**Birmingham, Alabama, and the Civil Rights   
Movement in 1963**

*The 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing*

The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was used as a meeting-place for civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Ralph David Abernathy and Fred Shutterworth. Tensions became high when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) became involved in a campaign to register African American to vote in Birmingham.

On Sunday, 15th September, 1963, a white man was seen getting out of a white and turquoise Chevrolet car and placing a box under the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Soon afterwards, at 10.22 a.m., the bomb exploded killing Denise McNair (11), Addie Mae Collins (14), Carole Robertson (14) and Cynthia Wesley (14). The four girls had been attending Sunday school classes at the church. Twenty-three other people were also hurt by the blast.

Civil rights activists blamed George Wallace, the Governor of Alabama, for the killings. Only a week before the bombing he had told the New York Times that to stop integration Alabama needed a "few first-class funerals."

A witness identified Robert Chambliss, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, as the man who placed the bomb under the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. He was arrested and charged with murder and possessing a box of 122 sticks of dynamite without a permit. On 8th October, 1963, Chambliss was found not guilty of murder and received a hundred-dollar fine and a six-month jail sentence for having the dynamite.

The case was unsolved until Bill Baxley was elected attorney general of Alabama. He requested the original Federal Bureau of Investigation files on the case and discovered that the organization had accumulated a great deal of evidence against Chambliss that had not been used in the original trial.

In November, 1977 Chambliss was tried once again for the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. Now aged 73, Chambliss was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. Chambliss died in an Alabama prison on 29th October, 1985.

On 17th May, 2000, the FBI announced that the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing had been carried out by the Ku Klux Klan splinter group, the Cahaba Boys. It was claimed that four men, Robert Chambliss, Herman Cash, Thomas Blanton and Bobby Cherry had been responsible for the crime. Cash was dead but Blanton and Cherry were arrested and Blanton has since been tried and convicted.

[Source](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAC16.htm)

Timothy B. Tyson

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| policedogs.jpg (16918 bytes) **Police use dogs to quell civil unrest in Birmingham, Ala. in May of 1963. Birmingham's police commissioner "Bull" Connor also allowed firehoses to be turned on young civil rights demonstrators. Photo Source:** [**The Seattle Times Online**](http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/mlk/movement/PT/police_dogs_1963.html) |

Haven to the South's most violent Ku Klux Klan chapter, Birmingham was probably the most segregated city in the country. Dozens of unsolved bombings and police killings had terrorized the black community since World War II. Yet King foresaw that "the vulnerability of Birmingham at the cash register would provide the leverage to gain a breakthrough in the toughest city in the South."

Wyatt Tee Walker, who planned the crusade, said that before Birmingham "we had been trying to win the hearts of white Southerners, and that was a mistake, a misjudgement. We realized that you have to hit them in the pocket." Birmingham offered the perfect adversary in Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, who provided dramatic brutality for an international audience. SCLC’s [Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a civil rights organization founded in 1957] goal was to create a political morality play so compelling that the Kennedv administration would be forced to intervene: "The key to everything," King observed, "is federal commitment."

The movement initially found it hard to recruit supporters, with black citizens reluctant and Birmingham police restrained. Slapped with an injunction to cease the demonstrations, King decided to go to jail himself. During his confinement, King penned "Letter from Birmingham Jail," an eloquent critique of "the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice" and a work included in many composition and literature courses.

The breakthrough came when SCLC’s James Bevel organized thousands of black school children to march in Birmingham. Police used school buses to arrest hundreds of children who poured into the streets each day. Lacking jail space, "Bull" Connor used dogs and firehoses to disperse the crowds. Images of vicious dogs and police brutality emblazoned front pages and television screens around the world. As in Montgomery, King grasped the international implications of SCLC’s strategy. The nation was 'battling for the minds and the hearts of men in Asia and Africa," he said, "and they aren't gonna respect the United States of America if she deprives men and women of the basic rights of life because of the color of their skin."

President Kennedy lobbied Birmingham's white business community to reach an agreement. On 10 May local white business leaders consented to desegregate public facilities, but the details of the accord mattered less than the symbolic triumph. Kennedy pledged to preserve this mediated halt to "a spectacle which was seriously damaging the reputation of both Birmingham and the country."

