and messing up things just when we [through the city government] were

⁶⁴ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 264.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, quoted in King from Police Report, May 3, 1963 on ACMHR meeting of May 2.

⁶⁸ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 368.

⁶⁹ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 266, 267.

⁷⁰ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 370-371.

⁷¹ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 268.

⁷² David Vann helped organize the referendum that changed Birmingham’s form of government from a three-member commission to a mayor and nine-member council. Vann served as a special assistant to Birmingham mayor Albert Boutwell under the new city government.

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getting a new start,' Vann recalls. 'And then he said to me, 'But lawyer Vann, they've turned the fire hoses on a black girl. They're rolling that little girl right down the middle of the street. I can't talk to you no more.' Vann would later say that it was then, when Connor's troopers attacked the children, that 'in the twinkling of an eye' the whole black community instantaneously consolidated...behind Dr. King."⁷³ Historian Frye Gaillard noted:

From that moment on, the most powerful black businessman in the city [Gaston] put aside his ambivalence about King and Shuttlesworth and their movement. All of a sudden everything seemed simple. There were only two sides, and everybody had to choose. You could be with the movement and the children in the streets, or you could be with the police commissioner and his dogs, who were suddenly the symbol of everything that was wrong. That was how Gaston saw it, and he was not alone. All across the country, the images flashed across television screens, and the horror and revulsion became an epidemic. It was the lasting legacy of Bull Connor – the greatest blunder in the history of segregation – and he was not finished yet.⁷⁴

With the use of the fire hoses, which were strong enough to rip the bark off of trees, "the cheering observers changed into a wrathful mob" throwing bricks and bottles at firemen. In an effort to control the 1,000 to 1,500 onlookers, Connor brought out his six German Shepherds. "An officer sicced a dog on fifteen-year-old Walter Gadsen for crossing Sixteenth Street. Although not a member of the movement, Gadsen was arrested for parading without a permit. The teeth of a dog tore a gash in twenty-three-year old Milton Payne. Two German Shepherds attacked Henry Lee Shambry, ripping his trousers off and lacerating his leg." More bricks and rocks were thrown at law enforcement. Eventually, the scene ended as officers cleared Kelly Ingram Park, and movement leaders called off the demonstration at 3:00 P.M.⁷⁵

Media images of the violence shocked the nation. Charles Moore, a freelance photographer for *Life*, and Bill Hudson of the Associated Press were two of the out-of-town photographers covering the event. *Life* magazine featured Charles Moore's photograph of the firemen blasting the demonstrators with the caption, "They Fight a Fire That Won't Go Out."⁷⁶ The Saturday *New York Times* featured Bill Hudson's picture of the dog attacking Walter Gadsden spanning three columns with the title, "Dogs and Hoses Repulse Negroes at Birmingham."⁷⁷ The next day, President Kennedy sent Burke Marshall, Assistant Attorney General to Birmingham to try to mediate an agreement. As described by one historian, "The events in Birmingham abruptly transformed the mood of the nation. . . . Bull Connor's police dogs accused the conscience of white America in terms which could no longer be ignored."⁷⁸

Saturday, May 4

On Saturday, May 4, 1963 at noon, Walker sent the activists from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and Seventeenth Street AOH Church in groups of twos without picket signs toward City Hall. One group of students in their teens and as young as ten marched toward city hall with a banner that read "Love God and Thy Neighbor." Connor arrested the schoolchildren. "Cameramen filmed the smiling faces as the youngsters followed policemen down a ramp to a holding pen in the basement of the building." In an effort to stop the

⁷³ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 190.

⁷⁴ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom, Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 148.

⁷⁵ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 268.

⁷⁶ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 373.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁷⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1965), 986.

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protests and children from demonstrating, police arrested all suspicious looking African Americans near city hall and blocked the doors to movement churches.⁷⁹

Unable to leave the churches, the marches stopped, and violence erupted between the police and approximately three thousand bystanders gathered in Kelly Ingram Park. “Without marches, the spectators began taunting police. Angry black men mockingly danced about the elms and waved their arms, daring defendants of white supremacy to sic the dogs and shoot the water.”⁸⁰ Again, the officials turned the hoses on the bystanders and brought out the police dogs. Rebellious bystanders threw bricks, bottles, and shards. Concerned that the spectator violence would damage the nonviolent campaign, James Bevel and Reverend William Greer worked with city officials to stop and disperse the bystanders.

