“We’re Going Too!”
The Children of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement

DISSERTATION

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By
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Abstract

In 1963, the Birmingham, Alabama civil rights movement brought both national and international attention to the plight of southern African Americans. The Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), in partnership with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), utilized nonviolent direct action – marches, sit-ins, jail-ins, and boycotts- to challenge Birmingham’s discriminatory laws and practices. The success of the Birmingham campaign was due in large part to the participation and personal sacrifice of black schoolchildren.

This dissertation examines the local Birmingham movement from the perspective of its most indispensible participants, black youth. It explores what it meant to be a black child coming of age under Jim Crow. It analyzes the recruitment, participation, and impact of Birmingham black youth in the Children’s March, a weeklong protest from May 2 to May 7, 1963, during which over 2,000 children between ages six and eighteen marched through Birmingham’s streets in nonviolent protest against racial inequality. It also looks anew at the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963, which led to the deaths of four black school-aged girls, and the subsequent killing of two black boys. Studying these events offers fresh insight into the lived experiences of black youth under Jim Crow, and the national and international media attention that these
events garnered, which helped compel the federal government to support new civil rights legislation. Despite the children’s invaluable contributions to the Birmingham movement, their personal stories and contributions remain largely overlooked.

The marginalization of black youth is attributable in part to the usual approach to studying the civil rights movement. Over the past four decades, the conventional narrative of the civil rights movement has expanded as it relates to gender, class, space, and time, but much less in terms of age. To more fully incorporate age as a prism through which to better understand the civil rights movement, this project draws on primary and secondary sources related to black children growing up in the era of Jim Crow, as well as oral histories chronicling the experiences of African Americans leading up to and during the height of the civil rights movement.

“We’re Going Too!” The Children of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement” asks: what did it mean to come of age as an African American child in Birmingham, Alabama at the height of the civil rights movement? In order to answer this question effectively, this dissertation investigates the lived conditions, family dynamics, and the long lasting socio-economic impact of Jim Crow on black children in the American South.

Set against a backdrop of Cold War domestic race politics, this dissertation examines the history of black childhood during the Jim Crow era as a way to better understand how black boys and girls came to be active participants in the most important social movement of the twentieth century. It draws heavily on oral histories of men and women who grew up in Birmingham in the civil rights era, which shines much needed light on how black people experienced racial discrimination, including racial violence,
and social protest. The narratives of their experiences and observations provide a unique perspective on black childhood as it relates to the civil rights movement, both locally and nationally.

This research will contribute significantly to an already rich collection of scholarship on the modern civil rights movement by creating a fuller, more complete picture of black life during the Jim Crow era and the struggle for freedom during the civil rights era.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to the African American children of Birmingham 1963. Thank you for your courage, sacrifice, and perseverance.

To my son, Amari Lumumba Ade Bennett, who is the love and light of my life.

For Susie Mae Daniels and Aurea Nieves this dissertation and my Ph.D. belongs just as much to the two of you as it does to me. I love you always.
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Since reading Anne Moody’s memoir, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, in college I have developed a strong interest in the history of black American childhood in the era of Jim Crow. Moody’s story chronicles her life as a black girl growing up in mid twentieth century rural Mississippi. In reading her narrative I learned that like black adults, black youths were also subjected to discriminatory Jim Crow laws and racial violence. Through her narrative I also became interested in learning more about black childhood during the era of Jim Crow particularly during the height of the modern civil rights movement.

More than ten years have passed since my first introduction to *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, and in that time Moody’s childhood memories led me to write an undergraduate thesis on the presence of black youth in the national civil rights movement; to pursue a master’s degree in History, and now, a Ph.D. Reading Moody’s memoir has done more for me than I could have ever imagined while sitting in my introductory course to modern American history. Her narrative changed the trajectory of my life. For all what Moody’s story has done for me, a stranger who is a first generation college student and is soon to earn her Ph.D., I am indebted to her. While I thank Anne Moody for introducing me to the history of African American childhood, I must show my gratitude to those who helped me along my journey to becoming Mrs. Gisell Jeter-Bennett Ph.D.
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Much of the primary source material for this work was due to the contributions of several people. They include: Horace Huntley and John W. McKerley with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Oral History Project, Laura Anderson and the staff at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the Birmingham Public Library and Barnett Wright with The Birmingham News.

There have also been many others who have provided support throughout my academic career: the Department of History at OSU, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, the Frank W. Hale Jr., Black Cultural Center, Lawrence Williamson, Ronald Parker, Dan and Chila Thomas, Nancy Hill-McClary, Richard Selfe, and The Center for

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To Rodney, thank you for being my big brother. Also, thank you for raising three of the funniest, sweetest, talented kids I know! To Xavier, Tyler, and Sydney you three are the reason why I finished my dissertation. I wrote this so that one day you can read it and be empowered. You three are destined for greatness!

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Vita

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Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication ............................................................................................................................. v

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................... vii

Vita ........................................................................................................................................ xii

Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Family Matters ................................................................................................. 24

Chapter 2: The Local Movement ......................................................................................... 64

Chapter 3: Children’s March .............................................................................................. 135

Chapter 4: Age of Innocence ............................................................................................ 196

Chapter 5: Epilogue ........................................................................................................... 250

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................ 258
Introduction

From May 2 through May 7, 1963, more than 1,000 black youths were arrested and jailed for protesting racial discrimination in the downtown streets of Birmingham, Alabama. The march led civil rights organizations, namely the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), along with local Birmingham city officials and members of the John F. Kennedy Administration, to engage in a dialogue that eventually led to the desegregation of “Bombingham,” a title bestowed upon the city in response to the innumerable bombings of African American homes and churches by white racial terrorists.

Almost fifty years later, in April 2013, the Birmingham (Alabama) Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) hosted a three-day symposium entitled, “Lessons of the Birmingham Movement: Youth, Activism and the Struggle for Human Rights.” The conference explored the role of young people in historic and contemporary human rights movements in a global context. As part of the opening activities, the BCRI organized a panel called “Veteran Foot Soldiers and the 1963 Birmingham Campaign.” Participants included Reverends Frank Dukes and Jonathan McPherson Sr., both of whom were alumni of Miles College, a historically black college located six miles west of Birmingham. As students, they organized and led the city’s selective buying campaign in 1963. Also on the panel was Bishop Calvin Woods, Sr., who organized sit-in demonstrations and boycotted the segregated bus system, as well as former Ullman High School students
Arnetta Streeter Gary, Janice Wesley Kelsey, and Sylvester Ricky Powell, who were among the two thousand black schoolchildren who took part in Birmingham’s Children’s March.

The panel took place inside the sanctuary of the historic Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Sitting in the pews were students from Birmingham public high schools and Miles College. They listened as panelists shared memories of, and offered lessons about, growing up black in what many considered to be the most segregated city in America.

Sylvester Ricky Powell was born in the Smithfield district of Birmingham, a part of town that came to be known as “Dynamite Hill,” after the Ku Klux Klan bombed a series of black homes. His neighbors in the middle-class black enclave included Arthur Shores, the only practicing black attorney in the state of Alabama; Angela Davis, who later became a poignant figure in the Black Power Movement; and his best friend Cynthia Wesley, who was tragically killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing on September 15, 1963. Living on Dynamite Hill exposed Powell to the racial violence that terrorized Birmingham’s black citizens. In addition to segregated neighborhoods, Jim Crow practices included segregated public accommodations and facilities. Janice Wesley Kelsey who was in the 11th grade in spring 1963, recalled: “I lived in a segregated society with water fountains, restrooms and restaurants.” Growing up in a Jim Crow society, Kelsey was not always conscious of the disparities between races. “I didn’t get the feeling that separate was not equal until I attended my first civil rights meeting and Reverend James Bevel addressed the teenagers.” She talked about the ways in which James Bevel discussed racial discrimination in a manner that resonated with
schoolchildren. “He told me that the books we used were outdated. I knew they were ragged but I didn’t know white schools had more current books. He pointed out things that stuck in my soul.”¹ The same was said about school supplies and athletic equipment. While attending weekly civil rights meetings held by members of the ACMHR and the SCLC Kelsey decided to join the fight for equality. “On May 2, D-Day, I left school early. I couldn’t wait for lunch. I was singing, shouting, and skipping with a song in my heart that I was gonna go and get my freedom!” She was arrested that day, and she shared her memories of spending several days in the 4-H dormitory at the local fairgrounds, wondering when they would be released to their parents. Then and now, she took great pride in her participation in the movement.²

Part of understanding the “courageous tale” of someone like Janice Wesley Kelsey is learning what motivated her to join a movement traditionally meant for adults. Studying the motivations of these schoolchildren provides insight into who, and what, mattered most to them. For Arnetta Streeter Gary, her inspiration to participate came from her high school civics teacher, Mrs. Odessa Woolfork, who taught her students to be “intelligent about history and the city they lived in.” Heeding her teacher’s advice, Gary attended weekly meetings hosted by the ACMHR and SCLC, and it was at these gatherings that she heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which influenced her to be a part of the movement. “To hear Dr. King put an anointment on me,” she said. “Just as God chose

Moses, David, Solomon and many others, he chose a little black girl from Birmingham, Alabama to step forward. I was that little black girl.” As a panelist she described her involvement in the Children’s March and shared a vivid memory of when she was confronted by a white fireman, who then, with the force of his water hose, sent her and other youth protesters tumbling down the street. Despite having been hosed and arrested, not once but twice, Gary proudly told the audience, “If I had to do it all over again. I would be in that same line waiting to be sent to jail.” Impressed by the sheer courage and determination of her younger self, the students cheered and applauded loudly.3

Next to speak was Sylvester Ricky Powell. Like Kelsey and Gary, he also participated in the Children’s March. He remembered sitting in class and hearing the sounds of youth protesters cheering and singing in the streets as they made their way to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. “I could hear them singing ‘Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around, turn me around, turn me around. Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around walking on to freedom land.’” With the song as his call to action, Powell as well as other students rose from their seats and exited the classroom. “Our teacher turned and faced the chalkboard and pretended as if she didn’t see us leaving.” He then spoke briefly about his time on the “front lines” of demonstrations. “I remember being beaten by the bayonets of white policemen. Being watered down by the hose of the Birmingham Fire Department, and the dogs snarling at us as we were trying to have the rights to go to lunch counters, schools, and to integrate.” After sharing his memories of marching in the streets in Birmingham to join other youth protesters in jail, Powell went on to talk about his late

3 Ibid
childhood friend Cynthia Wesley. His voice quivered as he remembered the events of September 15, 1963 and the mass funeral service for her and two of the other young victims. He noted, “I was a pallbearer at Cynthia’s funeral. I promise you as I reflect even today, the memories are still etched in my mind. Still hurts.” Silence fell over the sanctuary as Powell paused. He admitted that every now and again he asks himself, “What would my friend have become had she lived?” Knowing this question would never be answered, he finds solace in imagining the life she could have had.4

Before the program ended, moderator Barnett Wright, a journalist with the Birmingham News, asked the panelists if they wished to give parting words. Both Ms. Arnetta and Mr. Sylvester encouraged the students in the audience to take time and learn about their history. “Those who fail to learn from history are bound to repeat it,” preached Powell. When the time came for Janice Wesley Kelsey to speak, she reached for the microphone, looked out into the audience and said: “It took a lot to get here. It took water hoses, dog bites, and mangled bodies to get some of the benefits you enjoy. Please appreciate the sacrifices that were made.” Though her words were directed at the young men and women at the symposium, that same heartfelt request could apply to scholars who study African American history, the Birmingham civil rights movement and by extension, the national civil rights movement. Too often the involvement of black youth in the Birmingham campaign of 1963 has been overshadowed by scholarship centered on national organizations and well-known adult leaders.5 Yet, at the center of this narrative

4 Ibid
were black schoolchildren whose courage and sacrifice impacted the struggle for racial equality in Birmingham and beyond.\textsuperscript{6}

The experiences of black schoolchildren in the era of Jim Crow remains marginalized in American history, including the history of the civil rights movement. Over the past two decades, an increasing number of scholars have concerned themselves with the study of childhood and how particular historical events and changes in culture impacted children’s lives. Rather than assume that children replicate adult experiences and perspectives, the field of childhood studies investigates how families, communities, and societies construct normative perspectives about children and engage in childrearing; how social structures of inequality, such as race, class, and gender shape these norms and practices; and how children themselves experience their lives and conceive of their society. According to historian Wilma King, the increase in scholarship on childhood and adolescence has contributed to “the emergence of social history and the complication of lives and events through color, class, gender and race analyses.”\textsuperscript{7}

Since the early 1960s, when the history of children first emerged as a field, much has been published on the experiences of childhood among different segments of the American population. The scholarly interest in the lives of youth was inspired by the Baby Boom during the post-World War II era and the development of youth culture. However, the field of childhood studies has examined a range of historical time periods, from the beginning of British colonization to the present. Philippe Aries’ \textit{Centuries of Childhood}, which was published in 1962, was groundbreaking. His study of European

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Ibid}

\textsuperscript{7} Wilma King. \textit{African American Childhoods}, 4.

Despite recent strides in the history of children, the study of African American children remains sidelined. The marginalization of black children’s experiences among scholars has left countless critically important questions unanswered. Learning the answers to such questions as “What was it like to be a black child living in the South at the height of Jim Crow?” or “How did southern black children come to understand racial discrimination?” would offer scholars a deeper understanding of a generation of African Americans who witnessed and endured great loss, but also, had the courage to stand up and fight for freedom. In studying the marginalization of black children’s experiences scholars would also gain insight into the ways black communities worked to protect and
inspire youth, as well as how the dominant white society, through custom and law, conditioned black youth for life under a system of oppression.

This dissertation seeks to address the following historical questions: How did black children living in Birmingham experience life under Jim Crow, and what were some of the advantages and disadvantages associated with living within segregation? What life experiences and observations compelled thousands of children between ages six and eighteen participate in the Birmingham civil rights movement? What short and long term effects did the movement have on the young demonstrators and those children who did not participate? How did black youths respond to racial violence and domestic terrorism especially in the case of the events on September 15, 1963, which claimed the lives of six black children? Lastly, in what ways did Birmingham and the nation receive the presence of black youth in the battle for racial equality?

Studying black children in Birmingham during the Sixties uncovers the many limitations of standard conceptions of childhood. Contrary to the belief of “a childhood for every child,” black children were in many ways excluded from experiences commonly associated with childhood. The mistreatment of black children corresponded to the overall degradation of African Americans. Few black children, for example, were allowed to express their natural tendencies to inquire about the mysteries of life. They were too occupied with trying to learn the complexities of Jim Crow etiquette. Examining

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8 “Childhood for every child” was a slogan used during the late 1930s and 1940s in protest against child labor in the United States. The aim was to recognize the rights of children as American citizens and to protect them from practices that may “foster racial, religious, or any other form of discrimination.” Rebecca de Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2009), 251, 258.
black childhood in the American South exposes the prevalence of violence and oppression across generations of Africans Americans. Additionally, a focus on black children in the civil rights era necessitates a critical assessment of race within the sociopolitical structure of America during the postwar years.

In 1967, psychologist Dr. Robert Coles observed that within modern history there was “no precedent for children directly involving themselves in an attempt to change the social and political structure of the adult.”

In contrast, the young people who came of age in the years following the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board* school desegregation decision and the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till (an African American boy accused of whistling at a white woman in the crossroads town of Money, Mississippi), became dedicated to and helped revitalize the civil rights movement. Their participation demanded a response from the adult black community, white sympathizers, and most importantly local and national political officials. Furthermore, the exposure of youth activism inspired children and older African Americans to raise their voices against segregation. In short, black children helped shape history, and there is no better example of this than the civil rights movement in Birmingham, Alabama.

The marginalization of black youth is attributable in part to the methods used to examine the civil rights movement. Over the past four decades, the usual narrative of the civil rights movement, which focuses on leaders, organizations, geographic locations, and events of national significance, has expanded as it relates to gender, class, space, and time. Despite these developments, the willingness to assess the movement on the basis of

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age remains minimal. It is important to note that black schoolchildren have not been excluded entirely from the narrative. The stories of Emmett Till, the Little Rock Nine and the desegregation of Central High School, and the four young girls killed in the church bombing in Birmingham are all part of popular civil rights history. However, scholars tend to examine these historic events in which children were primary actors solely to better understand America’s sociopolitical order. Instead of placing historical emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of black children, scholars concern themselves with how these particular events influenced America’s racial politics. As a result, the broader experiences of black children, as well as their voices, remain ignored.

In the years following World War II, interest in the welfare of children was at an all time high, but at the same time, African American children were dismissed as undeserving. On the one hand, as Rebecca de Schweinitz points out, mainstream America “defined African Americans as a child race,” undeserving of enfranchisement and lacking the ability to achieve social and economic autonomy. On the other hand, black children were denied the “rights of childhood” and did not receive the same protections as their white counterparts. Jim Crow laws and etiquette made it difficult for black men and women, adults and children, to contest their denial of civil rights and racial inequalities more broadly without consequence.