The next day, however, bombs exploded at King's headquarters and at his brother’s home. Violent uprisings followed, as poor

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| hoses.jpg (20342 bytes) **In Birmingham, anti-segregation demonstrators lie on the sidewalk to protect themselves from firemen with high pressure water hoses. One disgusted fireman said later, "We're supposed to fight fires, not people." Photo: ©** [**Charles Moore**](http://www.kodak.com/US/en/corp/features/moore/aboutCharlesMoore.shtml) **Online Source:** [**www.kodak.com**](http://www.kodak.com/US/en/corp/features/moore/pressure.shtml) |

blacks who had little commitment to nonviolence ravaged nine blocks of Birmingham. Rocks and bottles rained on Alabama state troopers who attacked black citizens in the streets. The violence threatened to mar SCLC’s victory but also helped cement White House support for civil rights. President Kennedy feared that black Southerners might become "uncontrollable" if reforms were not negotiated. It was one of the enduring ironies of the civil fights movement that the threat of violence was so critical to the success of nonviolence.

Across the South, the triumph in Birmingham inspired similar campaigns; in a ten-week period, at least 758 racial demonstrations in 186 cities sparked 14,733 arrests. Eager to compete with SCLC, the national NAACP pressed Medgar Evers to launch demonstrations in Jackson, Mississippi, On 11 June President Kennedy made a historic address on national television, describing civil rights as "a moral issue" and endorsing federal civil rights legislation. Later that night, a member of the White Citizen’s Council assassinated Medgar Evers.

Tragedy and triumph marked the summer of 1963. As A. Philip Randolph sought to fulfill his vision of a march on the capitol for jobs, King convinced him to shift the focus to civil rights. Joining with leaders from SCLC, SNCC, the Urban League, and the NAACP, Randolph chose Bayard Rustin as march organizer. Kennedy endorsed the march, hoping to gain support for the pending civil rights bill. On 28 August about 250,000 rallied in the most memorable mass demonstration in American history. King's "I Have a Dream" oration would endure as a historical emblem of nonviolent direct action. Prominent in the crowd was writer James Baldwin, widely regarded as a black spokesperson, especially since the 1962 publication of his influential work, *The Fire Next Time*.Malcolm X’s denunciation of the event as the "farce on Washington" and sharp differences over the censorship of a speech by SNCC’s John Lewis would later seem to foreshadow the fragmentation of the movement. But against the lengthening shadow of political violence and racial division--the dynamite murder of four black children at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham two weeks later and the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22--the march gleamed as the apex of interracial liberalism. Toni Morrison used the bombing of the church as part of the rationale for her characters forming a black vigilante group in *Song of Solomon*.

From *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Copyright © 1997 by Oxford University Press.

News Stories about the Bombing

*UPI News Report of the Birmingham Church Bombing*

Six Dead After Church Bombing   
*Blast Kills Four Children; Riots Follow  
Two Youths Slain; State Reinforces  
Birmingham Police*

United Press International   
September 16, 1963

Birmingham, Sept. 15 -- A bomb hurled from a passing car blasted a crowded Negro church today, killing four girls in their Sunday school classes and triggering outbreaks of violence that left two more persons dead in the streets.

Two Negro youths were killed in outbreaks of shooting seven hours after the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed, and a third was wounded.

As darkness closed over the city hours later, shots crackled sporadically in the Negro sections. Stones smashed into cars driven by whites.

**Five Fires Reported**

Police reported at least five fires in Negro business establishments tonight. A official said some are being set, including one at a mop factory touched off by gasoline thrown on the building. The fires were brought under control and there were no injuries.

Meanwhile, NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins wired President Kennedy that unless the Federal Government offers more than "picayune and piecemeal aid against this type of bestiality" Negroes will "employ such methods as our desperation may dictate in defense of the lives of our people."

Reinforced police units patrolled the city and 500 battle-dressed National Guardsmen stood by at an armory.

City police shot a 16-year-old Negro to death when he refused to heed their commands to halt after they caught him stoning cars. A 13-year-old Negro boy was shot and killed as he rode his bicycle in a suburban area north of the city.

**Police Battle Crowd**

Downtown streets were deserted after dark and police urged white and Negro parents to keep their children off the streets.

Thousands of hysterical Negroes poured into the area around the church this morning and police fought for two hours, firing rifles into the air to control them.