That same day, the President met with an Americans for Democratic Action group, who questioned him on civil rights. The President said that a newspaper picture “of a police dog lunging at a Negro woman . . . made him ‘sick,’ but that at this point there was nothing he could constitutionally do.” While Burke Marshall acted as a mediator in Birmingham, the President, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, “tried to persuade business leaders with branches in Birmingham to use their influence toward mediation. Washington meanwhile refrained from public comment lest it undercut Marshall’s effort.”⁸¹

Sunday, May 5

No arrests occurred on Sunday, May 5 in what came to be known as “Miracle Sunday.” That afternoon, between 1,000 and 3,000 demonstrators led by Charles Billups, pastor and local activist, walked up to the police barricades, knelt, and prayed. Despite orders to turn on the hoses, the firemen did nothing. The usually rowdy spectators were quiet. Looking at the fire hoses, Charles Billups said, “We’re not turning back. We haven’t done anything wrong. All we want is our freedom. . . . Turn on your water, turn loose your dogs, we will stand here till we die.” Eventually, the demonstrators went to Julius Ellsberry Park to pray and sing.⁸²

Meanwhile, Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall mediated between black and white representatives. At a meeting between merchants and black negotiators, A. G. Gaston distributed the movement’s “‘Points for Progress’” which had been modified from the six objectives SCLC formed at the start of the campaign. The Points for Progress included the following demands:

1. desegregation of all store facilities, Lunch Counters, Rest Rooms, Fitting Rooms
2. immediate upgrading of employment opportunities available for Negroes, and the beginning of a non-discriminatory hiring policy
3. merchants request the City Government to drop all charges against those persons arrested while exercising their Constitutionally guaranteed right to peaceful protest
4. merchants request the City Government to establish a Bi-racial Committee to deal with future problems of the community and to develop specific plans for: hiring Negroes to the police force, alleviation of obstacles in voter registration, school desegregation, re-opening all municipal facilities on a desegregated basis, desegregation of movies and hotels.⁸³

⁷⁹ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 271.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 875.

⁸² McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 387.

⁸³ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 274, quoted in “Points of Progress” box 1, file 7, King Papers, King Center, Atlanta.

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Negotiations on the points stalled because the merchants refused to discuss objectives regarding the government.⁸⁴

Monday, May 6

On Monday, May 6, 1963, thousands of students gathered at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. According to one black educator, 87 of 1,339 students attended class that day. Giving the students no small task, a leaflet distributed by movement organizers read: “‘It’s up to you to free our teachers, our parents, yourself, and our country.’” Prepared for being arrested, some students brought their toothbrushes with them. While the students marched they sang, “‘Don’t mind walking, ‘cause I want my freedom now’” or chanted “Freedom.” Again, violence broke out when a black spectator threw a bottle. As police officers moved into the crowd, ACMHR-SCLC leaders ended the march. “The city had arrested so many demonstrators that officials had lost count, but they estimated the number to be around 2,425. Hundreds packed spaces for dozens . . . the movement had ‘filled the jail.’”⁸⁵

Attempts at a compromise continued that day. Burke Marshall met with Martin Luther King at John and Deenie Drew’s house on Dynamite Hill. From Washington, members of the Kennedy administration, including the President and Attorney General, called several of Birmingham’s white elites and encouraged them to negotiate an agreement, all to no avail.⁸⁶

Thousands attended the Monday night mass meeting at St. James Baptist with an overflow crowd sent to two other churches. Concerned parents sought information on the safety and location of their arrested children. As it rained that night, the children who were being kept at open stockyards tried to keep dry.⁸⁷

Tuesday, May 7

Tuesday, May 7, 1963 was a climactic day for the campaign, as pandemonium broke loose. What began as peaceful demonstrations turned into the most intense, chaotic, and dramatic events to date. From Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, several hundred children marched around Kelly Ingram Park arriving back at the church.

The doors of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church suddenly swung wide and out swept hundreds of schoolchildren. They took off in several directions but with a common destination. One group of students approached a policeman and announced, “We want to go to jail.” . . . The spectators lining the sidewalks joined in the surge of black humanity as it overran the traffic barricades and once-formidable firemen and headed, unabated, toward the downtown business district several blocks away. . . . At least three thousand demonstrators milled about on Twentieth and surrounding streets, grinding traffic to a halt for half an hour.⁸⁸

Activists sang, sat-in, picketed, knelt in prayer, and went in and out of segregated stores and offices. “Powerless to act, policemen stood by helplessly as civil order collapsed in the heart of the city in the early afternoon.”⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Ibid., 275.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 275-76.