This study, however, foregrounds the lived experience of black youth in the segregated South, and explores how this experience led them to challenge the denial of citizenship rights for the entire African American community. In doing so, they modeled

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10 de Schweinitz. If We Could Change the World, 2.
how children can become politically autonomous subjects. In other words, the black children were not just protesting their right to a childhood but also claiming their ability to assert their political rights as full citizens, regardless of their age.

There are three types of historical scholarship on black children. The first is personal narratives, which recapture historical moments through a lens that is too narrow for multiple interpretations. The second is oral histories that provide first-hand accounts of particular events, but often lack critical analysis. And the third is compilations of essays that analyze themes in American history and question how particular events may have impacted or changed the lives of black children. Unfortunately, this approach tends to place more emphasis on particular events than on the personal experiences of the children. With the exception of Frederick Douglass’ autobiography and Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, both of which recall childhoods under enslavement in the nineteenth century, and the personal narratives of twentieth century southern youth activists Anne Moody, Melba Patillo-Beales, Sheyann Webb, Rachel West, and Carolyn Maull McKinstry, there is a dearth of scholarship on the lives of black children.¹¹ Ellen Levine, Wilma King, Rebecca de Schweinitz, and Horace Huntley and John W. McKerley are among the scholars who have responded with intriguing studies of black youth and the modern civil rights movement.

Levine’s *Freedom’s Children* highlights the role of black youth who came of age in the American South during the 1950s and 1960s, and in doing so challenges the way scholars frame the civil rights movement. First-hand accounts from black children reveal

insight into how different segments of the black population—schoolage boys and girls—experienced and remembered the civil rights movement. In *African American Childhoods*, King posits that there is insufficient historical perspective and representation of black children within American history.\(^\text{12}\) In her chapter on the “Emmett Till Generation,” she interrogates reasons why civil rights organizations and leaders changed their views on the use of children in massive demonstrations against Jim Crow. de Schweinitz’s *If We Could Change the World*, like King’s *African American Childhood*, connects the experience of youth participants within the larger black freedom struggle. She also argues that the domestic-centered political ideology of the cold war years “encouraged but also shapes and ultimately limited, support for African American civil rights” and consequently the lives of black youth.\(^\text{13}\) Given the complexities of America’s “professed democratic values” and the harsh realities of racism on the home front, America’s race politics became international news.\(^\text{14}\) This gave African American civil rights organizations and leaders much needed leverage in their effort to draw the federal government into the fight against segregation as an ally. Southern governments were not easily swayed by international criticism, and thus made it difficult for black Americans to challenge racial laws and practices without pressure from the White House. However, youth participation, and involuntary inclusion, in the Birmingham civil rights movement influenced the fight for full citizenship and protection for black Americans.

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid. 5
\(^\text{13}\) Gisell Jeter. “‘Fight for Freedom first, then go to school!’” 10.
Huntley and McRerley add to current knowledge of the subject in *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, a collection of twenty-nine oral histories of men, women, and children who were grassroots activists during the Birmingham civil rights movement. Their work is particularly important because they incorporate the personal narratives of black children, which complicates adult-centric studies of grassroots activism and civil rights struggles in the city. Also, this collection of personal reflections reinforces the contributions of a population that is often overshadowed by more widely known leaders and organizations. Lastly, these oral histories offer new insights into the daily progress and struggles of a local movement.

While each of these scholars has helped advance the historical discourse on black children in American history, there remains a great need for work that couples the historic plight of black children with civil rights history and emphasizes the experiences and courageous efforts of black youth. Investigating the role of youth demonstrators makes clear the importance of exploring black activism across age, as well as across race and gender.

In the past twenty years, the scholarship on 1960s Birmingham has become more inclusive of local people and grassroots activism. The narrative of black schoolchildren who grew up in the midst of Jim Crow, however, remains marginalized. Ironically, Birmingham, Alabama is one of the more widely researched places as it relates to addressing race relations and grassroots activism in the 1960s American South. Over the years, scholars such as Charles E. Connerly, Glenn Eskew, David Garrow, Horace
Huntley, and David Montgomery have published works studying the complex social, political, and economic histories of the “Magic City.”

Connerly’s “The Most Segregated City in America” emphasizes the role of the city’s geo-political structure in the discrimination of black citizens, and the mobilization of local blacks. Eskew’s But for Birmingham skillfully investigates the intersection of the local struggle led by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), and the national movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Council. In addition to offering a history of the city’s socioeconomic and political structure, Eskew’s study highlights internal division within Birmingham’s black and white communities, thus disproving any notions that either racial group was monolithic in its ideologies and actions with regard to race relations. Lastly, his work disrupts the belief that the organizing efforts of the SCLC were not as properly planned and executed, as many have argued. He insists instead that it was far more complicated and involved several setbacks, thereby challenging the heroic narrative model that has permeated much of the scholarship on the local struggle.

David Garrow’s Birmingham, Alabama, 1956-1963 is a compilation of three essays that emphasized the “character and caliber” of the local black community, and offered a particularly useful analysis of Reverend Shuttlesworth and his leadership role. Garrow aimed to explain how the city’s local leaders and movement supporters helped the city become a symbol of resistance to racism. Horace Huntley and David Montgomery, co-authors of Black Workers’ Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, turned to the Oral History Project of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute to gather personal
accounts about the local movement. Their collection and use of oral histories demonstrates how members of Birmingham’s black community responded to racial injustice and highlights the significance of grassroots leadership.

Each of these works delves into the complex racial dynamics that eventually came to a boil in May 1963. From May 2 through May 7, over 2,000 children, between six and eighteen years of age, marched in the streets of Birmingham in a non-violent protest against racial inequality. During the demonstrations more than 1,000 children were arrested and jailed. The march led civil rights organizations, namely the ACMHR and the SCLC, along with local Birmingham city officials and the Kennedy Administration, to engage in a dialogue that eventually led to the desegregation of Birmingham. In the days following the initial march, King shared his sentiments about the protest with an audience of young demonstrators and supporters. He stated, “There are those who write history, and there are those who make history…I don’t know how many historians we have in Birmingham tonight…but you are certainly making history…and you will make it possible for the historians of the future to write a marvelous chapter.”¹⁵ Despite the children’s invaluable contributions to the Birmingham movement, their personal stories and historical significance remains in the shadows. Therein lies the heart of this dissertation.

“We’re Going Too! The Children of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement” uncovers the personal narratives of those who, in the words of Dr. King, “believed that their world could be changed for the better” and who “undertook the challenge to make

the changes."16 This dissertation examines the reaction and actions of African American youth, between ages six and eighteen, who grew up in Birmingham during the height of the civil rights movement. It explores the personal experiences of young black people in Birmingham in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as how the local civil rights struggle impacted their lives and how they affected the success of the modern civil rights movement as both “actors and symbols.”17

The primary aim of the dissertation is to complicate the movement’s standard narrative by studying black school-aged children in the Birmingham civil rights movement. This study hopes to shift scholarly attention toward the experiences and voices of black youth in order to provide a better understanding of what Jim Crow was and how it impacted young people. This approach draws special attention to black family dynamics and concepts of childrearing in a Jim Crow society. It raises questions about how the black family and the larger black community reared children and prepared them for a life in which they were deemed “less than” by the dominant white society. It debunks the notion that age prevented black children from being able to recognize differences in treatment according to race. And it helps explain the ways black children understood and sometimes challenged Jim Crow laws and etiquette.

Second, this dissertation strives to provide new understandings of how black children inserted themselves into the local freedom struggle and responded when the Birmingham movement imposed itself on them. The shift to movement strategies rooted

16 Ibid.
in nonviolence and civil disobedience in the late 1950s, coupled with a rise in the number of college-aged students joining the cause and increased media coverage caught the attention of Birmingham’s younger generation of African Americans. This work looks at their introduction to the movement as well as their recruitment by civil rights activists to determine how and why these children made what historian Wilma King calls the “transition from scripted actors to viable activists.” And it also explores black youth and their reaction to racial violence in an effort to gain insight into how children of this period interpreted the value of black life in the Jim Crow South.

Lastly, this study, through its focus on the roles played by black schoolchildren—both as political actors with agency and symbols that Americans observed in public—gives new perspective on the history of the Birmingham movement and the national civil rights struggle. It introduces a form of black community activism that transcended class, gender, and age. The Children’s March was not a traditional black protest. The fight for civil rights no longer occurred in the courtroom; instead local residents engaged in public demonstrations, protests, and sit-ins. It was not led by black upper-class, top-tier leadership. Rather, it was a mass movement organized by local religious leader Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and supported mostly by black working class men and women that worked in white-owned factories, mines, and kitchens. Also fundamental to the Birmingham campaign of 1963 were young black children. When adults could not join the movement due to work obligations and responsibilities, or fear of white retaliation, black youth became a force in the fight for freedom. Exploring the direct, and indirect,

involvement of these children also exposes the solidarity and fragmentation of black people of Birmingham and among movement leaders. It explains how the young protesters made the rest of the nation and parts of the world aware of the “horrors of segregation” that existed in the American South. Televised coverage of unarmed black children being attacked by dogs and fire hoses made it difficult for the Kennedy administration to look the other way, especially if it wanted to continue leading the charge on the global spread of capitalism and democracy. And it reveals how young people, through their central role in the Children’s March in May 1963 and the deadly events on September 15, pressured Birmingham city officials to negotiate a settlement with civil rights leaders and the federal government to intervene and later pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The experiences of these children transformed the civil rights struggle and left a permanent mark on the nation’s conscience.

“We’re Going Too! The Children of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement” draws on monographs, autobiographies, black and white, documentaries, and archival materials. Critical to this study is the use of oral history produced by the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Oral History Project (BCRI OHP), the Kids in Birmingham 1963 online oral history database, and interviews I conducted. Books, scholarly journals, documentaries, and photographs on the Birmingham civil rights struggle, simply don’t compare to testimony offered by those who experienced it first-hand. “Sometimes only words, expressions of feelings rather than descriptions of events, can capture the

19 Huntley and McKeary. Foot Soldiers for Democracy. xv
20 Ibid.
intangible elements of the black freedom struggle,” says historian Robin D.G. Kelley.\textsuperscript{21} Recapturing the voices and experiences of black children from 1960s Birmingham reveals nuances about their family dynamics and social development within an inhospitable environment. Furthermore, the oral histories reveal the young activists’ emotional experiences during the demonstrations, their arrests, and also during funerals for personal friends and classmates. Lastly, these stories address the ramifications behind mobilizing schoolchildren for social change.\textsuperscript{22}

Finally, this dissertation details changes within leading civil rights organizations – the ACMHR and the SCLC- as it relates to what sociologist Aldon Morris terms, “tactics of mobilization.” According to Morris, the success in Birmingham was a result of the grassroots organizing and execution. His examination of indigenous organizations like the ACMHR and its use of third party insurgents such as black children will provide insight into how young people understood movement development and how they interpreted their role as a result.\textsuperscript{23} Refocusing scholarly attention on schoolchildren creates a new perspective on who these young children were and how their involvement affected both local and national movements.

This dissertation explores the experiences and memories of African American children in the Birmingham civil rights struggle chronologically, beginning after World War II in 1945 and ending with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Setting the study in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., xvii
\item \textsuperscript{22} Wilma King. \textit{African American Childhoods}, 6; Huntley and McKerley. \textit{Foot Soldiers for Democracy}, xvi-xvii.
\end{itemize}
immediate post war period and not simply in May 1963, acknowledges the long history of the Birmingham black freedom struggle and also highlights important moments both in the Birmingham movement and in the lived experiences of black youth.

Chapter 1 focuses on how southern black children in the 1950s and 1960s experienced the world around them. It captures what it meant to be an African American child in Birmingham, Alabama. It also investigates how familial and communal experiences aided black children in their understanding of life in a segregated world. During this time children learned racial etiquette from adults who taught the importance of self-respect, self-worth, race loyalty and pride to counter the false representations of black Americans that existed among white segregationists. A look into family and community dynamics will allow readers to understand how black children, like their parents, coped with second-class citizenship in the white-dominant public sphere while thriving in the internal world of the black community. Such analysis also helps in explaining why some children later became involved in the Birmingham Campaign of 1963.

Chapter 2 focuses specifically on the years from 1956 to 1963, a time of significant transformation in the Birmingham civil rights struggle. In these seven years the local movement underwent changes in organizational leadership, movement objectives, and protest strategies. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part begins with the ban of Birmingham’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter in May 1956, followed by the founding of the ACMHR, one month later. ACMHR and its principal leader, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, protested
segregation ordinances through bus boycotts and sit-ins, while continuing to challenge the very same ordinances in court. Appealing to middle and working-class blacks, the ACMHR became the leading civil rights organization in Birmingham during the 1950s and 1960s.

The second part of the chapter addresses the arrival of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the SCLC in Birmingham. After an uneven campaign in Albany, Georgia in late 1962, King and SCLC looked to Birmingham for redemption. This section examines ACMHR and SCLC’s collaboration and the launch of Project C (a series of nonviolent sit-ins, marches, and jail-ins) to end segregation in Birmingham in early 1963. Next, the chapter shifts its focuses to black youth and how they became familiar with the struggle for civil and human rights and how the ACMHR and SCLC, through the use of creative recruitment strategies, made it possible for black schoolchildren to join the local campaign in May 1963.

Chapter 3 begins with the weeklong youth demonstrations in May 1963. It captures the experiences of the young foot soldiers as they marched the streets of Birmingham and were arrested and sent to jail. In addition, this chapter examines how the ACMHR-SCLC collaboration along with Birmingham’s white city officials and the Kennedy administration responded to and resolved the social, political, and economic effects of the Children’s March. This chapter relies on oral histories to paint a vivid picture of what it was like for black children to be on the frontlines, to survive jail, or for those who were not active participants, what it was like to witness the demonstrations. The eyewitness accounts help raise awareness the courage of black youth, the sacrifices
they made not only for themselves but also for future generations, their parents and community as a whole.

Finally, chapter 4 opens on September 4, 1963, one week after the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in the nation’s capital, when Birmingham residents battled over school integration. The fear and anger toward enrolling black students in all-white public schools led to violent retaliation by white segregationists. The bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church wounded one girl and claimed the lives of four others. Later that day, two separate shootings resulted in the deaths of two young boys. These deaths made headline news across the world, once again thrusting Birmingham into the center of America’s racial dilemma. Important to this chapter are stories from the siblings, classmates, and friends of those who died that dreadful day. Their reflections offer insight into how black youth coped with domestic terrorism that targeted members of their community. Local and national reactions to the killings helped galvanize support for passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964. While none of the six children participated in the Birmingham movement in the months prior to their deaths, their accidental martyrdom served as a catalyst for movement activists and organizations to continue the fight for full citizenship.

The narrative concludes with updates from former “foot soldiers” and others who as children, lived through the Birmingham civil rights campaign. It will help illustrate how their current lives have been shaped by memories, both personal and collective, of “The Movement that Changed the World.”
Studying the Birmingham civil rights movement from the perspective of African Americans who lived through, and in some instances, participated in, the movement as children, reveals great truths about the movement and nation’s views of black Americans in general, and black children in particular. The experiences of black schoolchildren in 1960s Birmingham signify a particular element of the black experience that has largely been understudied. To know courage, heartache, and triumph is to have a richer, fuller understanding of what it once meant to be black in America.
Chapter 1

Family Matters

“Every generation had to learn the rules without understanding why, and each one either accepted or rebelled in that moment of realization and paid a price which ever they chose.”

Isabel Wilkerson, author, The Warmth of Other Suns

From the early years of the twentieth century until shortly after the Second World War, Birmingham was known as the “Magic City.” Rapid economic growth brought about by a thriving steel industry earned the city its nickname. After the war, however, the city became less well known for its steel manufacturing prowess and more for its culture of segregation and racial violence. Jim Crow had always been a part of Birmingham’s makeup. Indeed, it was as central as steel to Birmingham’s emergence and growth, and its core characteristics — exploiting black workers, excluding black voters, segregating housing and public accommodations, and using terror to enforce it all – were firmly entrenched. For the schoolchildren who took part in Birmingham’s civil rights battles of 1963, this was the world in which they grew up.

Coming of age in Birmingham in the years after World War II made black children painfully aware of racial discrimination, forcing them to live simultaneously within two overlapping worlds, one black and the other white. Their white world was defined in large part by public spaces controlled by whites, while their black world was

defined by private spaces controlled by blacks. Spaces controlled by African Americans were especially important because they shielded (as much as possible) black youth from the harmful psychological and physical effects of white-dominated public spaces. Indeed, in black private spaces, African American adults shared with their children lessons about the rules of racial conduct. Black controlled spaces also allowed African American adults to provide black youth with an alternative understanding of blackness, one that rejected white supremacy in favor of racial pride and self-determination. For Birmingham native Deborah J. Walker, who was four-years-old in 1955, black private spaces played an important role in her development as a black child. “I grew up in a loving, caring, protective and supportive African American community. In that environment I thrived and knew that I was loved and cared about.” The black community allowed children like Walker to be what she called “normal in an abnormal environment.”