When the crowd broke up, scattered shootings and stonings erupted through the city during the afternoon and tonight.

The Negro youth killed by police was Johnny Robinson, 16. They said he fled down an alley when they caught him stoning cars. They shot him when he refused to halt.

The 13-year-old boy killed outside the city was Virgil Ware. He was shot at about the same time as Robinson.

Shortly after the bombing police broke up a rally of white students protesting the desegregation of three Birmingham schools last week. A motorcade of militant adult segregationists apparently en route to the student rally was disbanded.

Police patrols, augmented by 300 State troopers sent into the city by Gov. George C. Wallace, quickly broke up all gatherings of white and Negroes. Wallace sent the troopers and ordered 500 National Guardsmen to stand by at Birmingham armories.

King arrived in the city tonight and went into a conference with Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, a leader in the civil rights fight in Birmingham.

The City Council held an emergency meeting to discuss safety measures for the city, but rejected proposals for a curfew.

Dozens of persons were injured when the bomb went off in the church, which held 400 Negroes at the time, including 80 children. It was Young Day at the church.

A few hours later, police picked up two white men, questioned them about the bombing and released them.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. wired President Kennedy from Atlanta that he was going to Birmingham to plead with Negroes to "remain non-violent."

But he said that unless "immediate Federal steps are taken" there will be "in Birmingham and Alabama the worst racial holocaust this Nation has ever seen."

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.

Negroes stoned cars in other sections of Birmingham and police exchanged shots with a Negro firing wild shotgun blasts two blocks from the church. It took officers two hours to disperse the screaming, surging crowd of 2,000 Negroes who ran to the church at the sound of the blast.

At least 20 persons were hurt badly enough by the blast to be treated at hospitals. Many more, cut and bruised by flying debris, were treated privately.

(The Associated Press reported that among the injured in subsequent shooting were a white man injured by a Negro. Another white man was wounded by a Negro who attempted to rob him, according to police.)

Mayor Albert Boutwell, tears streaming down his cheeks, announced the city had asked for help.

"It is a tragic event," Boutwell said. "It is just sickening that a few individuals could commit such a horrible atrocity. The occurrence of such a thing has so gravely concerned the public..." His voice broke and he could not go on.

Boutwell and Police Chief Jamie Moore requested the State assistance in a telegram to Wallace.

"While the situation appears to be well under control of federal law enforcement officers at this time, the possibility of further trouble exists," Boutwell and Moore said in their telegram.

President Kennedy, yachting off Newport, R.I., was notified by radio-telephone and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy ordered his chief civil rights troubleshooter, Burke Marshall, to Birmingham. At least 25 FBI agents, including bomb experts from Washington, were being rushed in.

City Police Inspector W.J. Haley said as many as 15 sticks of dynamite must have been used.

"We have talked to witnesses who say they saw a car drive by and then speed away just before the bomb hit," he said.

In Montgomery, Wallace said he had a similar report and said the descriptions of the car's occupants did not make clear their race. But he served notice "on those responsible that every law enforcement agency of this State will be used to apprehend them."

The bombing was the 21st in Birmingham in eight years, and the first to kill. None of the bombings have been solved.

As police struggled to hold back the crowd, the blasted church's pastor, the Rev. John H. Cross, grabbed a megaphone and walked back and forth, telling the crowd: "The police are doing everything they can. Please go home."

"The Lord is our shepherd," he sobbed. "We shall not want."

The only stained glass window in the church that remained in its frame showed Christ leading a group of little children. The face of Christ was blown out.

After the police dispersed the hysterical crowds, workmen with pickaxes went into the wrecked basement of the church. Parts of brightly painted children's furniture were strewn about in one Sunday School room, and blood stained the floors. Chunks of concrete the size of footballs littered the basement.

The bomb apparently went off in an unoccupied basement room and blew down the wall, sending stone and debris flying like shrapnel into a room where children were assembling for closing prayers following Sunday School. Bibles and song books lay shredded and scattered through the church.

In the main sanctuary upstairs, which holds about 500 persons, the pulpit and Bible were covered with pieces of stained glass.

One of the dead girls was decapitated. The coroner's office identified the dead as Denise McNair, 11; Carol Robertson, 14; Cynthia Wesley, 14, and Addie Mae Collins, 10.