⁸⁷ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 394.

⁸⁸ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 278.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 278.

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By late afternoon, children were still marching out of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and altercations occurred between officials and black spectators. Spectators threw debris as officials used the fire hoses, billy clubs, and dogs to halt activity and disperse the crowds. Arrests were limited because the jails were full. In an eerie scene, Connor drove up and down Sixteenth Street in his armored car. At the intersections of Kelly Ingram Park, firemen blasted the bystanders. “[O]ne stream picked up a man and sent him tumbling through the park like windblown trash. . . . Out of control, Connor screamed for his men to get the ‘niggers.’ . . . Sheriff Bailey ordered fifty helmeted deputies to assist Connor’s force of one hundred.” Policemen from surrounding areas joined the fight “as did an armed posse of irregulars headed by the Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark. State troopers arrived and squads of officers began to brutally beat back the riotous mob.”⁹⁰

Movement leaders urged the black protesters to leave, while others stayed in Sixteenth Street Baptist Church for safety until the violence subsided. When the demonstration was over, Fred Shuttlesworth left the church. As he walked down the street, firemen sprayed him with the hoses knocking him off his feet and against the church. With chest wounds he was taken to the hospital. Arriving as the ambulance departed, Connor said, “‘I wish they’d carried him away in a hearse.’” In an ironic gesture, firemen pumped out the flooded basement of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.⁹¹ The crowds were gone by dark.

Tuesday’s violence heightened local and national responses to the civil rights campaign. Images of young children marching, being hauled to jail, being terrorized by dogs, and being brutally sprayed with powerful fire hoses had everyone’s attention. Governor Wallace sent in extra highway patrolmen. State public safety director Al Lingo increased the number of state troopers to 600 and armed them with submachine guns, sawed-off shotguns, carbines, and tear gas. Jackie Robinson wired President Kennedy, “The revolution that is taking place in this country cannot be squelched by police dogs or power hoses.” From New York, nineteen rabbis flew to Birmingham on “‘behalf of the human rights and dignity’ of African Americans.” The rabbis “equated silence on segregation with the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust.”⁹²

Demonstrators and negotiators each met that night. At the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church mass meeting, “the Reverend Ed Gardner told concerned parents: ‘Perhaps some mothers don’t want freedom but our children want freedom.’ He assured them, ‘We are near where we are going.’ . . . ” Martin Luther King lectured on nonviolence.”⁹³ Negotiations between whites and blacks (along with Burke Marshall) continued through the night. In the end white businessmen had garnered a general acceptance of the “watered-down demands of the movement.”⁹⁴

Wednesday, May 8

On Wednesday, May 8, the ACMHR-SCLC Central Committee assembled in the Gaston Motel. Lucius Pitts, president of Miles College, who had attended the previous night’s meetings gave his impressions to the others and recommended more compromises. Pitts stated, “It is my candid opinion that if a truce is called with the above beginnings of change and with a definite time schedule on desegregating of all store facilities and upgrading of employment practices that we could be in a good position to effect continual change in the community.” This was a change in tact from the stance of the movement’s demands at the beginning to allow

⁹⁰ Ibid., 281.

⁹¹ Ibid., 282.

⁹² Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 282, 283.

⁹³ Ibid., 283.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 280.

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no compromises. Now, the traditional black middle class was seeking compromise, and looking to Martin Luther King to get it. The group agreed to a moratorium and planned a joint Kennedy-King conference.⁹⁵

Not all were pleased with the decision; least of all Fred Shuttlesworth. When he heard about the moratorium, Shuttlesworth checked himself out of the hospital and headed over to the Gaston Motel to confront King. He was enraged that the demonstrations had been called off without his consultation and prior to reaching a formal agreement. Following a tense stand-off between the two men, the press conference was canceled. King wanted unity and hoped to reach a solution in 24 hours.⁹⁶

Thursday, May 9

Negotiators reached an agreement late Thursday night; one that fell short of its original goals.