This chapter explores black children’s racial coming of age in Birmingham between the 1945 and 1955, a critical decade when most of the young people who participated in the 1963 Birmingham civil rights campaign were born. It aims to give readers a glimpse of how black youths experienced the world around them and how they came to understand race and racial difference. It looks at how they encountered segregation and discrimination and how they learned rules of racial etiquette. This chapter also examines the extent these lessons influenced children’s interpretations of what it meant to be black. Finally, this chapter explores how interactions between black parents and their children shaped the latter’s understanding of, and ability to, navigate Jim Crow.

Before Birmingham became a national battleground for civil rights in 1963, it was a Jim Crow city like any other. Hospitals, cemeteries, churches, movie theaters, libraries, parks, public restrooms, and water fountains were all segregated. In the windows of downtown stores and restaurants were signs that read “whites only” or directed blacks toward a separate entrance. African Americans riding public transportation were required by law to sit in the back of buses and to relinquish their seats to white passengers when no seats were available in the whites only section. The city’s public schools were segregated, and they would remain so a full ten years after the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Ed, Topeka, Kansas* that de jure segregation in public education was unconstitutional. Everywhere African Americans went, they were reminded to stay in their place.

Birmingham’s economic structure was equally stratified by race. Beginning with the city’s founding in 1871, Birmingham’s economy thrived on the exploitation of black labor. In 1950, the city’s black residents earned an annual income of $1,087 compared to the $2,274 for whites. Additionally, while blacks represented 35 percent of the city’s workforce, they were only 5 percent of sales employees and only 7 percent of managerial workers. Striking, though not surprising, 95 percent of Birmingham’s domestic employees were black. Even African American professionals – teachers, lawyers, doctors, and businesspeople – experienced financial discrimination as they were paid significantly less than their white counterparts, even when they held advanced degrees.  

Economic discrimination left a majority of the city’s black residents impoverished,

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making them especially vulnerable to economic intimidation, which in turn limited the likelihood that they would challenge white supremacy publicly and directly.  

In post-war Birmingham, widespread disfranchisement kept African Americans from penetrating the political arena. The poll tax curtailed the black electorate because most African Americans simply could not afford to pay it. The literacy test, meanwhile, kept blacks from registering because county registrars decided the questions and the answers. A registrar could compel a potential black voter to answer almost anything, no matter how complex or obscure. The registrar could require a black person to “write, copy, and interpret sections of the state constitution,” or to “print the word vote upside down, but in the correct order.” While the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited racial restrictions on voting, white supremacists used violence and other discriminatory practices to keep African Americans in a state of political powerlessness. And with only 9.5 percent of eligible black voters able to successfully overcome the obstacles to registering to vote, it was clear that democracy was more a concept than a reality for the city’s African American citizenry.

The segregationist attitude that permeated the political sphere was both protected and endorsed by Birmingham whites. With less than ten percent of the city’s black population registered to vote, the white citizenry, the industrial and financial elites and working class whites in particular, used their political power to endorse and re-elect candidates committed to defending segregation and racial discriminatory practices. For example, working class whites—the craftsmen, steelworkers, policemen, municipal employees and shop owners—mostly endorsed the Big Mules, the local coalition of steel

barons who used their financial power and social clout to maintain segregation and continue exploiting the black workforce. Much of the reason for working class whites taking an active role in local politics had to do with the fear that one day they might lose their jobs to cheap black labor, which explains the support of politicians like segregationist city commissioner, Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor, who in his own words worked to uphold and enforce “Birmingham’s segregationist ordinances to the utmost.”

Bull Connor was the voice of working class whites who felt threatened by changes to the city’s racial order. Born on July 11, 1897 in Selma, Alabama, Connor migrated to Birmingham in 1922 with his former wife Beara Levens and daughter. Before his involvement in city politics, Connor worked as a telegraph operator and at one point a private security operator at the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company. Connor also worked as a radio announcer for the Birmingham Barons, the local baseball team. His husky voice and ability to carry a casual conversation or “shoot the bull” during the course of the game earned him local fame and the nickname “Bull,” a moniker he carried proudly for the rest of his life.

In 1934, Connor won a seat in the Alabama House of Representatives. He served only one term before running in Birmingham’s 1937 municipal election for the opportunity to serve on the Birmingham City Commission and head the Department of Public Safety. He would go on to serve as commissioner from 1937 to 1963, with a brief four-year absence from office as a result of personal scandal. During his twenty-three years in office, Connor implemented policies that further entrenched segregation and economic inequality in Birmingham.

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year tenure, Connor used his political position, clout, and the resources of the Birmingham police to enforce segregation and suppress the black struggle for civil rights. With men like Bull Connor controlling municipal government, the battle for equality proved all the more difficult.\(^\text{30}\)

Housing in Birmingham was as exclusionary as city politics. City officials, real estate agents, and white residents utilized racial zoning statutes and exclusionary practices—such as blockbusting, redlining, intimidation and violence—to limit the rights of blacks to choose where in the city they wished to live. According to the 1940 census tract map of Birmingham, the majority of black neighborhoods were located in areas zoned for heavy industrial and commercial use. Those communities included East Thomas, Ensley, East Birmingham, and Southside. Together, they housed most of the city’s poor, working class African Americans. Birmingham native and future 1963 demonstrator Washington Booker, III, recalled growing up on Seventh Avenue in Southside. “We stayed in a two-story tenement house. We had one room. My mother and my sister slept in the big bed, and I slept in the roll-away bed. … We [also] had a tub that we poured boiling water into and put cold water in the tub to take a bath. There was no such thing as hot water in the house. The bathroom was a room a little bigger than a closet. It had a commode that sat right in the middle of the floor, and there was no light in it.”\(^\text{31}\) Booker’s experience with substandard housing was common for African Americans straddling the poverty line. Typically, these homes and rental properties lacked bathing facilities, running water, and electricity. They were also overcrowded and located on poorly lit and unpaved streets.


The housing situation was different for middle class black professionals, who on average earned about $3,627 annually, some $2,500 more than their black working class counterparts. They tended to live in Titusville, Smithfield, and Enon Ridge, away from heavy industry areas. Their communities featured single and multi-family homes with indoor plumbing and electricity. “Our neighborhood was a fairly middle-class neighborhood,” said Carolyn Maull McKinstry who grew up in Titusville. “We had quite a few professional people there. There was any number of teachers that lived on our street. In fact, my eighth-grade teacher lived on my street, my seventh –grade teachers lived two streets behind me. So it was quite common to have your teachers or principal living close by.”

Although these middle and upper class black communities were smaller than their white counterparts and lacked the same kinds of public services and recreational facilities, they were drastic improvements over neighborhoods occupied by poorer Blacks. But these communities too were overcrowded, since middle class blacks had few other housing options. A handful could afford homes in the less congested communities of northern Smithfield and College Hills, two former white communities, but their numbers were limited. At minimum, they had to earn $5,000 annually to purchase a formerly white-owned home in a neighborhood that had been recently rezoned “Negro.”

The economic and residential differences among Birmingham blacks had a deep impact on the experiences of individual African Americans. In many ways, they influenced how individuals viewed issues of access, racial equality, leadership and

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community mobilizing. These differing perspectives would shape the trajectory of Birmingham black activism in the 1950s and 60s.

**Black Birmingham**

Although black neighborhoods reflected intra-racial class stratification, together they comprised black Birmingham. Because of Jim Crow, African Americans created a society with its own schools, businesses, neighborhoods, and social hangouts. In black Birmingham, African American youth enrolled in segregated schools. Even after the 1954 ruling on the *Brown* case, there were a total of forty-three Negro elementary schools (Bryant, Eureka, Kingston, Lincoln, etc.) and five high schools (Carver, Hayes, Parker, Ullman, and Western) in the Birmingham public school system. The persistence of segregated education reflected the city’s commitment to keeping even its youngest citizens segregated. On Sundays, families gathered at Bethel Baptist Church or one of the city’s other sixty African American churches. “The irony of segregation,” according to historian Leon F. Litwack, “is that it opened up new opportunities for enterprising blacks, providing services that white businesses or companies refused to offer blacks.” As such, men and women patronized black-owned businesses like the Green Acres restaurant and the Nelson Brothers Café, and beauty solons and barbershops like Magic City. Nearly all of these businesses were centrally located on Fourth Avenue in Birmingham’s black business district. Some were small mom and pop shops, but

35 Ibid.,
others were owned by black business magnates. One of the largest black entrepreneurs was Arthur George Gaston, who owned a funeral home, a savings and loan bank, and a motel, the Gaston, which opened in 1954. The Gaston Motel was a black jewel in the city. Boasting a restaurant and a lounge, it was a destination for weary black travels and escape seeking locals. Also located in the black business district was a seven-story office building owned by the Prince Hall Freemasons. This seven-story brick building housed the office of Omega Psi Phi Incorporated, a black Greek letter fraternity, as well as the offices of black lawyers, doctors and other black professionals. Despite its origin, black life behind the veil offered a degree of comfort and safety in a dangerous, segregated world.

To ensure that blacks adhered to the strict laws and customs of Jim Crow, white institutions, both public and private, promoted a culture of violence. For instance, as African Americans moved into what were once white-only neighborhoods, terrorists, like Robert E. “Dynamite Bob” Chambliss, an active Klansman from a local Birmingham klavern, began bombing their homes. Between 1946 and 1950, more than 10 black families had their homes bombed for doing nothing more than moving into formerly all-white North Smithfield.36 As the bombings, concentrated mainly in North Smithfield, increased, that area of town became known as Dynamite Hill. Angela Davis, a well-known civil rights activist of the 1960s and 70s, who lived in Smithfield as a child remembered being five-years-old when her neighbor’s house was bombed. “An explosion a hundred times louder than the loudest, most frightening thunderclap I had ever heard shook our house. Medicine bottles fell off the shelves, shattering all around me. The floor

36 Ibid. 84-85; 100.
seemed to slip away from my feet as I raced into the kitchen and into my frightened mother’s arms.” Soon after the bombing, a crowd of black neighbors gathered at the site, staring at the ruins. “Far into the night they spoke of death, of white hatred, death, white people, and more death.”

At the time, no one was arrested or brought up on charges for these crimes; the city simply was not interested in prosecuting these cases. Even when the police received information about Chambliss being responsible for bombing the home of Samuel and Essie Mae Matthews, no arrest was made; the police claimed simply that there wasn't credible evidence.

In addition to bombings, white terrorists staked burning crosses on the front lawns of black homes and churches, vandalized black-owned businesses, and verbally and physically assaulted anyone they believed had forgotten their “place.” One such example was the case of Judge Edward Aaron, a thirty-four-year-old black painter, who was kidnapped by six Klansmen and castrated as part of an initiation rite on Labor Day, September 2, 1957. Aaron was walking with his girlfriend when the Klansmen grabbed him and took him to a secret lair in nearby Chalkville. Once at the hideout, Bart A. Floyd, who was chosen earlier that afternoon to assume lead the vigilante group, questioned Aaron about his knowledge of the local civil rights movement. Despite having no connection to the movement or its leaders, the men forced Aaron to remove his pants then began to beat him. Then, Floyd grabbed Aaron’s genitals and proceeded to cut. Next,

38 While Chambliss escaped imprisonment for 1947 bombing of the Matthews’ home, he in 1977 was convicted of murder in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that occurred on September 15, 1963, and claimed the lives of four black girls.
they poured turpentine on the open wound, gathered him up and tossed him in the trunk of one of their vehicles. They dumped him in Springdale where police officers found him after having almost bled out. Such an intense level of racial violence placed Birmingham in the center of Jim Crow violence in America.

Birmingham’s African American community looked to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to help stop the reign of terror and end segregation. For nearly fifty years, between 1913 and 1956, the NAACP led the charge against discriminatory practices related to voting, housing, employment, and racial violence by negotiating with city officials and filing lawsuits. Organized by the black community’s traditional leadership class comprised of educators, doctors, lawyers, ministers, and business professionals, the Birmingham chapter was elitist. Indeed, its membership rolls read like a who’s who in black Birmingham. At various times, it included entrepreneur Arthur George Gaston; lawyer Arthur Davis Shores; Emory O. Jackson, the editor of Birmingham’s black newspaper, Birmingham World; Reverend Dr. William Rufus Pettiford, pastor of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church; and local dentist Dr. Ernest W. Taggart. In addition to their white-collar professions, members of the organization had affiliations with other such elite organizations, including fraternal groups, such as Alpha Phi Alpha and Omega Psi Phi; secret societies, including the Pythian Temple and the Colored Masonic Temple; and women’s socials clubs including the Links, the Imperial and the Periclean. According to sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, outside of the black community, middle class African Americans lacked political and

39 In time, four of the six Klansmen were charged and each sentenced to twenty years in the Alabama state prison for their participation in the kidnapping and castration of Judge Edward Aaron. Eskew, But for Birmingham. 115.
economic power in American society. As a result, they used their “strategic positions in segregated institutions” to dictate “ideologies and values” they deemed apt for the larger black community.\(^{40}\) Hence, members of this traditional leadership class promoted an accommodative ideology that suited their own socioeconomic interests through their positions within the NAACP.

Mostly associated with Booker T. Washington, the notable black leader of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and founder of the historic Tuskegee Institute, accommodative ideology was the belief that progress for African Americans could be achieved through long-term educational and economic advancement, not political confrontation or what he considered “intemperate calls for equality."\(^{41}\) NAACP leadership operated under these principles, by negotiating and compromising with white officials under the confines of Jim Crow paternalism. For instance, when black citizens voiced concern about the separate and unequal public facilities—parks, library, and recreational center—in their community, NAACP leaders proved disappointing. Rather than petition for improvements or demand an end to segregated facilities, leaders met quietly with white officials and agreed to continue to use segregated facilities with minimal upgrades to the facilities. At the same time that the local branch settled acquiescently, member Dr. E.W. Taggart petitioned the park and recreational board to purchase land for the construction of a Negro golf course. In this instance it

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appears that members of the organization would rather vocalize the needs of the black bourgeoisie rather than advocating on matters that benefitted all black citizens.

This leadership approach compromised the NAACP’s ability to effectively challenge racist laws and practices. Since the organization’s leadership chose not to “rock the boat” or “make they [good] white friends mad,” as Hosea Hudson, a Birmingham steel worker and local activist once stated, their positioning generated a sense of uncertainty and distrust between the organization and the larger black community. What might have been progress to the NAACP leadership was not satisfactory to many others.

In essence, what was deemed as “progress” differed along socioeconomic lines in Birmingham’s black community. For the black poor and working classes, it meant increased wages, more if not equal employment opportunities, the same access to municipal services and facilities, and better police protection from violent acts and threats. Middle class blacks came to understand progress as gradual economic, educational, and sociopolitical improvements. Much like its middle class leaders, the local NAACP also assumed a less aggressive approach in its dealings with racial inequities.

While black citizens held differing opinions about the NAACP’s leadership and style of activism, state officials conspired to ban the organization in an effort to undermine the freedom movement. Alabama Attorney General John Patterson led the charge, specifically targeting the Birmingham branch, which was the largest in the state. He brought the NAACP up on a series of charges that included failure to register as an out-of-state corporation and pay the “non-resident” fee prior to conducting business in Alabama. Other charges included conspiring with members of the Communist Party,
supporting desegregation efforts in Montgomery and at the University of Alabama. On May 26, 1956, the state officially banned the NAACP’s Birmingham branch, forcing it to cease its operations for the next nine years.  

Even though the NAACP had its detractors among African Americans, it was, nevertheless, the “voice” of black Birmingham. As a result, its silencing created a protest void. Into this void stepped a new, dynamic, grassroots organization, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). Co-founded by the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, pastor of the Bethel Baptist Church and other members of the NAACP, the ACMHR became the new voice of protest against Jim Crow.

The name of the organization itself reflected local activists understanding of the movement’s tactical evolution and goals. It symbolized an ideological shift in twentieth century black protest from a legal approach to one grounded in nonviolent philosophy, direct action strategies, mass mobilization, and cultural expression through song, prayer, and sermon. “Christian” represented the beliefs of Shuttlesworth and other planners that the organization “should be Christian in all respects, that all our actions, thoughts and deeds would be first, foremost, and always Christian.” The emphasis on religion also marked a return to the collective social power of the black church. Most black churches functioned as mass-based institutions, thereby providing easier access to potential movement supporters and participants.

The ACMHR sought to maximize its membership by reaching out to churchgoers in hopes that their loyalty and commitment to their respective church would transfer to

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the movement.\textsuperscript{44} The founders also included “movement” in the name rather than organization because, pro-segregationists “can outlaw an organization, but they can’t outlaw the movement of people determined to be free,” said Shuttlesworth.\textsuperscript{45} The decision to include “human rights” suggested that the planners saw little difference between that and civil rights. As they understood it, the “‘First Rights’ is ‘Human Rights,’” therefore their fight was for all Americans, not just African Americans. Meanwhile, Reverend R. L. Alford, pastor of the Sardis Baptist Church, suggested including Alabama in the name. He hoped that the work of Birmingham’s black activists would eventually make its way across the state of Alabama. Together, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights represented hope through collective struggle for Birmingham’s black community.