As the crowd came outside watched the victims being carried out, one youth broke away and tried to touch one of the blanket-covered forms.

"This is my sister," he cried. "My God, she's dead." Police took the hysterical boy away.

Mamie Grier, superintendent of the Sunday School, said when the bomb went off "people began screaming, almost stampeding" to get outside. The wounded walked around in a daze, she said.

One of the injured taken to a hospital was a white man. Many others cut by flying glass and other debris were not treated at hospitals.

**Fourth in Four Weeks**

It was the fourth bombing in four weeks in Birmingham, and the third since the current school desegregation crisis came to a boil Sept. 4.

Desegregation of schools in Birmingham, Mobile, and Tuskegee was finally brought about last Wednesday when President Kennedy federalized the National Guard. Some of the Guardsmen in Birmingham are still under Federal orders. Wallace said the ones he alerted today were units of the Guard "not now federalized."

The City of Birmingham has offered a $52,000 reward for the arrest of the bombers, and Wallace today offered another $5,000.

**Dr. King Berates Wallace**

But Dr. King wired Wallace that "the blood of four little children ... is on your hands. Your irresponsible and misguided actions have created in Birmingham and Alabama the atmosphere that has induced continued violence and now murder."

Online Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/churches/archives1.htm>

Killer of the Innocents -- Commentary  
*Birmingham World* -- Sept. 18, 1963

Lethal dynamite has made Sunday, September 15, 1963, a Day of Sorrow and Shame in Birmingham, Alabama, the world's chief city of unsolved racial bombings.

Four or more who were attending Sunday School at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on the day of Sorrow and Shame were killed. Their bodies were stacked up on top of each other like bales of hay from the crumbling ruins left by the dynamiting. They were girls. They were children. They were members of the the Negro group. They were victims of cruel madness, the vile bigotry and the deadly hate of unknown persons.

Society in a free country has a solemn responsibility to itself and those who make it up. Free men are bound by an irrevocable civic contract to safeguard the rights, safety, and security of all of its members. This is the basic issue in what is happening in Birmingham. The continued unsolved racial bombings tend to suggest the deterioration of society in this city.

Our neighborhood and church leaders has also the challenge of seeking some lofty, but real self-defense strategy and technique. Patience is a human element and subject to no less frailties. The unsolved bombings have taxed patience and aroused unquenchable fears - fears of police, of the sincerity of public leaders, and of the quality of Negro leadership in this City of Sorrow and Shame.

To the families of the bombed victims, the Birmingham World offers its sympathy. To the pastor and the members of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church we offer a friendly hand. We are angered by the murderous bombing ad shocked by the lack of solution. The Birmingham World has been in the struggle against this kind of insanity, intolerance, disrespect of the House of God, defiance of established law, and disregard of human values since its beginning which the bombings substantiate. We shall try to carry on in the struggle, believing in the divine goodness. We have that overcoming faith in a Higher Being to guide us.

Those who died in the September 15,bombing also died serving the Lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified. This will be an unforgettable day in our nation, in world history,; in the new rebellion of which the Confederate flags seem to symbolize. Yet, if members of the Negro group pour into the churches on Sunday, stream to the voter-registration offices, make their dollars talk freedom, and build up a better leadership, those children might not have died in vain.

The Negro group in Birmingham is unhappy. The Negro group is dissatisfied with the kind of protection they are getting. The Negro group is disturbed when law enforcement remains all-white in Birmingham and in Jefferson County. The Negro group is disappointed with the lack of more help from the Federal Government. This makes Birmingham a city of uneasiness for the Negro group.

Where does Birmingham go from here? The huge bomb reward fund grows bigger, but the bombings solution does not seem to be near. Governor George Wallace says he stands for law and order but he seems to attract the support of the negative forces whose credo inspires less. From the lips of the Governor come assertions which seem to imply defiance of the Supreme Court decision on schools.

Is Birmingham a sick city? We cannot answer for sure. There are tensions because there is fear...there is a feeling of diminishing faith in City Hall to measure up to the responsibility of the kind of municipal leadership needed in his City of Sorrow and Shame. The killers of the innocents have challenged the conscience of decent person everywhere.