Friday, May 10, Agreement Announced

On Friday, May 10, 1963, Fred Shuttlesworth sat between Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy at a table on the patio of the Gaston Motel for a press conference announcing the negotiated truce that ended the Birmingham Campaign. Shuttlesworth read their prepared statement,

Birmingham reached an accord with its conscience today. The acceptance of responsibility by local white and Negro leadership offers an example of a free people uniting to meet and solve their problems. Birmingham may well offer for twentieth-century America an example of progressive race relations, and for all mankind a dawn of a new day, a promise for all men, a day of opportunity and a new sense of freedom for all America.⁹⁷

Shuttlesworth went on to read the compromise made on the demands; ones that provided no immediate relief:

1. Lunch counters, rest rooms, fitting rooms, and drinking fountains would be desegregated within a specified time period (ninety days);
2. Negroes would be hired and upgraded on a nondiscriminatory basis throughout the industrial community of Birmingham;
3. Demonstrators who had been jailed were to be released without having to post bond; and
4. A biracial committee would be established to keep communication open between the white and black communities.⁹⁸

Martin Luther King said that this was, “the moment of a great victory,” for blacks, whites, and the city of Birmingham.⁹⁹ After he spoke, Fred Shuttlesworth collapsed from exhaustion and was taken away in an ambulance.

The peace of the compromise did not last long. On Saturday, May 11, 1963, more than 2,500 Klansmen gathered together. After the meeting, two sites were bombed in an attempt to kill Martin Luther King. At 10:45 P.M., vigilantes bombed the house of his brother, the Reverend A. D. King. At midnight, dynamite exploded at the A. G. Gaston Motel. The bombings triggered violence and riots in black neighborhoods.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 285-86. Miles College was a black school in Birmingham.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 287-88; McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 414-15.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 422.

⁹⁸ Morris, *Origins*, 271.

⁹⁹ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 422.

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Groceries, shops, and black rental property in the area between the motel and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church were burned. A. D. King attempted to telephone the president at the White House, but could only reach the FBI. “You’ve got to do something, the whole town has gone berserk,” he shouted.¹⁰⁰

On Sunday May 12, 1963, President Kennedy sent 3,000 army troops and Burke Marshall back to Birmingham. The rioting stopped, and the situation calmed. A month later on June 11, 1963, in defiance of the federal government, Governor Wallace stood in the door of the University of Alabama and refused to allow Kennedy’s Deputy General to register two black students. That night at 8:00 P.M. President Kennedy gave a televised speech. He said that the nation was founded, “on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened. . . . In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children be treated. . . . A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all . . . race has no place in American life or law.”¹⁰¹ The president announced that he was going to introduce civil rights legislation.

The president was responding to international and national pressure to act on the civil rights struggle. Eskew asserts, “The direct action of the Birmingham Campaign had forced the president to confront race reform. . . . Since the sit-ins in 1960 and the Freedom Rides in 1961, pressure had mounted steadily for some type of federal response to guarantee the rights of all American citizens. As the resistance of George Wallace and Bull Connor countered the increased demands of Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King, Kennedy searched for a sweeping solution to end the repressive police action while forcing the demonstrations off the streets and into the courts. The decision to press for legislation that would outlaw racial discrimination was made during the civil rights struggle in Birmingham.”¹⁰² A year after Birmingham, Burke Marshall recalled in a *New York Times* interview with reporter Anthony Lewis, “Everyone concluded that the president had to act and...not only face this himself, but somehow bring the country to face this problem and resolve it.”¹⁰³

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, a presidential special assistant and speech writer from 1961-64, assessed Kennedy’s speech:

It was a magnificent speech in a week of magnificent speeches. Some criticized Kennedy for not having given it earlier. But the timing was a vindication of his approach to mass education. He had prepared the ground for that speech ever since he became President. His actions, his remarks, the concern for Negro rights and scorn for racism implicit in his personality and bearing – all had subtly entered and transformed national expectations and attitudes. He had quietly created an atmosphere where change, when it came, would seem no longer an upheaval but the inexorable unfolding of the promise of American life. Yet he did not call for change in advance of the moment. If he had made his June speech in February, it would have attracted as little attention as his civil rights messages that month. But Birmingham and the Negroes themselves had given him the nation’s ear.¹⁰⁴

On June 20, 1963, New York Congressman Emanuel Celler introduced the Civil Rights bill in the House of Representatives. The bill prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and proposed equal employment opportunities.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 300-303.