**Black Parenthood**

For African American adults, the Jim Crow experience was wholly unique. Decisions that most people take for granted, such as where to work, live, and socialize required tremendous thought, as Birmingham Blacks had to navigate the rough terrain of job discrimination, racial zoning, and segregation laws. Whether or not they internalized racial discrimination, segregation shaped the contours of their daily lives.\textsuperscript{46} Yet, as difficult as it may have been for them to negotiate life for themselves in a racist society, the greatest burden was how to raise a child in that environment. In *Notes of a Native*  

\textsuperscript{45} Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 95.  
Son, novelist James Baldwin captured the frustration of black parents when describing the daunting task or “impossibility” facing them of “how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to create in the child … a stronger antidote to this poison than one hand found for oneself.” Despite parents’ best efforts, they could never fully shield nor prepare their children for the harsh realities of Jim Crow.

Black adults were not the only ones affected by negative stereotypes and discrimination. As children watched television, accompanied their parents to stores, and listened to conversations at the kitchen table, or at church on Sunday, or from other kids while playing, they began to question what blackness meant in Birmingham’s racist society. According to psychologist Dr. Robert Coles, who studied black children in the South and their reactions to socializations during the mid-twentieth century, by the time black youth reached the age of six, they had already begun to form ideas about their physical appearance and about how others perceived them. Such was the case for Deborah J. Walker. Growing up black in Birmingham, Walker received both verbal and non-verbal cues about racial difference. “I learned most lessons [on racial discrimination] through unspoken word. I literally ‘caught’ that it was not okay to be Black. Nor was it safe,” recalled Walker.

Jim Crow laws and social mores that specifically governed everyday life also reinforced the notion of black inferiority and worthlessness. James Stewart, a Birmingham native and youth protester from the May 1963 demonstrations, remembers his mother dragging him away from a water fountain because it was marked whites-only.

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47 de Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 121.
48 Coles, Children of Crisis, 337-338.
“I learned that the square, taller [fountains] had the cold water, [but] she wanted me to drink out of the white one that was lower and had warmer water [because] it was the ‘Colored’ water fountain.”\(^{50}\) Being told that because of the color of his skin he could not enjoy a cool drink from the clean fountain, but instead had to settle for the one marked ‘Colored’ let Stewart know that black people deserved less than whites. In the case of Myrna Carter, her awareness of racial difference occurred during an encounter with a white store clerk. One day young Carter visited Silver’s, a local five-and-dime store, to purchase sugar wafers. Inside the store, she addressed the white saleswoman properly then asked to purchase the sugar wafers that were in a glass case. As she waited for her order to be filled, Carter noticed that the woman behind the counter did not retrieve the cookies from the front case. “I asked her where they came from, but the woman did not respond,” she remembered.\(^ {51}\) The sugar wafers the saleswoman sold to Carter were day-old cookies from underneath the glass case. What upset her even more was when a white customer entered the store and placed her order, she received the fresh cookies from the case that Carter had pointed to just moments earlier. The episode taught her that whites received better service than blacks. What Stewart and Carter both learned was that their age did not exclude them from racial discrimination; age did not matter, race did.

**Racism in American Media**

Messages about the meaning of blackness in relation to whiteness presented themselves in a multitude of ways. Popular films of the early twentieth century such as

\(^{50}\) James Stewart. “James Stewart” in *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, eds. Huntley and McKerley, 134.

Birth of a Nation (1915), Tarzan the Ape Man (1932), and Gone with the Wind (1939), reflected the negative perceptions of black Americans held by white people. Typecast as savage, violent, hypersexual, sassy, docile, and unintelligent, the black characters in these films reinforced racist ideologies and fostered false perceptions of black life in America. The same held true for black characters appearing on radio and television. At the same time, the absence of black characters from the big screen and small, and from radio as well, also posed a problem. Media, for better or worse, sets the tone for the “morals, values, and images” of American culture. The exclusion of African American actors and actresses reinforced notions of white supremacy. Even television news and mainstream print media were guilty of covering stories catering exclusively to a white audience, thus devaluing African Americans. As long as whites controlled mainstream media, in all forms, blacks remained marginalized.

However, as years passed and the fight for racial equality gained national attention, the images of blacks in the media came to include those that represented strength, courage, and resilience. Though society equated blackness with powerlessness and dehumanization, images of men and women challenging Jim Crow had a tremendous impact on the hearts and minds of young African Americans. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, black children would go on to witness a community of blacks boycott segregated public transportation in Montgomery in 1955; nine teenagers integrate a whites-only high school in Little Rock in 1957; black college students from North Carolina A&T State University and Bennett College integrate the lunch counter of the F.W. Woolworth’s in

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Greensboro in 1960; and later integrated buses with college-aged men and women traveling the nation’s southern highways in 1961. It taught them a different way to react to segregation.

Different from past generations who were taught to “withdraw from” or “avoid” situations deemed discriminatory, black youth in the 1950s and 1960s regarded such advice not particularly helpful. Instead they began taking their cues about how to defy Jim Crow from other young people. Watching teenagers and college students participate in sit-ins and demonstrations inspired some black youth to reassess the lessons and tactics taught by their parents. For example, Carolyn McKinstry recalled watching the Freedom Riders on television and it was at that moment that she became aware of the Jim Crow signs that were used to signify where blacks and whites sat on public buses. Watching these young men and women challenge segregated systems of public transportation across the South, McKinstry decided that she would do the same thing in Birmingham. “I said, ‘I’m going to ride [a bus]. I’m going to find out and see. I’m not moving that sign. If I sit down, I’m going to stay there.’” She was in the ninth grade. As a result of what they saw on television, children like McKinstry were introduced to people, mostly young in age, who refused to stay in their place and were not afraid to question or defy the racial order. What they saw encouraged them to challenge the lessons their parents taught them and directly contest America’s racial barriers.

**Jim Crow Education**

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53 de Schweinitz. *If We Could Change the World*, 210-211.
Attending segregated public school shaped black children’s understanding of racial difference in Jim Crow Birmingham in profound ways. It was a daily reminder of racial inequality and critical to black youth and their racial learning process. Whether it was outdated textbooks or second-hand school furniture, segregated schools exposed black schoolchildren to the Jim Crow world in a way that made inequality crystal clear. Countless children traced their initial racial awareness back to their segregated education. More than any other public space, school exposed black children to their racialized position in society. Despite laws dictating ‘separate but equal’ education, black schools lacked the same quality resources, from buildings to books, as their white counterparts. Gwendolyn Sanders Gamble who attended Kingston Elementary School recognized racial difference when she looked at her textbooks and realized that they had been used by several students in the white schools. “I was tired of looking in my fifth or sixth grade books and seeing a white child that had that book in the fourth grade. I would see where they would put their teacher’s name, their grade in there, and year. It let me know that I was behind that child. Educationally, I was two years behind that child. I felt that I deserved the right to be at the same level, if not above the level of that white child.”

Schoolbooks were not the only items handed down by white public schools. Other second-hand supplies included classroom furniture and laboratory materials, as well as athletic uniforms and equipment. Much of what was given to black schools was either outdated or in poor condition. It was not uncommon, for instance, for athletic teams to have to wear mix-matched uniforms and play with old equipment. Being forced to use old, worn out equipment affirmed that blacks were inferior to whites. For Dale Long,

who attended segregated schools in Birmingham, recognition of difference came when he spotted the word “Nigger” carved on his desktop.\textsuperscript{56} This type of defacement was common, as it became a way for white students to express racial superiority over their black counterparts. Whether it was the old school supplies or derogatory messages, these visual symbols became what Berrey called an “easy-to-interpret presentation of difference” in which even white youths had an advantage.\textsuperscript{57}

**Public Interactions in Black and White**

Another important racial lesson for black youth came from observing interactions between their parents and white people. These particular racialized experiences proved impactful because they taught children that even their parents, whom they loved, respected, and deemed invincible, were not immune to discrimination. Watching a white person mistreat a parent, or worse, to see them defer to racist whites, shocked children into an awareness of the harsh realities of segregation.\textsuperscript{58} Most children found these encounters to be frustrating and confusing, as they were unaccustomed to watching their parents act submissively. For Miriam Taylor McClendon, witnessing the impact of white supremacy while observing daily encounters between black and white people proved both painful and uncomfortable.” I had always felt that there was something wrong between the races, and I wasn’t sure really what that something was,” she said. “But I didn’t like the way the black people in my community would respond when a white bill collector would come around. Black men were normally very proud, aggressive men. But then, all

\textsuperscript{56} Interview with Dale Long, telephone interview with author, digital recording, July 8, 2014, Dallas, Texas. Recording in possession of author.

\textsuperscript{57} Berrey, “Resistance Begins at Home”, 71

\textsuperscript{58} de Schweinitz. *If We Could Change the World*, 215-216.
of a sudden, they would become rather subservient in their demeanor when a white man came around and that bothered me.”\(^{59}\) Witnessing unsettling encounters disrupted children’s understanding of what it meant to be black in Birmingham. To watch one’s parents denounce segregation behind closed doors, only to become subservient to white people in public, taught these children a very powerful lesson about the racial dynamics in their community. Nothing mattered more than race. These particular encounters also affirmed that in a Jim Crow world, blackness represented powerlessness.\(^{60}\)

Learning the importance of race and its influence over daily interactions between and among blacks and whites generated different responses from African American children.\(^{61}\) When it came to Jim Crow laws and social expectations, some children abided by the rules without much questioning. “As we used to say,” recalled Jimmie Lucille Spencer Hook, “you knew your place. You knew what you could do and what you couldn’t do. The things that blacks didn’t do, you just accepted that.”\(^{62}\) Meanwhile, some African Americans, like young Washington Booker, III, adhered to the discriminatory laws but not without reservation or wanting to challenge the status quo. “I understood access to public facilities because I went down to Newberry’s [cafeteria] and I would have to walk by and look at the white people sitting at the counter eating a banana split. I swore to God I was going to get me one. More than anything else I wanted a banana split behind that counter. They looked so good, but [blacks] couldn’t go back there. You have to go over to the other side, go down to the basement, and stand up…. As a child, I

\(^{59}\) Miriam Taylor McClendon. “Miriam Taylor McClendon,” in *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, 174

\(^{60}\) Berrey, “Resistance Begins at Home”, 71-72


\(^{62}\) Ibid.18.
wanted to go there because I saw the white kids go there.” Booker was not alone in his quest for equality. Larry Russell and his childhood friend also found themselves questioning Jim Crow practices and the legitimacy of this racist ideology. According to Russell:

When I was twelve or thirteen, I’d go to Newberry’s [cafeteria] with friends. They had one water fountain for whites, and one for us. I used to think, ‘What’s the difference between colored water and white water? What does white water taste like?’ I couldn’t wait to catch the drop on somebody to find out. My friend Joe and I went in there many nights and waited and waited until it was time for the store to close. They were busy trying to get people out, and we’d get us a sip of “white” water. It tasted no different. Water was water. The only thing different was with the black one you practically had to put your mouth on the thing to drink out of it. On the white side, they hardly had to bend over. Their water came up so free. This was mystifying.

Discovering that there was no significant difference between the water dispensed from white and black fountains taught young Russell and his friend Joe the lengths to which white segregationists worked to enforce racial hierarchy. More importantly, the courage it took for these boys to question and also test the legitimacy of racial difference further proved that black youth were not only concerned about Jim Crow laws and practices, but were willing to challenge their existence.

While some children reacted to discriminatory practices with curiosity and a desire for change, others responded with negative feelings toward whites. That was true for Deborah J. Walker, who as a child internalized racial oppression, which later manifested into feelings of anger toward whites. “What I most remember is intuitively knowing that life was hard for them [her parents], and that things were not as they should

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be. What I remember most is feeling at some level, a low-grade anger.”65 This anger stemmed from her noticing how her mother and father navigated Jim Crow society while maintaining their self-respect and pride. For many years Walker’s mother worked for a white family as a nanny, and the way she carried herself with such dignity made it hard for them to mistreat her. As for her father, a veteran, he held several low wage jobs in order to help provide for his wife and children, eventually saving enough to purchase a home for them.66 Knowing that because of society’s racial order, Walker’s parents had to work extra hard in order to provide for their children while trying to maintain a modicum of dignity for themselves angered her and bred resentment toward society as a whole. And she was not alone. Many African Americans who harbored negative feelings toward whites traced those sentiments back to witnessing their parents being mistreated. While these reactions may have left some feeling powerless, inferior, or dehumanized, others took those same emotions and used them as motivation to fight for social change.67

**Lesson Learned**

While navigating the treacherous waters of Jim Crow proved challenging for black children, they were especially dangerous and damaging for adults. Deemed an inferior race by white southern racists, it pained parents to have to socialize their children into understanding their place as a black person in white controlled spaces.68 Having to

66 Ibid.,
67 Berrey, “Resistance Begins at Home”, 74-75.
reconcile the demands of teaching children accommodation and submission while also promoting self-worth and racial pride brought forth mixed emotions- humiliation, love, anger, hope, fear, and optimism. The embarrassment and shame felt by parents as their children witnessed them bow under the weight of Jim Crow were terrible moments that one tried hard to forget. Equally painful was preparing future generations for life as second-class citizens. Passing down lessons on racial etiquette and watching a child become accustomed to this culture of degradation, or worse, accept their performance as truth, reminded adults not only of their oppression but also the long history of black powerlessness in the Jim Crow south. “But even as they learned to accommodate, even as they learned ‘how to live,’” said Litwack, “even as they accepted the reality of subordination, even as they learned to wear the mask, many found ways to impact some meaning and dignity to their lives.”69 Exploring lessons of black childhood socialization illustrates how parents protected and prepared their children for life in a white-supremacist society. At the same time, examining adult recollections of childhood related to learning racial etiquette offers insight into racialized youth socialization and its impact on the development of individuals’ social consciousness.70

To alleviate the initial shock of racial awareness, African American children turned to their parents. Mothers and fathers assumed the responsibility of teaching their children the lessons of subservience and subordination. As much as they tried to shield youth from the harsh realities of segregation, parents understood the importance of educating their children about the rules and rituals of Jim Crow.71 Parents and community

69 Leon F. Litwack. Trouble in Mind, 431.
70 Ibid, 18-19.
71 Ibid. 35.
adults worked together to ensure that children did not take racism too lightly because the consequence could be death. Understanding the racial order was essential to the upbringing of black youth. “Socialization for survival,” as scholar Patricia Hill Collins put it, was not exclusive to Birmingham. Rather it was a process practiced by black families across the Jim Crow South.

To understand how children in Birmingham learned to abide racist laws and customs without having their spirits broken, it is helpful to draw on historian Steven Berrey’s three-part model for studying the ways black parents in Mississippi taught their children to survive and subvert Jim Crow. First, they instructed children in racial rules for protection; second, they taught children to perform, not to accept, their expected Jim Crow roles; and third, they provided an alternative meaning of blackness rooted in racial pride and struggle.72

Living in a racially segregated city like Birmingham, children looked to their parents, family, and community members for guidance. Robert Coles, a child psychologist who studied African American youth growing up in the American South, discussed the important role that parents played in teaching their children the racial rules of Jim Crow society in *Children of Crisis*. He wrote, “If the Negro child’s life is one of having to learn how to confront a future of unrelenting harassment, his intimidated parents must prepare him for it. They must teach their child a variety of maneuvers and postures to cope with his baffling lot.”73 Failure to instruct children about Jim Crow customs was not a viable option. To avoid cases like the 1955 kidnapping and murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, black families had a deep

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72 Berrey, “Resistance Begins at Home”, 76.
responsibility to educate, nurture, and prepare black children for life in a racialized society. “It is not simply that Negro children learn the bounds of their fate, the limits of the kinds of work allowed to them, the extent of their future disenfranchisement, the confines of their social freedom, [and] the edge of residential elbowroom permitted them…” explained Coles. Black children also had to learn how to use this acquired knowledge to “make sense of what is about them in the world, and what must be in them to survive.”

Unlike their white counterparts, black parents had the responsibility of worrying about how to raise their children around such racial animosity and violence. Methods on how to approach lessons on racial socialization varied. Some adults chose to be open in their explanations of how to act in the presence of whites and the reasons for behaving in such a manner, while others gave directives without clarification. Deborah J. Walker remembers receiving some of her lessons on racial rules through unspoken word. “We had a phrase, ‘More is caught than is taught,” said Walker. “I literally caught that it was not okay to be black. Nor was it safe. We had to be careful when we moved outside of [our] community and while our parents tried to make life as normal as possible…we

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74 On August 28, 1955, Chicago native Emmett Till was kidnapped and murdered in Money, Mississippi by two white males for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Half-brothers Roy and J.W. Milam kidnapped the fourteen-year-old male from the house of his great uncle Moses Wright. The Milam brothers pistol-whipped Till and later tied a cotton gin fan around his neck and disposed of his body in the Tallahatchie River. Days later Till’s submerged body was discovered by a young white male who had gone fishing in the river. Weeks later on September 19, Roy and J.W. Milam appeared in court for the murder of Emmett Till. After an all-white jury deliberated for 67 minutes, the Milam brothers were acquitted. Later, J.W. Milam confesses to the murder in an interview with Look magazine reporter William Bradford Huie. Till’s death raised an important question of whether black children were to be protected against racial violence on the basis of their age.