Neither the living who were bombed nor those who have not been bombed should give ground to the bombers. The United States government and other law enforcement agents must leave no stone unturned until the perpetrators of this heinous crime are brought to justice

[Online Source](http://www.useekufind.com/peace/a_1963_church_bombing.htm)

"Birmingham Bombing"  
David J. Garrow, *Newsweek*, July 21, 1997

On Sunday, September 15, 1963, a bomb went off at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Four girls in the ladies lounge were instantly killed. Though no other act of terror during the course of the civil rights movement would claim as many lives, the case was never cracked.

In July 1997 the Justice Department and the state of Alabama announced that they had reopened the investigation. This threw fresh light on the murky subculture of truck-stop racists that was at the heart of the South worst moments and on how J. Edgar Hoover's peculiarities may have helped the guilty men go unpunished. By coincidence, Spike Lee has just released a documentary on the church bombing, "4 Little Girls."

The probe is a part of a larger, more important trend: a series of visits back into the deadly days of the movement. First came the 1994 conviction of Byron de la Beckwith for the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers; James Earl ray, Martin Luther King jr.' convicted killer, wants a new trial. The interest in these long-dormant cases is a sign that the New South is still desperate to make sense of the bloody baggage of the Old.

In the Birmingham of the early 1960s, 16th Street Baptist Church was a natural target. King used it as staging ground for his marches against segregation and the integration of the city's schools had just gotten underway. Even before the Sunday-morning blast, Birmingham had become known as "Bomingham" on account of the city's violent KKK chapter, Eastveiw Klavern 13.

It took Alabama 14 years to convict one of the terrorists "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss. Other coconspirators, whose identities were known to the authorities, were left alone. The central problem was the FBI. The then director J. Edgar Hoover disliked King, but the director had other reasons, too. He focused the FBI's resources on sure things, and he doubted that a white Alabama jury would convict the men. And he was reluctant to reveal his informants and questionable wiretapping in court.

According to FBI files, there were at least five potential members of the bombing conspiracy. Whatever the specifics turn out to be, the case is proof positive that William Faulkner had it right: in the south, he once wrote, "the past is never dead. It isn't even past."

[Online Source](http://dekalb.dc.peachnet.edu/~yliu/papr/birmingham.htm)

Jury Convicts Ex-Klansman  
Associated Press, Monday, July 9, 2001

A former Ku Klux Klansman was convicted of murder Tuesday for the 1963 church bombing that killed four black girls, the deadliest single attack during the civil rights movement.

Thomas Blanton Jr., 62, was sentenced to life in prison by the same jury that found him guilty after 2½ hours of deliberations. Before he was led out of the courtroom in handcuffs, the judge asked him if he had any comment.

"I guess the good Lord will settle it on judgment day," Blanton said.

Blanton is the second former Klansman to be convicted of planting the bomb that went off at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on Sept. 15, 1963, a Sunday morning.

The bomb ripped through an exterior wall of the brick church. The bodies of Denise McNair, 11, and Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson, all 14, were found in the downstairs lounge.

Denise's parents, Chris and Maxine McNair, did not comment as they left the courthouse. Chris McNair was hugged by U.S. Attorney Doug Jones, who fought back tears as he told reporters: "We're happy for the families. We're happy for the girls."

The Rev. Abraham Woods, a black minister instrumental in getting the FBI to reopen the case in 1993, said he was delighted with the verdict.

"It makes a statement on how far we've come," said Woods, the local president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

"We're mindful that this verdict will not bring back the lives of the four little girls," added Kweisi Mfume, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in a statement. "(But) justice has finally been served."

Defense attorney John Robbins said the swift verdict showed the jury was caught up in the emotion surrounding the notorious case. He said he would seek a new trial, arguing the case should have been moved out of Birmingham and Blanton's right to a speedy trial had been violated.

He also said the lack of white men on the jury -- eight white women, three black women and one black man returned the verdict -- "absolutely hurt Blanton." The jurors, who were publicly identified only by number, left without comment.

The case is the latest from the turbulent civil rights era to be revived by prosecutors. Byron De La Beckwith was convicted in 1994 of assassinating civil rights leader Medgar Evers in 1963 and former Klan imperial wizard Sam Bowers was convicted three years ago of the 1966 firebomb-killing of an NAACP leader.

But the church bombing was a galvanizing moment of the civil rights movement. Moderates could no longer remain silent and the fight to topple segregation laws gained new momentum.