¹⁰¹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 880-81.

¹⁰² Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 310-11.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 311.

¹⁰⁴ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 881.

¹⁰⁵ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 312.

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March on Washington

National civil rights leaders viewed the Birmingham campaign as a success in bringing the civil rights struggle to the forefront of the national conscience.¹⁰⁶ To celebrate, and to keep pressure on the Kennedy administration, they planned the March on Washington. The march took place on August 28, 1963. Over a quarter of a million people participated of whom 60,000 were white. It was, at that time, the largest demonstration for human rights in the history of the nation and was a tremendous success. Many Americans witnessed for the first time black and white people united, marching, and celebrating side by side.¹⁰⁷

Sixteenth Street Church Bombing

Despite the national progress in race relations achieved during the spring and summer, racial turmoil and violence persisted in Birmingham. Court ordered school desegregation triggered more violence in September. In defiance of federal court orders to desegregate public schools, Governor Wallace utilized state troopers to prevent desegregation in four Alabama cities, including Birmingham. On September 9, 1963 the Alabama District Court ordered the governor to desist and issued an injunction against the state troopers preventing school desegregation. Governor Wallace stationed Alabama National Guard troops at the schools. In return, Kennedy federalized the guard enabling some school desegregation in Birmingham. Klan member and white supremacist Robert "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss foreshadowed the violence to come when he told his niece, "You just wait until Sunday morning. And they will beg us to let them segregate."¹⁰⁸

On Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, Ku Klux Klan members bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church killing four little girls - Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. The four girls were in the basement at the back of the church in the women's room preparing for the upcoming service when the bomb went off. Addie Mae's sister, Sarah, lost an eye in the attack. Dozens of others were injured. A *Washington Post* article described the scene: "Dozens of survivors, their faces dripping blood from the glass that flew out of the church's stained glass windows, staggered around the building in a cloud of white dust raised by the explosion. The blast crushed two nearby cars like toys and blew out windows blocks away."¹⁰⁹ Following the bombing, rioting broke out in the city, and two other black youths were killed that day. Burke Marshall immediately went to Birmingham. "When I got to Birmingham," Marshall later stated, "I thought I was in a city under siege."¹¹⁰

Upon learning of the bombing, Martin Luther King wired President Kennedy stating that "unless immediate federal steps are taken, the 'worst racial holocaust this nation has ever seen' would come to pass in Alabama." King also sent a telegram to George Wallace that read, "The blood of our little children is on your hands."¹¹¹ The brutal attack and the deaths of four little girls rocked the nation and drew international attention to the violent struggle for civil rights in Birmingham. A week after the bombing, thousands gathered in New York to protest the Birmingham murders. Many whites were as outraged by the incident as the blacks, and offered

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Quill, 1999), 264.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 199; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 265.

¹⁰⁸ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 319.

¹⁰⁹ "History of Church Fires," www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/churches/photo3.htm, 2004 (accessed December 14). According to the article, the City of Birmingham offered a \$52,000 reward for the arrest of the bombers, and Governor Wallace offered another \$5,000.

¹¹⁰ Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 175.

¹¹¹ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 530, quoted in *Detroit News*, Sept. 16, 1963; *Birmingham News*, Sept. 16, 1963.

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various services to the families. In *Bearing the Cross*, historian David Garrow describes the Sixteenth Street Church bombing as “the greatest human tragedy that had befallen the movement.”¹¹²

A mass funeral was held on September 18 for three of the four victims – Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Addie Collins – with the eulogy given by King. Despite the threat of violence and police patrols, 8,000 people attended the service at Reverend John Porter’s Sixth Avenue Baptist Church. At the funeral, Martin Luther King spoke about life being “as hard as crucible steel.”¹¹³ Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth presided over Carole Robertson’s funeral.

Sympathy for the bombing was expressed worldwide. The people of Wales donated a new stained glass window by Welsh artist John Petts for the balcony of the church. The window depicts Christ as a black man, a crucified figure with his left hand raised in protest and his right hand extended in reconciliation. The window was unveiled on June 6, 1965 bearing the inscription, “You Do It to Me.”