75 Coles, Children of Crisis, 340.
Racialized danger was something that concerned all black citizens, children included. “My mother knew that I was too rambunctious to be a little black boy in the South,” recalled Washington Booker, III. “That put me in the position to be killed.” “Sometimes she would beat me. She’d say, ‘I’d rather kill you myself than have a white man do it.’” Fear that a child could be injured or killed for having committed a real or perceived violation of Jim Crow law or custom was every black parent’s worst nightmare. Refusing to lose a child to racial violence, parents like Booker’s mother went to extraordinary lengths to keep their children safe, even if it meant physical discipline.

Regardless of how parents socialized their children, having to address the simple question, “why?” proved extraordinarily difficult. Raising a child under Jim Crow was an arduous endeavor. Parents had the dual responsibility of preparing their children for life as a black person in a white segregated world, while also keeping them inspired and motivated to live a life better than those who came before them. Part of rearing black youth included having to explain why certain opportunities did not exist for them. Dale Long recalled a day when he and his brother convinced their father to take them to the Lyric Theater in downtown Birmingham to see a movie. What Dale and his brother did not know was that this particular theater was segregated, which meant that blacks had to enter through an alley and could only sit in the upstairs balcony. “I could see the look of

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humiliation on my dad’s face,” said Long. It pained his father to have to expose his sons to that level of degradation. For Carol Mauell McKinstry, her parents chose to drive their children in their family car before ever riding segregated public transportation. “My parents never really allowed us to ride the bus. There were a lot of things my parents didn’t tell us. Rather than saying ‘You can’t,’ they conveniently dropped us off or picked us up rather than have us get on a bus and have someone tell us that we could not sit up front.”

The McKinstrys were not the only black parents who worked hard to avoid embarrassment and shame. In fact, avoidance was a common form of protest. When at all possible, parents tried their best to shield their children from discrimination. Even Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had trouble denying his children certain childhood experiences because of racial law. In his book, *Why We Can’t Wait*, King reflected on having to wipe tears from his daughter’s face while explaining why she was not allowed to visit Funtown, a local amusement park. He wrote:

> When you suddenly found your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing unconscious bitterness toward white people …. [Y]ou can understand my legitimate and unavoidable patience.

78 Interview with Dale Long, telephone interview with author, digital recording, July 8, 2014, Dallas, Texas. Recording in possession of author.
80 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*, (New York: A Signet Book, 1964), 81-82.
Many parents could relate to the fear of the “ominous clouds of inferiority” forming in the minds of children. Learning that their skin color denied them certain rights and privileges was a difficult life lesson, but a necessary one. Children needed to learn their “place” in society at a young age to prepare them for life ahead.

In addition to teaching children to know their place, parents and community members also worried about protecting black children from the harmful physical and emotional effects of segregation. Living in a city where racial violence and police harassment was frighteningly common, it was imperative that black children understand that any “real or perceived violations of racial customs could result in injury or death.” This especially held true for black boys who, regardless of how young they were, were still seen as sexual predators. Any accusations regarding inappropriate behavior toward a white woman or girl could result in being arrested, attacked or even murdered. As for black girls, they were taught to be cautious during interracial interactions, particularly with white males, for fear of sexual assault.\(^8^1\)

When parents were not thinking about the physical dangers associated with Jim Crow, they fretted over their children’s emotional well-being. In grooming children for a life under segregation, parents had to see to it that these young, impressionable individuals did not internalize the negativity and become self-loathing. As challenging as it may have been, parents had to teach their children how to perform the role of a second-class citizen in order to survive the rituals of Jim Crow. Though most parents feared their child might internalize this inferior status, others wanted their children to accept as truth their place in life if it meant keeping them safe from harm. Regardless of how parents

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\(^{8^1}\) Berrey, “Resistance Begins at Home”, 78.
chose to socialize their children, it was critical that they understood and could successfully navigate Birmingham’s racial power structure. To combat the emotional stress of learning Jim Crow culture, families worked closely with the larger black community to help children separate the stereotypes and “expected public actions” from who they truly were as individuals. Referred to by Berrey as the “dual process,” black adults educated the youth about racist customs and how to perform the role of a second-class citizen while including lessons that encouraged self-worth and racial pride.  

The act of “performing” a particular persona in the presence of whites was something that African Americans had practiced since slavery. Just as enslaved parents socialized their children to endure the trials of slavery by “paying deference to whites while maintaining self-respect,” so too did black parents in the period of Jim Crow. Much like their ancestors, parents and those in their community worked together to teach children how to tolerate degradation and dehumanization while “maintaining their humanity” and protecting their self-esteem. By learning to discern the act and role of subordinate from the individual’s own thoughts and feelings made performing tolerable. Examples of enactments performed by adults and youth include using the titles “Mister” and “Miss” when addressing whites and only entering the white homes and businesses of through a rear door. Part of learning to enact these racial stereotypes involved observing grown-ups. In watching how black adults interacted with whites and how they navigated public spaces, children grew to understand that by portraying themselves as second-class citizens in the presence of whites was nothing more than a means of survival and not a

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82 Ibid.,
reflection of them personally. These enactments provided African Americans a way in which to separate Jim Crow law and customs from who they were as human beings and what they knew to be true about black Americans. “The law was not about right and wrong, or just and unjust, but rather it was something [blacks] obeyed to survive.”

In addition to teaching lessons in Jim Crow performance, black adults taught children how to reject negative stereotypes and embrace a meaning of blackness grounded in racial pride. Redefining blackness allowed black parents and adults to educate the youth on the true history and culture of their people. The home became central locations for such lessons. It was a safe environment where parents could teach their children how to survive in a Jim Crow world while also helping them to love themselves and take pride in being black.

Not every lesson in survival occurred at home. Children often benefited from observing black adults navigate systems of oppression. Watching them interact with whites taught children valuable lessons about how to appease segregationists without compromising personal integrity. But for Birmingham native Gwendolyn Sanders Gamble, lessons on race presented themselves even in the midst of disappointment. She recalls her mother going to register to vote. “There was a poll tax that she did not have money to pay for. There was [also] a lesson that she should have been studying to pass this test,” said Gamble. “I said for someone who lives in this country, this is a right that you should have without paying a poll tax, without taking a test.” Although her mom was not allowed to register, Gamble learned an important lesson. “I knew that the white man up the street didn’t have to go down there and take a test. If he could read or write, he

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84 Berrey, “Resistance Begins at Home”, 78-79.
was allowed to vote. …Whether you can read or write, you should have the right to voice your opinion of whom you wanted to be elected.”  

Seeing her mother turned away at the polling station was a difficult experience, but meaningful nonetheless. Conversely, some parents chose to challenge racial discrimination rather than appease whites. Condoleezza Rice, a Birmingham native who later served as Secretary of State under President George H. W. Bush, remembered a time when her mother confronted a white saleslady at a local department store. It was 1961 and Rice, along with her mother, went dress shopping at Berger-Phillips, an upscale department store located in downtown Birmingham. After perusing the store, Mrs. Rice escorted six-year-old Condoleezza to the dressing rooms marked “whites only”, but before they could make it to the dressing room, a white saleswoman stopped them. The woman quickly took the dress from young Rice’s hands and directed them to a storage room that they could use as a makeshift dressing room. Even in her adult years Condoleezza Rice still remembered her mother’s encounter with the saleswoman. In so many words her mother said, “My daughter will be trying this dress in a dressing room, or I’m not spending my money here.” Afraid of losing her commission, the saleslady escorted the two of them to a changing room that could not be spotted at first glance, and preceded to guard the door for fear of someone finding out. If her supervisor found out, she could have been fired. Rice felt great respect and pride for her outspoken mother. “She was always on my side,” she stated.

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While this was certainly not a daily occurrence, other African Americans shared similar stories of their parents challenging white supremacy publicly. “My father was very outspoken,” said Carrie Delores Hamilton Lock. “He was not afraid of white people. He always said what was on his mind, and it often got him in trouble.” When she was no more than six or seven-years-old, Lock’s father had a verbal altercation with a Birmingham police officer. “We were on the way to the hospital to pick my mother up, and the police stopped my father. [The police] got really smart. They said something [like]. ‘Get out the car, Boy.’ And of course we were in the back seat, and my dad said, ‘Who are you calling ‘Boy’?’ And the cop said, ‘You’re going to be in trouble.’ My dad said, ‘If you put your gun on top of the car and fight me fair, I’ll show you who a boy is.’ While some may have criticized Lock’s father for his “bold behavior,” it taught young Carrie an important lesson. Her father proved there were protectors in the community, people who were willing to challenge white segregationists and Jim Crow ideology especially at a time when blacks could not depend on members of the Birmingham police force to protect and serve black citizens.

In addition to personal acts of defiance, black adults joined local civil rights groups. By the late 1950s and into the early 1960s, organizations like the NAACP and later the ACMHR experienced high levels of membership. As card-carrying members of such organizations, black parents and adults made public their disdain for the status quo. More importantly, their involvement exposed children to a culture of resistance and a community of people that supported social, political and economic advancement for

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88 Ibid. 203.
African Americans young and old. It was also through parental involvement in these organizations that children were exposed to collective activism, which would later inspire some to take part in the mass demonstrations of May 1963.

Outside of home, school was another important site for children to build self-esteem and racial pride. “School equipped us with the knowledge and skills to achieve and to be successful despite Jim Crow,” said Deborah J. Walker. “We understood that school was our way out, a survival tool. So I (and many others) knew that we had to do our best academically. Our teachers had standards and expectations and we were expected to live up to those.”

Within the hallways and classrooms of some of Birmingham’s black public schools, children learned about black history and culture. “Black kids had very limited knowledge of blacks’ contribution to this society,” said Larry Russell who attended segregated schools. “We had Negro Education Week in school, where your teachers would assign you a task of finding something that was done by a colored person.”

Although students complained about there being a short list of famous people, it still provided them an opportunity to acknowledge contributions by African Americans despite racial oppression.

Aside from cultural assignments, individual teachers took it upon themselves to educate students about racism; they wanted to inspire them to be agents of change. James Stewart’s civics teacher, Odessa Woolfolk, challenged her students to read news articles and discuss current events as a class. “We would give our opinions on currents,” recounted Stewart. “No one up until that time had asked us what our opinion was.”

Woolfolk’s teaching philosophy enabled her students to “look around …and see some of the things that were incorrect in Birmingham and some of the racism that was actually law at the time, the Jim Crow laws.”\footnote{James Stewart. “James Stewart,” in \textit{Foot Soldiers for Democracy}, 134.} Arnetta Streeter was also a student in Mrs. Woolfolk’s history class and she too considers her to have been a great influence. “She openly encouraged us. There were very few teachers who would actually speak up and tell you ‘Yes you need to participate in the movement…’ She was the one that was going to tell you exactly how it was and encouraged you.”\footnote{“Veteran Foot Soldiers and the 1963 Birmingham Campaign” (presentation, Lessons of the Birmingham Movement: A Symposium on Youth, Activism, and the Struggle for Human Rights, Birmingham, AL, April 25-27, 2013).} Living in a society that mistreated and undervalued black life, teachers like Mrs. Woolfork sought to inspire and uplift their students through education. But it was not easy.

Jim Crow impacted black teachers as much as it did their students. Teaching at black schools did not have autonomy over the curriculum. Instead, teachers were obligated to follow the prejudice-based curricula mandated by the state which almost entirely excluded the history, culture, and often even the presence of black Americans. As an act of defiance educators took it upon themselves to share such knowledge with their students even at the risk of unemployment or retaliation from white vigilantes. While the majority of black teachers practiced social conservatism, there were others who believed the time had come for them to teach their students how to challenge Jim Crow, rather adapt to it. While segregated education certainly had its disadvantages, black schoolchildren were still exposed to positive, thoughtful black people, who by their mere
presence and words of encouragement, helped black children see themselves and their people as something more than what white society defined them as.\footnote{3}

Beyond the classroom, extracurricular activities served as another avenue for black adults to affirm the value of black children. Implementing after-school activities was part of a larger initiative to provide African American children with the kind of experiences that every child deserved. Condoleezza Rice remembered the efforts toward this end put forth by men and women in her community. “Parents in Birmingham made their children’s opportunities as equal as possible and their worlds as pleasant as they could. Segregation did not intrude every day and people lived good lives. We found a way to live normally in highly abnormal circumstances.”\footnote{4} While Rice, a resident of Smithfield a community that was home to the city’s black professional and upper class, was fortunate enough to take lessons in piano, ballet, gymnastics, and even baton twirling, not all black youth were afforded these same opportunities.\footnote{5} Certainly children from poor or working class families were denied most of these chances. Nevertheless, the black community endeavored to provide young people with productive escapes from the harsh realities of Jim Crow. Children played in the segregated city parks, participated in black-only youth sports leagues, and were involved in academic and social clubs and joined athletic teams at their respective schools. Quite simply, they worked hard to provide their children with “normal” childhoods.

\footnote{3}{Berrey, “Resistance Begins at Home”, 80; Adam Fairclough. \textit{Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow}, (Athens: the University of Georgia Press, 2001), 44-45; 67.}
\footnote{5}{Ibid.}
The youth also took it upon themselves to create childhood experiences that mirrored those of white children. Establishing social clubs like the Cavaliers, an all-boy organization, and the Cavalettes, their sister group, black youth fostered racial pride, built camaraderie, and provided each other with social interactions that would otherwise not exist in white spaces. Arnetta Streeter, along with a group of her classmates created a social and savings club called The Peace Ponies. “I don’t remember how we came up with that name. I do remember there were eight of us, just girls.” Their group worked to encourage their fellow classmates and friends to raise money for needy families. Social groups and networks like these offered black children an alternate environment where they could thrive and be themselves. Activities such as these were important because they broke barriers of exclusion. Creating space for black children to socialize helped convey the message to them that in no way should they deem themselves inferior to white children, and as American citizens, they too had a right to enjoy life.

In black controlled spaces children not only received instructions on how to live in Jim Crow Birmingham, but they were also exposed to black history and culture, and were taught that despite the popular conceptions of black inferiority, they were just as good as white people. In reflecting on his childhood, Birmingham native Freeman A. Hrabowski remembered the guidance and encouragement given to him by members of his community.

Our internal world told us that we would have to be twice as good as others in order to overcome life’s unfair obstacles. All of these messages had an immeasurable impact on the psyches of young African American children; yet, the black community constantly worked to balance those negative messages –

96 Leon F. Litwack, Trouble in Mind, 375.
97 Arnetta Streeter. “Arnetta Streeter,” in Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 117.
98 de Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 2.
from constructive guidance in the home and neighborhood and moral lessons taught in the church, to inspirational stories in the Negro-owned newspapers and constant encouragement by teachers who told us we were very special. It was in this community, during tense and often terror-filled times that gripped the nation that I lived as a child.  

By challenging what it meant to be black, African American adults provided black children with a different way of seeing the world and themselves. In this way, the black family and the broader black community helped black children preserve their core humanity and develop a strong sense of self. Unlike segregated public spaces in which black children were ridiculed and humiliated, the black family and the black community worked together to uplift and protect youth.

The personal stories of African American men and women born in Birmingham between 1945 and 1955 shine light on the common experiences of black children during the height of Jim Crow. Through lessons recalled on how to navigate public spaces and how to interact with whites, their stories reflect how the black family and the black community taught children to survive and thrive. It was in the black community where boys and girls not only found comfort and support from the scourge of Jim Crow, but also learned how to navigate the color line. In black Birmingham, children learned the rich history of their ancestors and learned to take pride in their culture. Mothers, fathers, teachers, and other community members taught boys and girls that they were more than the color of their skin; they were smart, beautiful, courageous, and destined for greatness. Here, children learned to challenge racist ideologies, laws, and customs.

99 Freeman A. Hrabowski, III., Excerpt from his speech, “The Role of Youth in the Civil Rights Movement: Reflections on Birmingham” (September, 1996), 4.
Still, despite their best intentions, Jim Crow was overwhelming. “The fact is, as hard as they tried our parents could only partially succeed in building a fully adequate and parallel social structure,” recalled Condoleezza Rice. “The time would always come when the children of Birmingham had to face the realities of segregation.”¹⁰⁰ And just as children faced these realities, they eventually began to respond to the call of the movement.