During closing arguments, Jones told the jury that it was "never too late for justice."

He said Blanton acted in response to months of civil rights demonstrations. The church had become a rallying point for protesters.

"Tom Blanton saw change and didn't like it," Jones said as black-and-white images of the church and the girls dressed in Sunday clothing flashed on video screens in the courtroom.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Posey added: "The defendant didn't care who he killed as long as he killed someone and as long as that person was black."

"These children must not have died in vain," he said. "Don't let the deafening blast of his bomb be what's left ringing in our ears."

Robbins argued that the government had proved only that Blanton was once a foul-mouthed segregationist, not a bomber. He said murky tapes of his client secretly recorded by the FBI were illegally obtained and should not have been admitted as evidence.

The surveillance began after Blanton and other Klansman were identified as suspects within weeks of the bombing.

The FBI planted a hidden microphone in Blanton's apartment in 1964 and taped his conversations with Mitchell Burns, a fellow Klansman-turned-informant.

Posey went over the tapes for jurors, putting transcript excerpts on the video screens. He read from one transcript in which Blanton described himself to Burns as a clean-cut guy: "I like to go shooting, I like to go fishing, I like to go bombing."

Posey also quoted Blanton as saying he was through with women. "I am going to stick to bombing churches," Blanton said, according to Posey.

On one tape, Blanton was heard telling Burns that he would not be caught "when I bomb my next church." On another made in his kitchen, he is heard talking with his wife about a meeting where "we planned the bomb."

"That is a confession out of this man's mouth," said Jones, pointing to Blanton.

The defense argued that the tape made in Blanton's kitchen meant nothing because prosecutors failed to play 26 minutes of previous conversation. "You can't judge a conversation in a vacuum," Robbins said.

Robbins also said Blanton's conversations with Burns were nothing but boasting between "two drunk rednecks." He dismissed Burns and other prosecution witnesses as liars.

Another former Klan member, Robert "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss, was convicted of murder in 1977 and died in prison in  1985.

Another former Klansman, Bobby Frank Cherry, was indicted last year but his trial was delayed after evaluations raised questions about his mental competency. A fourth suspect, Herman Cash, died without being charged.

The Justice Department concluded 20 years ago that former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had blocked prosecution of Klansmen in the bombing. The case was reopened following a 1993 meeting in Birmingham between FBI officials and black ministers, including Woods.

The investigation was not revealed publicly until 1997, when agents went to Texas to talk to Cherry.

[Online Source](http://www.courttv.com/trials/birmingham/0502_ap.html)

About the Girls



**"****The Day The Children Died"  
*People Magazine*  
by Kyle Smith, Gail Cameron Wescott in Birmingham and David Cobb Craig in New York City  
Photographs by Ann States/SABA**

**SUNDAY SCHOOL HAD JUST LET OUT,** and Sarah Collins Cox, then 12, was in the basement with her sister Addie Mae, 14, and Denise McNair, 11, a friend, getting ready to attend a youth service. "I remember Denise asking Addie to tie her belt," Cox, now 46, says in a near whisper, recalling the morning of Sept. 15, 1963. "Addie was tying her sash. Then it happened." A savage explosion of 19 sticks of dynamite stashed under a stairwell ripped through the northeast corner of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. "I couldn't see anymore because my eyes were full of glass - 23 pieces of glass," says Cox. "I didn't know what happened. I just remember calling, 'Addie, Addie.' But there was no answer. I don't remember any pain. I just remember wanting Addie."

That afternoon, while Cox's parents comforted her at the hospital, her older sister Junie, 16, who had survived the bombing unscathed, was taken to the University Hospital morgue to help identify a body. "I looked at the face, and I couldn't tell who it was," she says of the crumpled form she viewed. "Then I saw this little brown shoe - you know, like a loafer - and I recognized it right away."

Addie Mae Collins was one of four girls killed in the blast. Denise McNair; Carole Robertson, 14; and Cynthia Wesley, 14, also died, and another 22 adults and children were injured. Meant to slow the growing civil rights movement in the South, the racist killings, like the notorious murder of activist Medgar Evers in Mississippi three months earlier, instead fueled protests that helped speed passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

"The bombing was a pivotal turning point," says Chris Hamlin, the current pastor of the Sixteenth Street church, whose modest basement memorial to the girls receives 80,000 visitors annually. Birmingham - so rocked by violence in the years leading up to the blast that it became known as Bombingham - "Finally," adds Hamlin, "began to say to itself, 'This is enough!'"