In a memo written in 1965, the FBI named four men as primary suspects, all from Birmingham’s Eastview Klavern: Robert Chambliss, Tommy Blanton, Bobby Frank Cherry, and Herman Cash.¹¹⁴ The FBI took over the case, and the investigation ended in 1968 with no indictments. “The agency [FBI] insisted it was not deliberate, but for many of the veterans of the civil rights movement, who had learned the details of J. Edgar Hoover’s opposition to the cause – his buggings and wiretaps of Martin Luther King, his frenzied conviction that King was a communist – the agency’s bland and dismissive denials had the ring of a lie.” In 1970 a newly elected state attorney general reopened the case. Chambliss was convicted of murder on November 14, 1977.¹¹⁵ It would be decades before the other two suspects were tried for their crimes. Herman Cash had died in 1994, having never been prosecuted for the crime. On May 1, 2001, Thomas Blanton was convicted and sentenced, at the age of 61 to spend the rest of his life in prison.¹¹⁶ Finally in 2002, Bobby Frank Cherry was convicted. His boasts that he was the one who planted the bomb next to the church wall helped convict him.¹¹⁷

Impact of the Birmingham Campaign and Church Bombing

After the Birmingham Campaign, President Kennedy proposed civil rights legislation saying that it should be enacted, ‘not merely for reasons of economic efficiency, world diplomacy and domestic tranquility – but above all because it is right.’” On November 22, 1963, he was assassinated. In President Johnson’s first Congressional address, he called “for passage of the civil rights bill in order to bring alive ‘the dream of equal rights for all Americans whatever their race or color.’” Precisely one year after President Kennedy had proposed legislation, the Bill passed the Senate.¹¹⁸ On July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights bill.

The Birmingham Movement was a milestone in the modern Civil Rights Movement. According to historian Ralph E. Luker, the movement was “the site of nonviolent direct action’s most dramatic confrontation with segregation. . . . For all its terrifying violence, the events of the Birmingham Movement won national support for many of the Civil Rights Movement’s goals and led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.”¹¹⁹

¹¹² Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 291.

¹¹³ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 892.

¹¹⁴ Gaillard, *Cradle*, 331.

¹¹⁵ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 322; McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 574.

¹¹⁶ Gaillard, *Cradle*, 334.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹¹⁸ Garrow, *Birmingham*, 239.

¹¹⁹ Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 26, 27-28.

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Others have written on the significance of the Birmingham Movement from various viewpoints. Arthur Schlesinger notes that the best meeting he attended while at the White House was on June 22, when President Kennedy met with civil rights leaders to discuss the civil rights bill. Schlesinger summarized: "The President agreed that the demonstrations in the streets had brought results; they had made the executive branch act faster and were now forcing Congress to entertain legislation which a few weeks before would have had no chance."¹²⁰

In a law review article, professor of law David B. Oppenheimer commented on the significance of Birmingham to the civil rights movement:

On April 1, 1963, President John F. Kennedy stood firmly opposed to the introduction of a major civil rights bill. He believed that such a law would not pass, and that its debate by Congress could divide and destroy the Democratic party. Seven weeks later, on May 20, 1963, Kennedy announced to his cabinet that he was directing the Department of Justice to draft a civil rights bill. . . . The Act was probably the most important legislation enacted by the United States Congress in the twentieth century. What happened between April 1 and May 20, 1963 that so dramatically changed President Kennedy's assessment of the bill's chances? In a word – Birmingham.¹²¹

Glen Eskew noted:

Just as the children's crusade broke the stalemate in local race relations, so too it broke the stalemate on the national level as it forced the president and Congress to draft legislation that ended legal racial discrimination. . . . [I]n the tumultuous months following Birmingham, as civil rights protests rocked cities across America, it became clear to the Kennedy administration that legislation was necessary to achieve desegregation in the South. Consequently, the victory in Birmingham evolved into the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which opened the system to African Americans even in recalcitrant places such as the steel city.¹²²

Aldon Morris stated:

The Kennedy response [to the Birmingham Campaign] meant that the SCLC successfully created an economic and political crisis in Birmingham. To be sure, the nation was being treated to the spectacle of an American city practicing totalitarian behavior against some of its own citizens. The world, including countries that had long maintained that the United States' rhetoric about democracy was in fact a lie, watched 'American justice' being displayed in Birmingham by television and satellite. At home, many citizens were shocked by the oppression existing in Birmingham and looked to a President whose image epitomized liberalism and fair play. Kennedy had little choice but to act. The impact of the collective power of the masses had reached the White House.¹²³

David Garrow stated that the national attitude toward civil rights after the events in Birmingham impacted Kennedy's resolve toward introducing legislation. Prior to the Birmingham campaign, the country's white

¹²⁰ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 885.