¹⁰⁰ Rice, Extraordinary, Ordinary People, 76.
Chapter 2

The Local Movement

“It is people in motion, not people talking that make changes, although it takes talk to
excite people to motion.”

Rev. Dr. Fred Shuttlesworth, pastor and activist

The strength of the Birmingham movement in 1963 was due in large part to the Alabama
Christian Movement for Human Rights. The ACMHR was founded in 1956, at a time
when the Alabama government ordered a statewide ban of the NAACP and local black
residents found themselves at odds with the traditional leadership class and its
bureaucratic strategies and accommodative approach towards white supremacy. From this
shift in leadership organizations emerged new “tactics and strategies of social disruption”
that transformed the 1950s and 1960s black protest. Organized by a group of black
activist-clergy and like-minded community members with strong ties to the black
working class, this indigenous movement embraced nonviolent civil disobedience and
mass movement protest of a kind unseen in Birmingham. The ACMHR took the fight
against racialized social, political, and economic oppression to new heights.

The ACMHR was part of the mass movement efforts that emerged in the 1950s.
Different from the bureaucratic organization model of the NAACP, this local movement
mobilized, organized, and coordinated collective actions designed to attain the common

goals of the group. This new organizational form contributed to some of the most memorable events of the Birmingham and modern civil rights movements. This chapter examines leadership shifts in the Birmingham movement in order to explain the tactical move from legal action to nonviolent direct action between 1956 and 1963, and its effect on black protest and activist culture. Also, particular attention is placed on the impact that the ACMHR led effort had on Birmingham’s black youth. As men and women attended ACMHR’s weekly mass meetings, so did children. The structure and welcoming spirit provided school-aged children an opportunity to learn more about the racial inequities black Americans faced, and later, a public platform for them to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo. It is through the ACMHR’s mass-oriented tactics and progressive leadership that children became actively engaged in the Birmingham civil rights movement.

The formation of the ACMHR signified a noticeable break from traditional black protest in Birmingham. Prior to its existence, the NAACP served as the primary black protest organization. Between 1913 and 1956, leaders of the NAACP challenged discriminatory practices and customs by petitioning and negotiating with white city officials. This approach was not well received by the black community, particularly those who identified as part of the working class. The 1950 Census data reveals that more than 80 percent of black males living in Birmingham worked in unskilled categories of labor. The statistics were similar for black women as 75 percent of them worked in private houses as domestics. Working in occupations with low wages, long hours and few opportunities for advancement, the black working class needed leadership with vested

103 Ibid., 40.
interest in immediately eliminating systems of oppression for all blacks, not just black professionals.

As local blacks continued to question the NAACP’s commitment to ending interracial tensions, the number of racially motivated crimes in Birmingham’s black residential communities, particularly those that were once white neighborhoods, continued to rise. During the postwar period of 1945 to 1965 more than fifty bombings went unsolved.¹⁰⁴ Lawlessness fueled anger, anxiety, and fear among black citizens young and old. Increased danger along with a lack of protection from city police and political officials greatly impacted NAACP membership. Other reasons for membership decline included financial instability, disinterest in the organization, and internal conflict among chapter members.¹⁰⁵ Within the span of four years, 1947 and 1951, paid membership in the organization fell from 7,000 to just 1,554. However, nothing impacted black protest as much as racial violence.

In 1953, while the NAACP fought to remain relevant in the eyes of African Americans, thirty-one-year-old Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and his family moved to Birmingham to serve as pastor of the Bethel Baptist Church. His arrival brought new life to an aging congregation and a unifying force to a fractured movement. Much of this had to do with his holistic and civic-minded religious philosophy. Shuttlesworth believed that social justice and spiritual salvation were equally important. “When the ideas, and mood and time and the man and God all conspire—that’s when a movement is born,” recalled

In addition to his pastoral duties, Shuttlesworth was a member of the Civic League (an organization established to help African Americans obtain a standard of living on par with Birmingham whites), the Jefferson County Coordinating Non-Partisan Voters League, and the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (IMA). His initial fight against Jim Crow was mostly indirect, but following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling outlawing school segregation, Shuttlesworth chose to adopt a more aggressive approach. He noted, “I had felt like a man when I passed the newsstand and saw the Supreme Court outlawed segregation...I felt second only to when I was converted. Second greatest feeling in my life. I felt like a man. I had the same rights, my kids had the same rights as other folks.”

Outlawing segregation encouraged Shuttlesworth to demand racial equality. When Shuttlesworth became president of the IMA he petitioned for the “immediate hiring of Negro police and detectives in areas populated by Negroes.” He also called for the city commission to increase the number of Jim Crow recreational facilities for Birmingham’s African Americans. Although the city commission disapproved of Shuttlesworth and the IMA’s proposals, he refused to back down.

By the latter half of 1955, Shuttlesworth had become one of the most highly visible leaders among blacks in Birmingham. Local churches and community groups called on Shuttlesworth to discuss civil rights philosophy and activities. On January 22, 1956, Shuttlesworth appeared at a community-wide gathering sponsored by the NAACP. During his speech, Shuttlesworth criticized white city officials and other local segregationists for mistreating black citizens. More importantly, the reverend spoke out about the NAACP and its obligation to the black community. He challenged the

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107 Ibid., 79.
organization to not “live in tree tops or in a maze of grandiose phrases,” but instead make clear goals that appealed to the masses. Shuttlesworth also criticized the traditional leadership class. He noted:

Negroes are tired and fed up with their own leaders who rise to prominence and then do the Uncle Tom; yes, against those who use their positions for fame and personal aggrandizement. We don’t need big shots. Negroes are tired of leaders who will take handouts, sops, and pats on their backs. What we need are men who seek not office, but service; men who will stand for the right.

What Shuttlesworth conveyed in his speech was merely an expression of what those at the grassroots level felt regarding the leadership style and commitment of the organization’s leaders. After denouncing these “supposed-to-be leaders” he was asked to serve as membership chairman for the organization.

In his first months in the position, Shuttlesworth worked to rebuild ties between NAACP leadership and members of the black community. “I would draw on the fact that I knew people from different areas…. Now my purpose was to draw them all into the NAACP.” Shuttlesworth understood that in order for real and substantial progress to be made, there would have to be a collective effort. Mass participation would ensure financial and emotional support for the movement, but would also provide a degree of unity that would prove intimidating to the white opposition. Expanding the NAACP’s membership base to those who did not reflect the traditional, upper-class, image of the organization concerned members of the national office. National executive secretary, Roy Wilkins, advised local NAACP chapters to avoid those affiliated with left-wing or

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108 Ibid., 89.
109 Ibid.
Communist groups whom he feared might try to infiltrate the organization. 1950 to 1956 marked a period in the United States characterized by increased political repression against communism and a campaign centered on spreading fear of communist influence on American soil. Named after Republican U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, who was heavily involved in the campaign, “McCarthyism” was the practice of making accusation of subversion or treason, related to pro-communist activity, without substantial evidence. Postwar McCarthites punished individuals and groups for challenging the status quo and caused Wilkins’ concern about left-wing individuals identifying with the NAACP. These same issues were of no concern to Shuttlesworth who continued to recruit members for the Birmingham chapter. He was more concerned about unifying the black community and less about the reputation of the local NAACP chapter or the national organization. It was about taking down social, political, and economic systems of oppression for Shuttlesworth.

Rise of the ACMHR

While the NAACP worked hard to avoid being called anti-American, the southern white power structure launched a south-wide investigation of NAACP branches in an effort to uphold segregation laws and practices. In Alabama, State Attorney General John Patterson sought a court injunction against the Birmingham branch. He accused the organization of communist involvement in the form of financial support and membership.
Patterson’s allegations resulted in a nine-year suspension. On May 26, 1956, a Jefferson County police officer interrupted a small staff meeting led by Shuttlesworth to serve the Birmingham chapter with papers. When a member of the staff asked the police officer, “What can we do?” he replied, “You can’t do nothing.” Frustrated by the officer’s crude remark, Shuttlesworth answered back “That isn’t so. We have to do something. There’s never a time when a man can’t do anything. You are not going to stop people from trying to be free.” Later that day, Shuttlesworth gathered Arthur D. Shores, Lucinda Robey, and other NAACP leaders to discuss appealing the injunctions. When attorney Shores informed his NAACP associates that failure to adhere to the injunctions could result in jail time, Shuttlesworth replied, “Well, some of us may need to go to jail anyway.” Disappointed but refusing to succumb to the pressures of the state government, members agreed to reconvene once again and discuss next steps. As word of the state ban on the NAACP spread through the city, so did a sense of “helplessness and hopelessness” amongst black residents.

Despite black people’s dissatisfaction with the NAACP’s bureaucratic leadership style, accommodative approach to white supremacy and pace of change, its absence left an “organizational and protest vacuum” in the city of Birmingham. Outlawing the local chapter also sent shockwaves across the state of Alabama. The idea that all branches of the NAACP could be banned was certain to leave communities of black Americans

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113 *Manis, A Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 93.

114 *Ibid*.

115 *Ibid*. 
across the American South with no formal organization to report their grievances to. Over the next several days Shuttlesworth received phone calls from local men and women wanting to know what this meant for racial equality in Birmingham. Unable to provide them a definite answer, Shuttlesworth began to worry. Then on June 2, at three o’clock in the morning, Shuttlesworth heard what he understood to be the voice of God saying to him, “They are trying to kill hope, but you can’t kill people’s hope.” He replied, “Speak Lord, for I hear” and at that point he heard the words “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” Shuttlesworth interpreted the spiritual experience as divine instruction to allow black Birmingham natives to decide whether to organize a new protest group to fill the void created by the absence of the NAACP.

Later that evening Shuttlesworth invited local ministers Nelson H. Smith Jr. of New Pilgrim Baptist Church, Terry Lee Lane of Union Bethel Independent Church, George B. Pruitt, of Wilson Chapel Baptist Church and R.L. Alford of Sardis Missionary Baptist Church, along with Lucinda Robey, principal of Moore Elementary School to his home. There he shared with them his spiritual experience and together they discussed the possibility of organizing a mass meeting for early in the week. Each of them understood the need to establish a new organization to serve as the voice of the people and to stand firm against Jim Crow. Before it was time for the pastors to preach at their respective churches, they drafted a series of resolutions calling for the formation of a new grassroots organization. The next day, those same individuals gathered at the Smith and Gaston Funeral Home to finalize plans for the new organization and to prepare for the following evening. During this time, the committee discussed a series of issues, which later became

116 Manis, A Fire You Can’t Put Out, 94.
known as the ACMHR “Declaration of Principles.” They first expressed their determination to “press forward persistently for freedom and democracy,” and demanded an end to all forms of second-class citizenship from American society. Next, the committee stated members of the ACMHR would remain “sober, firm, peaceful, and resolute within the framework of goodwill” while challenging the status quo. In regard to human rights, they demanded the state government “protect human rights” and “guarantee to each of its citizens the same rights and privileges.” The ACMHR also condemned “gradualism,” stating “procrastination, or evasion and the hastily enacted laws do not lead us to embrace ‘Gradualism.’” They demanded a new beginning, declaring, “WE HAVE ALREADY WAITED 100 YEARS!” In their final statement, they emphasized the use of nonviolence, stating, “We Negroes shall never become enemies of the white people; we are all Americans.” At the same time, planners condemned passive behavior arguing because of “history and the future” they must “march to complete freedoms—with unbowed heads, praying hearts, and an unyielding determination.”

The next day, June 5, over one thousand men, women and children sat in the pews, aisles, church foyer, and even gathered outside in the parking lot of the Sardis Baptist Church in order to hear Shuttlesworth and members of the planning committee talk about this new protest organization. Being a church-based protest organization, the mass meeting began with music selections and prayer. As the levels of excitement and anticipation continued to build, the Reverend Shuttlesworth took to the pulpit. He remembered: “I indicated that the enemies of freedom were trying to kill our hopes and

keep us from fighting, but they could not outlaw us all; that I was ready to go to jail anytime, to be the first, and that I thought a lot of Negroes were ready to go to jail in order to help get their rights, if the procedure proved necessary.” Shuttlesworth also stressed that the black citizens of Birmingham were in search of “leadership to better their condition” and to see to it “the laws of our land are upheld according to the Constitution of the United States.” Outcries of “yes” and “that’s right” rang throughout the church. After Shuttlesworth’s passionate speech, the planners read their proposed principles and resolutions before bringing them to a vote. Responding with a standing ovation the congregation adopted the “Declaration of Principles” and voted in support of organizing the ACMHR. Before the meeting adjourned, the planners informed the group that their success depended on financial support, regular meetings, and a pledge of “moral support and loyalty.” That evening, the ACMHR raised $245 in donations. The founding members also designated Monday evenings for mass meetings, which later became known as “Mass Night” or “Movement Night.” With “The Movement is Moving,” as the ACMHR slogan and Fred Shuttlesworth elected president of the organization, the modern Birmingham civil rights movement began.

**Changing of the Guard**

Whereas the NAACP’s traditional leadership decided strategies and procedures for the organization, the ACMHR operated under a different premise. It was part of a new

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118 Clarke, “Goals and Techniques in Three Civil Rights Organizations in Alabama,” 40.  
120 Clarke, “Goals and Techniques in Three Civil Rights Organizations in Alabama,” 140-141.
social protest movement of the mid-1950s that consisted of mass protest supported by local movement organizations. Rather than having only one “homogeneous civil rights movement” several local movements emerged with their own methods for grassroots organizing, fundraising, and recruitment. According to sociologist Aldon Morris, these “local movement centers” were also social organizations within the community of a subordinate group that utilized collective action in order to achieve the shared goals of the group. The Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights did exactly that for Birmingham’s black community. Fred Shuttlesworth and ACMHR leadership devised tactics and strategies designed to aid black citizens in their fight against Jim Crow.\footnote{Morris, \textit{The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement}, 40.}

The new movement status of the ACMHR benefited the organization a great deal. First, it made it easier for the organization to garner support from the black community. At the time of ACMHR’s formation in 1956, Shuttlesworth had only been in Birmingham for three years. Hence, locals did not associate him with the traditional leadership class that divided the community through its accommodationist ideology. Second, the new status made it more difficult for local white power structures to co-opt and control ACMHR leadership through personal rewards as they had with some of the NAACP leaders. Refusing rewards or favors proved the ACMHR’s rejection of the racial status quo thereby raising its creditability among Birmingham blacks. Other reasons for the ACMHR’s growing popularity, according to Morris, can be tied back to three key factors: “(1) decision-making apparatus and procedures; (2) reliance on charisma, mass emotionalism, and mass enthusiasm; and (3) disruptive tactics by the masses.”\footnote{Ibid., 46.}
This local movement center encouraged input from all its members, regardless of a person’s economic or social status. Nearly 50 percent of its members had unskilled or semi-skilled occupations, while only 10 percent held professional jobs. Whereas the NAACP’s membership derived mostly from the middle and upper class sector, the ACMHR appealed more to working class blacks. Reasons for the class disparity can be tied back to the ACMHR’s organizational structure. Each week the organization held its mass meeting during which Shuttlesworth and other leaders shared strategy and additional information related to the movement. Even though Shuttlesworth assumed responsibility for all organizational decisions, it was not without communicating with his members.\textsuperscript{123} The organization’s transparent decision-making and organizational operations provided community folk with space to convey their thoughts and concerns. Creating a sense of “togetherness” helped steer the ACMHR away from exclusive organizing, as was the case with the NAACP. An approach such as this made it possible for the new organization to build solidarity among members and leaders, maintain high interest levels and secure financial support.

Another reason for the ACMHR’s popularity had much to do with its ties to the black church. It was no coincidence churchgoers made up approximately 98 percent of the organization’s membership base. As a church-related movement organization, the ACMHR utilized “charisma, mass emotionalism and mass enthusiasm” to galvanize its members and recruit new supporters.\textsuperscript{124} Church culture played an important role in the Birmingham movement. Incorporating prayer, devotion, and Negro spirituals as part of

\textsuperscript{123} Clarke, “Goals and Techniques in Three Negro Civil Rights Organizations in Alabama,” 28.
\textsuperscript{124} Morris, \textit{The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement}, 47.
the meeting made members feel more “at home,” which led to greater attendance and participation. This type of approach also made it possible for men and women of different social and economic statuses to unite as black Christians committed to ending segregation in Birmingham. Much of the religious undertone can be attributed to the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and his fellow ministers. Local black ministers played an integral role as leaders in the ACMHR. Their charismatic personas and experience with mass-based institutions like the black church, made it possible for the organization to mobilize the masses.

Of all the unique characteristics of the ACMHR, its use of “disruptive tactics” set it apart from any previous protest organization. At the time of the NAACP’s disbandment, progress toward racial equality was at a standstill and critics blamed accommodationists and time-consuming legal strategy for the lack of improvement. The ACMHR refused to continue down the path of gradualism and instead implemented economic boycotts and direct action demonstrations in an effort to pressure the white power structures to desegregate. In doing so, it placed black citizens in a position where they had to decide on whether they would chance losing their jobs or serve jail time in the name of justice. Although some people found the risk of direct action to be too great, others accepted personal sacrifice in return for equality. Despite the dangers involved with direct action organizing, it proved to be a powerful tool in the arsenal of the modern civil rights movement.