The Justice Department is saying it too. Last month it announced it had reopened the probe into the bombing, delivering the statement a day after the theatrical release of 4 Little Girls, a Spike Lee documentary about the attack that will play in 10 cities before airing on HBO in February.

Robert "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss, a truck driver and longtime Ku Klux Klan member, was convicted of the murders in 1977. Though the FBI always believed had had accomplices, even identifying three suspects, the case against them was marred by conflicting accounts, and Chambliss, who died in prison at age 81 in 1985, refused to the end to cooperate. But new leads that emerged a year ago have made the FBI cautiously hopeful. "You have an old case, and we don't want to raise expectations too high," says Craig Dahle, an FBI spokesman in Birmingham, "but we would not have reopened the case if we did not believe there was a possibility of solving it."

Still, the community holds some hope for final justice (the case was reopened in 1980 and 1988 without arrests) for the  young martyrs. Denise McNair, the daughter of photo shop owner Chris and schoolteacher Maxine, was an inquisitive girl who never understood why she couldn't get a sandwich at the same counter as white children. Carole Robertson, whose father was a band master at an elementary school and whose mother was a librarian, was an avid reader, dancer and clarinet player. Cynthia Wesley, whose parents were also teachers, left the house that day having been admonished by her mother to adjust her slip to be presentable in church.

Addie's family was the poorest of the four. She was one of seven children born to Oscar Collins, a janitor, and Alice, a homemaker. "It was clear that she lacked things," recalls Rev. John Cross, the pastor of the church at the time of the bombing. "But she was a quiet, sweet girl." And, Sarah adds, a budding artist: "She could draw people real good."

It is no surprise that Sarah and her sister Junie have never fully shaken off the horror of that day 34 years ago. "I never smiled, and I never talked about what had happened," says Junie. "Then, back in 1985, someone told me that it was going to destroy me if I didn't start talking about it. So I did. I ended up checking into Brookwood (Medical Center, for psychotherapy) for 37 days."

Junie, like Sarah, now works as a housekeeper. Her employer, plastic surgeon Dr. Peter Bunting, had no notion of her connection to the bombing when he hired her. "I almost fell off my stool when she told me," he says, adding that while Junie holds no grudge, "I think she will always be in a state of healing - which is true of the city too." Junie lives in a spacious one-story home and is a member of a small church congregation called Fellowship West.

"She is queen," says Christopher Williams, "always so positive and outgoing that it's hard for me to imagine the timid, nervous person she says she was for so many years. She told me that she thinks she's finally crossed the bridge from the bombing, and I said, "Maybe you are the bridge."

After the blast, Sarah's face was so drenched in blood, says Cross, that "when they asked me who she was, I had to say I had no idea." In the hospital, Sarah, whose eyes were bandaged, wondered why Addie didn't visit with the rest of the family. Her sister Janie told her that "Addie's back is hurting." Sarah learned of Addie's death when she overheard Janie talking to a nurse. "It hurt real bad," Sarah says. "I just didn't know what I would do without Addie."Sarah spent three months in the hospital, ultimately losing her right eye (she now suffers from glaucoma in her left).

She worked as a short-order cook after high school and was married for three years to a city worker before she took a foundry job, which she held for 16 years. In 1988, she married Leroy Cox, a mechanic, and the two live together in a small, cheerful prefab house; a statue of the Virgin Mary graces its tiny front yard. Sarah's family members say she has always been the peacemaker, even as she struggled to find peace for herself. "In 1989," Sarah recalls, "a prophet called out to me at church and prayed for me to be relieved of my nervousness and fear. It has been better since then. The panic attacks in the middle of the night finally subsided."

What most concerns Sarah and Junie now is the forlorn state of Addie's grave site in a cemetery so close to the Birmingham airport that the roar of jets seem to mock the mourners below. The grass is overgrown, and a dirt road leading there is rutted, but Junie and Sarah can't afford to move their sister. "It is," says Junie, standing over the grave at dusk on a hot Alabama evening, "like an open sore to us."