¹²¹ Carroll Van West, "Downtown Birmingham Civil Rights Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Murfreesboro, TN: Center for Historic Preservation, draft 2004, 63-64, quoted in "Kennedy, King, Shuttlesworth & Walker: The Events Leading to the Introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *University of San Francisco Law Review* 645 (1995): 29.

¹²² Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 299.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 271.

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population had shown little attention toward supporting federal intervention. Garrow explains: “It was the national reaction to the Birmingham demonstrations and to George Wallace’s well-publicized attempt to prevent blacks from registering at the University of Alabama, which followed within months of the Birmingham events, that finally led President Kennedy to endorse progressive civil rights legislation.” As President Kennedy stated, ““The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them.””¹²⁴

Several activists, journalists, and officials commented on the impact of the Sixteenth Street bombing in the documentary “4 Little Girls” in which news anchor Walter Kronkite said,

I don’t think the white community really understood the depths of the problem and the depths of the hate of the Klan and its friends in the South, and the North too, for that matter, until that incredibly mean spirited terrible crime of blowing up kids in a Sunday school basement. Up to that time, I think was looked at primarily as an interesting kind of a social development that would come along somehow or other in the generations to come. At that moment that that bomb went off and those four little girls were blasted and buried in the debris of the church, America understood the real nature of the hate that was preventing integration, particularly in the South, but also throughout America. This was the awakening.¹²⁵

Former SCLC Director Wyatt Walker said, “I think that incident, as tragic as it was, convinced white America more deeply than anything else why there had to be a Birmingham confrontation and why there needed to be a Martin Luther King on the issue of race.” Nicholas Katzenbach, former US Attorney general, said, “The bombing of the churches in Birmingham and the death of little girls, was just an act of terrorism in my judgment and those are in many ways the hardest ones to resolve and the cruelest because they don’t care who it is that gets killed as long as there’s some symbolism in what they are doing.” Andrew Young stated, “It just seemed pointless. It wasn’t going to stop the movement. It just took the lives of four innocent, beautiful little girls.”

As Garrow summarized, “The events of Birmingham in 1963 represented a very significant turning point in the civil rights struggle. The demonstrations produced a national awareness of the Southern racial problems that spurred the introduction and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Thus, the impact of the 1963 direct action program was not limited to Birmingham, but was truly national in scope.”¹²⁶

Comparison of Properties

During the 1963 Birmingham campaign, working class black churches played important roles in the event’s mass meetings, training, and marches. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church played an exceptional role, after becoming available five days into the campaign, when it served as the staging ground for the major mass demonstrations due to its size and strategic location. The church was one of two middle class black churches that made space available to the campaign and became departure points for the marches. The second church, Sixth Avenue Baptist, no longer exists.

The 2003 draft “Racial Desegregation of Public Accommodations” National Historic Landmarks theme study recommends the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church be individually evaluated for National Historic Landmark consideration.¹²⁷ The study also considered other properties for further consideration. These include the

¹²⁴ Garrow, *Birmingham*, 229.

¹²⁵ Lee, *4 Little Girls*.

¹²⁶ Garrow, *Birmingham*, 239.

¹²⁷ Matt Garcia, Alton Hornsby, Jr., Steven Lawson, Susan Cianci Salvatore, *Civil Rights in America: Racial Desegregation in*

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Gaston Motel and a potential Birmingham Civil Rights Historic District. Unlike the church, the motel served as a press conference area and a place for strategic planning meetings. A district may contain the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as well as other buildings and public space associated with the 1963 Birmingham Movement.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #AL-898
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage of Property: Under 1 acre (Approximately 11733.84 square feet or .269 acres).

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	16	518341	3709028

Verbal Boundary Description:

The boundary includes Lot 22 of Block 17 at the NW intersection of 6th Avenue North and 16th Street North. The lot is bounded on the west by the church parsonage (Lot 21), to the north by an alley, to the south by 6th Avenue, and to the east by 16th Street.

Boundary Justification:

Lots 22 represents the parcel historically associated with the church.

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

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Telephone: 202-354-2210

DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
February 20, 2006