**Push Back**

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While many Birmingham blacks supported the ACMHR and its initiatives, not everyone shared the same sentiments. Support from the traditional leadership was at most times nonexistent. This was due in large part to Shuttlesworth’s “newcomer” status and the organizational structure of the new mass movement. Shuttlesworth had only lived in Birmingham for three years at the time of ACMHR’s founding. Having not been a member of the NAACP for too long, Shuttlesworth was able to distance himself from the traditional leadership class and its negative reputation. This allowed him to engage with, and recruit from all areas of the black community. People affiliated with the defunct NAACP including former president W.C. Patton, Rev. J.L. Ware of Trinity Baptist Church, and attorney Arthur D. Shores did not support the ACMHR initially. They were accustomed to the traditional legal approach and gradual pace of the NAACP and therefore hesitated to embrace demands for immediate change and confrontational tactics.\footnote{Morris, \textit{The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement}, 43.} What may have been true for some members of the traditional leadership, but not all, was the belief that with the rise of the ACMHR so went their access to white power. With no more accommodative negotiations, these leaders lost some of their social and political privilege. In an effort to prevent segments of the black population from supporting the ACMHR, old guard leaders looked to the Jefferson County Betterment Association (JCBA), the Baptist Ministers Conference and prominent black professionals to regain control of the local movement.

The JCBA, headed by Rev. James Lowell Ware, was comprised of nearly 110 black ministers from across the city who disapproved of the ACMHR’s direct action strategies and declared the organization “too militant for its own good.” This competing
organization sought to eliminate racial discrimination in a more diplomatic and cautious manner. Members of this organization criticized Shuttlesworth, a young minister, who to them, assumed the role of leader without having paid his dues. Ministers of the JCBA also demonstrated their objection of the ACMHR by refusing to host its mass meetings at their respective churches. In doing so, ministers made it difficult for the organization to recruit new members as some church goers aligned themselves with the pastors of their congregations. This shocked Shuttlesworth as he expected overwhelming support from his Christian brethren.  

While these ministers criticized Shuttlesworth for being overly eager, he knew many of these same individuals had done little for the struggle. “Some of the ministers will not work because of their own old priestly philosophy of letting the Lord do it and others do not out of envy of seeing somebody else move on,” he reflected. Reverend Edward Gardner, co-founder of the ACMHR and pastor of Mount Olive Baptist Church, also commented on JCBA members:

The ministers in the Jefferson County Betterment Association at that time were senior men. Some of them [were] sixty, seventy years old, and they just wasn’t willing to venture out. So it took energetic young men who were willing to go to jail. They weren’t willing to do that. They were gon’ call a meeting with the city fathers and try to work out something. But we saw that it was impossible for that time. They [the white officials] wouldn’t meet with you. 

Despite the lack of support from elder community leaders, Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR remained confident.

129 Ibid., 95.
Another point of contention stemmed from black traditional leaders’ disapproval of the direct action tactics embraced by the ACMHR. The organization had its sights set on fomenting immediate change, which ran counter to the gradual approach pursued by the old guard. Also, the alternative tactics like nonviolent demonstrations and boycotts used by ACMHR came to be viewed not as complementary but as threatening and detrimental to the current movement. John Rice, father of Condoleezza Rice and pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church, opposed nonviolence by arguing he did not think he could refrain himself from retaliating against white agitators. “I’m not going out there because if some redneck comes after me with a billy club or a dog, I’m going to try and kill him,” he told his wife during a conversation about his decision not to engage in civil disobedience. “They’ll kill me, and my daughter will be an orphan.” The idea of nonviolence appeared both dangerous and counter intuitive, particularly when home and church bombings occurred regularly in black residential communities.

Opponents also deemed the ACMHR too aggressive and viewed its demands - desegregation of public transportation, support for hiring an African American to the city’s police department, integration of Birmingham public schools, and desegregation of public parks- both unrealistic and untimely. They feared the sudden pressures of the ACMHR would only result in stricter enforcement of Jim Crow laws, and possibly increase racial violence against black citizens. Also critical of the ACMHR were black professionals who supported accommodationist ideology. People like Taggart and

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130 Rice, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People*, 94.
Gaston, who were willing to accept gradual and limited change, found it difficult to align themselves with the new organization.\textsuperscript{131}

Whereas Shuttlesworth expected opposition from white segregationists, he had not anticipated outright rejection from the black middle class. In understanding the class conflict Shuttlesworth called on the middle class to shift their focus on racial unity: “Our professional people need to understand that the gap between the class[es] and the masses must be closed. The classes evolved up from the masses and where would you go and what would you do without the masses?”\textsuperscript{132} Although frustrated by the display of class difference, Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR remained true to their convictions and pressed on.

While many disapproved of the ACMHR, it was no match for the overwhelming support from the black community. “The ACMHR was the biggest thing that really helped our people, so that’s what I did. I got with them and tried to do whatever I could,” said Joe Hendricks, an active community member.\textsuperscript{133} For Henry M. Goodgame Sr., “It was exciting, really, in the sense that we now [had] something or some leaders that could support us and announce what to do as far as Jim Crowism and that kind of thing. We were pretty proud about that.”\textsuperscript{134} Johnnie McKinstry Summerville recalled the days when she and her husband attended mass meetings together: “This is what they were preaching us: to do for ourselves. They taught us that if you come in and help, then we all as a group can get more done than just a single person. This is what really interested us: people working together to cause these things to happen. This was what the movement

\textsuperscript{131} Morris, \textit{The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement}, 35.
\textsuperscript{132} White and Manis, \textit{Birmingham Revolutionaries}, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{133} Huntley and McKerley, \textit{Foot Soldiers for Democracy}, 47.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 58.
was about, and it really made a statement for us.”\textsuperscript{135} Even \textit{Birmingham World} editor Emory Jackson, who also founded and served as the first president of the Alabama State Conference of the NAACP, endorsed the ACMHR. In an editorial Jackson wrote, “The fight for freedom in Alabama …will continue either with or without the NAACP.” As someone who encouraged black Americans to seek equality through education, voting, and entrepreneurship, Jackson understood the benefits of a new protest organization in Birmingham. He may have disapproved of the ACMHR’s use of civil disobedience but he applauded the organization for continuing the fight against Jim Crow.\textsuperscript{136} The traditional Negro leadership class’ control of black protest dissolved along with the NAACP in 1956. Establishing the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights introduced the city of Birmingham to a new band of civil right leaders whose approach and unwavering commitment to ending racial discrimination encouraged African American to play a more active role in the movement.

\textbf{The Voice of the Working Class}

Following the first mass meeting in May 1956, the ACMHR worked tirelessly to establish itself as the new voice of black protest in Birmingham. Much of its growing popularity stemmed from its membership base and less conservative platform. Having felt ignored by the traditional leadership, Birmingham’s black working class made up the majority of the ACMHR membership. According to membership data, nearly fifty percent of members held unskilled or semi-skilled jobs with an average annual family income of $3,715. 70 percent of its supporters were over the age of thirty and had small

\textsuperscript{135} Huntley and McKerley, \textit{Foot Soldiers for Democracy}, 82.
\textsuperscript{136} Eskew, \textit{But for Birmingham}, 127.
nuclear families. Membership was also disproportionately women at 62 percent. These statistics demonstrate that traditional leadership no longer solely occupied the local movement. Now it was the masses of Birmingham blacks concerned with securing basic civil rights. They were schoolteachers, factory workers, domestics, parents, and neighbors. They attended weekly mass meetings faithfully, many with their children in tow. These members depended on movement leadership to improve black American’s educational, legal, social, and economic status in Birmingham. Placing emphasis on first-class citizenship, and not “equal luxuries and grandeurs” appealed to lower class blacks whose socioeconomic status reflected the social and class prejudices effecting African Americans as a result of racial discriminatory laws and practices. This segment of the black community, with the help of Shuttlesworth and ACMHR activists, sought to prove they too were citizens worthy of equal access and opportunities.

Representing the needs of working class blacks, which were otherwise ignored by the traditional leadership class, was at the heart of the ACMHR’s campaign for equality. In a letter written by Shuttlesworth to Mayor James W. Morgan of Birmingham, he made it clear African Americans were “deeply concerned about receiving a more just and equitable share of this City’s economy, both in better jobs and better opportunities.” For a time, the NAACP demanded equal pay for ‘separate but equal’ occupations like teaching. As for the ACMHR, it challenged white officials to desegregate Birmingham’s job market thus providing blacks an equal and fair opportunity at better employment like

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137 Clarke, “Goals and Techniques in Three Negro Civil Rights Organizations in Alabama,” 34.
138 Ibid., 52; White and Manis, Birmingham Revolutionaries, 38.
139 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 129.
working as a police officer or bus driver for example. Aside from the economic gains, a job such as this would put an end to the white power structure that dominated the city.

Between 1956 and 1959, the ACMHR rallied around other key issues such as desegregation of public transportation, integration of Birmingham public schools, and desegregation of public parks. These efforts by the ACMHR demonstrated the organization’s pledge that all rights and privileges associated with American citizenship be true for all, regardless of race.

**ACMHR Strategy and Tactic**

As for protest strategies and tactics, ACMHR used a legal-judiciary approach along with weekly mass meetings and non-violent direct action to combat racial discrimination. In order to effectively execute these organizational techniques, the ACMHR relied on strong leadership, legal support, and steady financial and moral support from its members. While the ACMHR adopted its legal strategy from the NAACP, it was the organization’s decision to incorporate non-violent techniques—mass meetings, marches, boycotting, and protests—that resonated with ACMHR members. In a survey given to 180 ACMHR members in 1959, 80 percent of people approved of the organization’s use of nonviolent strategies as a way to improve the race relations in Birmingham.

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140 On October 8, 1958 the ACMHR issued a petition and request that public accommodations be “desegregated and open to all citizens without regard to race, creed, or color.” The letter was addressed to Birmingham mayor James W. Morgan, Eugene Connor and other members of the Birmingham City Commission, and members of Birmingham Park and Recreation Board. See Lola Hendricks Paper Collection, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Birmingham, AL. April 2009.

141 Clarke, “Goals and Techniques in Three Negro Civil Rights Organizations in Alabama,” 57
Birmingham. Of the different nonviolent techniques, ACMHR members most preferred mass meetings, and it showed. Members who completed the questionnaire indicated they attended every weekly mass meeting over 54% of the time. The ACMHR averaged between 500 and 600 people weekly, increasing in times of extreme adversity. ACMHR mass meetings seemed to operate based on three primary objectives: group solidarity and togetherness; maintaining interest among local activists and supporters; and securing weekly financial contributions. As for its members, the mass meetings served a “multi-purpose function.” The spiritual atmosphere of meetings appealed to religious worshippers, whereas the emotionalism provided those less involved with protest activities an opportunity to relate to those who were more active. Allowing members to identify with the organization and its mission through multiple outlets helped create the level of group unity needed for mass movement programming.

Just as mass meetings were new to the Birmingham movement, so too was nonviolent protest. Shuttlesworth and ACMHR activists borrowed their nonviolent tactics from the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), another local movement organization. Founded in December 1955 in a reaction to the protest against segregated city buses came to fruition after NAACP activist Rosa Parks refused to give her bus seat to a white passenger. The Montgomery bus boycott, led by MIA president, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a sociopolitical protest campaign that lasted from December 1, 1955 to December 20, 1956. It ended when the United States Supreme Court declared

142 Ibid., 70-72.
143 Ibid., 74-75.
144 Ibid., 80-83.
state and city laws demanding segregated buses were unconstitutional. Prior to the MIA, no mass-based movement existed in the state of Alabama. The organization’s mass organizing strategy and non-violent approach changed the structure of the Montgomery movement, and also served as a training ground for civil rights leaders like Shuttlesworth. Everything from the weekly mass meetings and use of direct action became part of the ACHMR’s strategy for a mass movement in Birmingham.

**Birmingham Bus Boycott**

In 1956 Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR organized a bus boycott in Birmingham following the MIA’s successful battle for desegregated seating on Montgomery buses. Shuttlesworth along with Rev. N. H. Smith Jr., of New Pilgrim Baptist Church, wrote letters to the Birmingham Transit Company and city officials requesting the city’s segregated seating ordinance be abolished. They asked the city commission to comply with the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the Montgomery suit by December 26, otherwise ACMHR protesters would take to the buses and ride in a “desegregated fashion.” Their confrontational tone and threats of direct action did not sit well with Birmingham’s whites. It appeared to them that Mayor James Morgan and the city commission was not adequately upholding and protecting racial law and order. “It would be helpful, in our view, if action were not pressed at this time to end bus segregation at once here in Birmingham,” read an article in the *Birmingham News*. “But apparently action to that end is going to be pressed.”

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145 Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 129.
147 *Birmingham News*, December 22, 1956
Americans had no right to demand changes to Jim Crow legislation, as those laws were believed to be in the best interest of blacks and whites. Up until this point, black leaders took a less combative approach when dealing with white officials. Instead of making demands and issuing ultimatums, they took a more accommodative approach to racial inequality. Departure from this form of black protest threatened the city’s racial order. It eliminated the ability to anticipate, and prepare, for movement tactics. With direct action, and not the traditional legal approach, as the preferred method of the ACMHR, local city officials could no longer depend on court backlog to delay black progress. As the newcomer status enabled ACMHR leaders to be independent of whites, it challenged the local white power structure and its ability to “co-opt and control” black leaders through personal rewards.¹⁴⁸ Threats of a bus boycott by ACMHR activists made it clear the days of the gradualist approach were done, but not without pushback from white segregationists.¹⁴⁹ As Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR worked tirelessly to end racial discrimination, local Klansmen and white antagonists began plotting ways to bring the organization and its leader to an end.¹⁵⁰

On Christmas Eve 1956, ACMHR members gathered at the New Hope Baptist Church to discuss plans to sit in the whites only sections on city buses should city officials and the busing company decide not to act in compliance. During the meeting Shuttlesworth coached members for the sit-in. He reminded the audience, “to be

¹⁵⁰ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 130
courteous and not to strike back” if threatened or attacked. Once the meeting adjourned, Shuttlesworth addressed questions from local city reporters. When asked by an Associated Press reporter about integrating Birmingham buses, he replied, “We hope we won’t have to do anything but ride. We are pledging ourselves here and now to nonviolence.” The next day Shuttlesworth delivered his Christmas sermon and as he stood in front of the pulpit he told his congregation, “If it takes being killed to get integration, I’ll do just that thing for God is with me all the way.” Later that evening, white vigilantes tossed sticks of dynamite at the north side of his home. The explosion destroyed the house and injured Shuttlesworth and two of his children. Once it became clear that everyone had survived the explosion, people began to look at the incident as a sign from God. One onlooker proclaimed, “God saved the Reverend to lead the movement.” An act meant to terrorize Shuttlesworth and possibly end his life, actually galvanized ACMHR members inspiring them to continue its fight against segregationist laws, customs, and racial violence.\textsuperscript{151}

Days after the bombing, over 250 African Americans rode city buses in the white’s only section in direct violation of city law. The protest was in response to the Birmingham Transit Company’s refusal to lift Jim Crow seating on public city buses by the ACMHR’s deadline. No incidents of violence were reported, but some 20 ACMHR members were arrested for breaking for the law.\textsuperscript{152} Although the city would not desegregate its buses for another two years, this event showed both white segregationists

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 134.
and black conservatives that the ACMHR was determined to end segregation in Birmingham sooner rather than later.

**School Desegregation**

Part of keeping pressure on city officials involved addressing segregation and discrimination in all areas of the black experience, and part of that included demands for schools to be desegregated. As leader of the movement, Shuttlesworth decided that his family had to be on the frontlines of the struggle, and what better than to have his children, Ruby Fredericka and Patricia Ann, integrate the city’s public school system. It was believed by many whites that Birmingham’s public school system, just like public schools across the South, operated under the guise of separate but equal. However, that was not true. The city’s white public schools received more money per pupil than black public schools. Based upon the condition of facilities, books, equipment and supplies, it was clear white segregationists devalued the education of black youth.¹⁵³ For these reasons the national headquarters of the NAACP challenged the legality of school segregation before the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1954, the NAACP’s legal council presented the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. In the trial, NAACP legal attorney Thurgood Marshall argued segregated public schools were not equal because they inhibited the “educational and mental development of Negro children and deprived them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.” At the end of the trial the Supreme Court voted in support of school integration stating, “…in the field of education

¹⁵³ Ibid., 140.
the doctrine ‘separate but equal’ has no place.”\textsuperscript{154} Over the next three years, white segregationists challenged the court ruling. Those opposed to integration argued the federal government had no right to interfere in matters of the state, and mixing the races would destroy the southern way of life. This, however, did not stop anti-segregationists from moving forward with their efforts. Finally a break came in September 1957 when the Arkansas NAACP recruited nine courageous black teenagers to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The events of Little Rock encouraged Shuttlesworth to seek the same opportunities for Birmingham’s black youth. He saw the long terms benefits of black and white children learning together. “When kids go to school together, and play together, they won’t be unknown and won’t be enemies.”\textsuperscript{155} As such, Shuttlesworth set about challenging Alabama’s Pupil Placement Law, which permitted school board superintendents to determine which schools children attended. For him the law was another attempt by pro-segregationists to delay implementing the \textit{Brown} ruling. This would not be a solo act. Shuttlesworth encouraged eight sets of parents to enroll their children, as well as his own daughters, at all-white Phillips High School at the same time as the nine students in Little Rock attempted to desegregate Central High School.

Before any black student could set foot in Phillips High, parents first had to submit a letter to Birmingham Board of Education superintendent L. Frazer Banks seeking permission for their children to attend. To their surprise, Banks granted the request, pending approval of the school board at its September 6 meeting. Tensions built


\textsuperscript{155} Manis, \textit{A Fire You Can’t Put Out}, 145.
as people waited for the board meeting. It was reported that six Klansmen brutally assaulted Edward Judge Aaron, a thirty-four-year-old black male. During the assault, a Klansman pistol whipped Aaron and then proceeded to interrogate him. “You think any nigger is as good as a white man? You think nigger kids should go to school with my kids?” Before he finished his violent attack, he ordered Aaron to tell Shuttlesworth, “Stop sending nigger children and white children to school together…or we gonna do them like we’re gonna do you.” Next the assailant hit him with his pistol one last time before stripping Aaron of his pants and using a razor blade to remove his entire scrotum. Despite losing a substantial amount of blood, Aaron survived the mutilation. News of the heinous crime spread quickly in Birmingham’s black community. Parents who volunteered their children for Phillips High began to fear for their lives, and as a result, most of them withdrew from the petition. Shuttlesworth, however, among several others, felt it necessary to push forward. They refused to be intimidated by violence and paralyzed by fear.156

The Shuttlesworth Children go to School

On the morning of September 9, 1957, Shuttlesworth alerted the school board that Ruby Fredericka Shuttlesworth, Patricia Ann Shuttlesworth, Nathaniel Lee, and Walter Wilson would be enrolling at Phillips High. His telegram to the school board stated: “Our application for admission having not been specifically approved or denied, our children needing to be in school, we are presenting them for enrollment at Phillips…”157 Based on recent events, Shuttlesworth requested the city provide the young desegregationists

156 Ibid., 147-48.
157 Ibid., 150.
protection upon their arrival. At 10:30 a.m., Shuttlesworth and the four teenagers arrived at Phillips High. As the car pulled up to the school, a mob of white men wielding baseball bats, knives, and chain links swarmed the vehicle shouting, “Niggers, go home!”\textsuperscript{158} Leaving the children in the car, Shuttlesworth stepped out and headed for the school. Before he could reach the school doors he was met by the mob. According to eyewitnesses, Shuttlesworth suffered blows to the head from brass knuckles and bicycle chains. Struggling to stay conscious, he broke free and raced back to his car. Before he could drive everyone to safety, vigilantes smashed the car windows and attempted to pull one of the children from the backseat. Ruby Shuttlesworth was the only child to sustain any injuries after having a car door slammed shut on her foot. They drove from the mob scene and headed straight to the University of Alabama Hospital.\textsuperscript{159}

Once there, a doctor recommended Shuttlesworth stay at the hospital overnight for observation. He replied, “I’ll stay if you order me to, but not unless the police will protect me here.” Knowing the city police department was laden with Klan members and sympathizers, Shuttlesworth said, “I won’t die over here in Klan country. If I go home and die, at least I’ll die among my friends. Besides, I have a mass meeting to go to tonight.”\textsuperscript{160} Before being released from the hospital Shuttlesworth fielded questions from reporters. One reporter asked him about the mob attack, he responded: “I guess this is the price you pay for freedom.” When asked what he was striving for in terms of his civil rights work in Birmingham, he answered, “For the day when the man who beat me and

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 151.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 153.
my family with chains at Phillips High School can sit down with us as friends.” Later that evening Shuttlesworth attended the ACMHR mass meeting. “God is showing the world that there are some Negroes in Birmingham who are not afraid,” said Shuttlesworth as he discussed the events of the day. While the ACMHR approached Jim Crow laws and practices nonviolently, they were prepared for, yet unafraid of, violent reactions by white segregationists and their aggressors. Even a reporter who attended the mass meeting that evening noted, “Negroes, while speaking calmly seemed prepared to meet any effort of whites to create any disturbance.” Although the four black teenagers did not integrate Phillips High, the ACMHR was not deterred. Instead, they kept the pressure on for the next six years.  

**Victory**

Almost two years after the twenty-one protesters challenged the city’s Jim Crow bus ordinance, the case finally reached federal district court. In an effort to circumvent the Judge Seyborne Harris Lynne’s ruling not to remove segregation signs from buses and terminals, the city commission implemented a new law that allowed the Birmingham Transit Company to decide whether bus passengers needed to comply with the law. Angered by the commission’s surprise move, the ACMHR called a special mass meeting during which the members passed a resolution stating Birmingham blacks had the right to ride in any seat. Before the meeting’s end, ACMHR members agreed to a second bus protest. The next day, October 16, 1958, 60 integrationists boarded city buses and sat in the sections designated for white passengers only. Police arrested fourteen people.

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162 Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 140-141.
including Rev. Shuttlesworth. Circuit Judge George Lewis Bailes sentenced him to 90
days in jail, and fellow demonstrator Rev. J. S. Phifer to 60 days. Those remaining spent
five days in jail and 180 day suspended sentences. They were also warned to avoid
participating in future protests.\textsuperscript{163}

The ACMHR sought to continue its fight against the city’s transit company by
calling on Birmingham blacks to boycott once again. The organization even garnered the
support of Rev. Ware and the conservative Jefferson County Betterment Association. The
protest, however, failed. James W. Morgan, mayor of Birmingham, and Eugene “Bull”
Connor, commissioner of public safety, squelched the boycott through the use of media
blackout and police intimidation against men and women involved in the protest.
Furthermore, the ACMHR-JCBA coalition could not mobilize enough of Birmingham’s
black community to win the protest.

Despite attempts to suppress the fight against segregation, the ACMHR filed a
class action suit against the Birmingham Transit Company for denying African
Americans the right to choose their own seat on public buses. Initially, the ruling in the
case upheld the segregation ordinance. However, after several appeals the case reached
U.S. district Judge H.H. Grooms. On December 14, 1959 the judge ruled in favor of the
ACMHR, finding Birmingham’s seating ordinance unconstitutional. Grooms stated, “A
willful refusal to obey a request to move from the front to the rear of a bus when
unaccompanied by other acts tending to disorder, does not constitute a breach of the
peace.” The ruling was announced at a mass meeting held in the Metropolitan Baptist
Church. Overjoyed, the ACMHR adopted a new resolution stating,

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 143-44.
“We are free Now …to ride ANY seat available on ANY BUS.”

Bus integration provided Birmingham blacks a new dignity and sense of citizenship. It also gave Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR momentum needed in order to undertake the battles against Jim Crow.

**Sit-ins and “Prayer Vigil for Freedom”**

Claiming victory in the battle to desegregate school boys, the ACMHR began preparing for its next battle, desegregating public accommodations. Equal access to restaurants, restrooms, public parks, water fountains, and movie theaters indicated a person was part of the community. Segregated facilities such as these reinforced the racial disparities amongst Birmingham citizens. As the ACMHR looked for new protest strategies and ways to involve more black citizens, a student movement was making its way across the American south. Beginning in the late 1950s southern black college students organized sit-ins in an effort to promote social, political, and economic change. The sit-in strategy involved protesters occupying seats at lunch counters on the principle, “sit until served.” Despite restaurant management denying service to the protesters, the desegregationists remained seated, thus costing the businesses money. Even in instances when white agitators harassed sit-in protesters they refused to leave the counter. They believed if the violent displays were on the part of white citizens, then people would begin to see the righteousness of their cause.

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164 Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 146. See also a copy of ACMHR flyer announcing, “It’s time NOW to move up front! Ride First Class for First Class fare – Sit in ANY empty seat on buses!” See Lola Hendricks Paper Collection, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Birmingham, AL. April 2009.
Most memorable was the sit-in demonstration at a Woolworth’s luncheonette in Greensboro, North Carolina. On February 1, 1960 four black male college students - Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr. and David Richmond - from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, entered a local Woolworth’s and demanded service in an area designated for white customers only. With service denied the young men remained at the counter. By the end of the week, student protesters occupied 63 of the 66 seats at the Woolworth lunch counter. Although the luncheonette remained a segregated establishment, the mistreatment of the “Greensboro Four” drew local and national attention. Their courage also spawned demonstrations across southern cities.

Intrigued by the steady rise of student-directed sit-in campaigns, Shuttlesworth hoped to work with local black college students and apply the same direct action strategies to the Birmingham movement.

In the days that followed, Shuttlesworth met with students from Miles College, a historically black college located six miles from Birmingham. Impressed by the efforts put forth by students at North Carolina A&T, students at Miles wanted to get involved. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss staging sit-ins at some of the local luncheonettes downtown. Frank Dukes, president of Miles student body and leading student activist, opposed the idea for fear of violence. Instead, Dukes recommended a “round-the-clock prayer vigil on behalf of democracy, fair play, and voting rights.” Students intended for the vigil to last as long as southern congressmen continued filibustering civil rights legislation at the nation’s capital. Although Shuttlesworth preferred sit-ins, he supported the students’ efforts and agreed to post bail should anyone get arrested.
On March 1, exactly one month after the “Greensboro Four,” students from Miles College and Daniel Payne College, another historical black college, hosted the “Prayer Vigil for Freedom” in Kelly Ingram Park, a public space designated for African Americans. That day, students marched around the park holding signs that read “The Law of God Will Be Fulfilled” and passed leaflets to passersby which announced: “We will remain in this public place night and day, regardless of weather, as many weeks as our prayers are needed.” The prayer vigil did not last as long as the students intended as Birmingham policemen shut it down and transported twelve demonstrators to the precinct. No charges were filed, but all those detained were photographed and fingerprinted before being released.165

Later that night, the evening newspaper ran an article on the prayer vigil and in it included the names and addresses of those arrested. In all likelihood, the newspaper purposely published names and addresses in an effort to help white vigilantes locate demonstrators. Nevertheless, student demonstrators feared for their personal safety. Two weeks after the vigil, Robert Jones, a sophomore from Miles College and student demonstrator, suffered a brutal beating at the hands of white men with iron pipes and billy clubs. His mother and sister were also attacked as they too were home at the time of the assault. When two deputies visited the Jones’s home the next morning to take a report, the mother recognized the two officers from the night before; no arrests were made and no charges were filed. Being willing to identify policemen as the assailants, demonstrates the length individuals would go in order to challenge racial order. Despite the students’ unsuccessful protest, segregationists made it clear that there would be strong

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165 Ibid., 148.
retaliation for any future demonstrations or tactics that dared disrupt the status quo. Nevertheless, student activists continued to organize.

**The New York Times Reports on Birmingham**

On March 31, 1960, a group of ten students decided to integrate lunch counters at five department stores downtown. That day, all ten students were arrested and charged with trespassing. This nonviolent response from both restaurant staff and city police surprised the protesters. Unlike in Greensboro where segregationists heckled and threw food and beverages at the demonstrators, those in Birmingham chose a more passive approach as to avoid a media firestorm. Yet and still, outside reporters like *New York Times* journalist Harrison Salisbury wanted to cover a story about Birmingham’s racial tensions. In his article headlined, “Fear And Hatred Grip Birmingham,” Salisbury criticized white citizens mistreatment of black activists. “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, enforced 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.” Describing Birmingham as a city of fear, many white citizens took issue with Salisbury’s assessment of “Magic City.” White citizens’ displeasure with Salisbury had more to do with an outsider interpretation of southern life and less about the journalist himself. Pro-segregationists disapproved of the northern critique of southern sociopolitical dynamics, claiming it a false representation of

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a culture they knew little of. Other white citizens argued the negative publicity was not indicative of all Birmingham whites, as not everyone supported segregation or approved the tactics used to preserve racial order. It even went as far as Birmingham’s three-man city commission—Mayor James Morgan, J.T. Waggoner, and Eugene Connor—filed a lawsuit seeking punitive damages against the New York Times for Harrison’s article.\(^{169}\) Several citizens contacted the Times demanding a retraction, but none was given. Even if the Times issued a statement, the “damage” had been done and once again negative publicity cast its shadows on Birmingham.

**Freedom Rides Comes to Birmingham**

As the Birmingham movement gained momentum, a series of unrelated civil rights events in spring 1963 helped thrust the local freedom struggle into the national spotlight. Beginning in May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a civil rights organization founded in Chicago, Illinois [in 1942], organized the “Freedom Ride” campaign to challenge segregation in interstate transportation.\(^{170}\) CORE sponsored this campaign in response to a ruling by the Supreme Court, which mandated that desegregation of interstate transportation pursuant to the commerce clause of the U.S. constitution.

African American motorists faced a variety of dangers and inconveniences along America’s highways. Segregationists worked to limit black mobility by refusing to service or repair black owned vehicles, denying black travelers access to public


\(^{170}\) Since its establishment in 1942, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) is a civil rights organization committed to creating equality for all American citizens despite “race, creed, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion or ethnic background.”
accommodations along the interstate, harassing motorists, and sometimes threatening violent removal from white-only “sundown towns.”

CORE recruited thirteen individuals, six white and seven blacks to integrate interstate bus terminals and transportation facilities while traveling on public Greyhound buses bound for the Deep South. The plan was to depart from Washington D.C. on May 4, and arrive in New Orleans, Louisiana on May 17, to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision. The Freedom Riders included men and women from various lived experiences. They journeyed from places like Wisconsin, North Carolina, and New York. They attended seminary school, black colleges and universities, and historically white institutions. They were World War II veterans, preachers, and rabbis. Finally, they were members of civil rights organizations (CORE and SNCC) as well as sympathizers of the movement. Together they traveled down U.S. interstate highways and into some of the most violent and racist cities in America. Although the Freedom Riders were trained in nonviolent philosophy and technique, nothing could have prepared them for the brutal beatings and vigilante violence.\(^{171}\)

By the end of week one, the Freedom Riders traveled from Washington D.C. through Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina before arriving in Atlanta, Georgia on May 12. During their stop in Atlanta, the Freedom Riders met with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and discussed travels. With their next stop being Alabama, King advised the riders to use caution as he was told, two weeks prior, of rumors that the Ku Klux Klan

would attack the Freedom Riders at the Birmingham bus terminal. No sooner than the next day did King’s warning ring true as the Freedom Riders made their first stop in Anniston, Alabama. There, a mob of Klansmen vandalized and bombed the Greyhound bus carrying protesters. They bashed in the widows of the bus, slashed tires, and tossed a firebomb into the rear of one bus, forcing riders to flee the bus only to be surrounded by vigilantes who proceeded to beat them. After some time, a highway patrolman appeared on the scene. He drew his service revolver and fired into the air; the mob dispersed. With the bus completely destroyed, the Freedom Riders had no choice but to wait for a new bus to arrive. This event shook the Freedom Riders, as they had yet to encounter such violence. While previous southern states chose to avoid physical altercations with the traveling protesters, so as not to attract any media attention, those living in Alabama had other ideas. The Anniston Klansmen made it their mission to teach these men and women about the laws and social codes of the south. As the activists in Anniston waited on the side of the highway for help, the Trailways bus with the remaining riders continued its journey to Birmingham.

Unbeknownst to the traveling integrationists, the Birmingham Police Department, headed by Eugene “Bull” Connor, made an agreement with local Ku Klux Klansmen that allowed them time with the Freedom Riders without interference from law enforcement. “My instructions were from the Birmingham Police Department that the Klan organization had 15 minutes, quote ‘to burn, bomb, kill, maim, I don’t give a goddamn,’ said Gary Thomas Rowe, an FBI Informant. Connor also communicated, “I will

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guarantee your people that not one soul will ever be arrested in that 15 minutes.” Even though police and FBI officials knew about the agreement, no effort was made to protect the riders. Then on May 14, 1961, the Riders pulled into Birmingham’s Trailways bus terminal. As they pulled into the station they could see a mob of white men, some of whom were carrying weapons. As the activists stepped off the bus the mob met them with iron pipes, clubs, and chains. For fifteen minutes, Birmingham Klansmen had their way with the nonviolent demonstrators. Once time expired, the assailants fled the scene leaving many integrationists in need of immediate medical assistance. A few minutes later, city police officers arrived on the scene and as promised, no arrests were made. The violent attacks against the Freedom Riders at the Trailways terminal solidified Birmingham’s reputation as one of the most “racially intolerant” cities in America.

As news of the Trailways attack spread, Birmingham’s citizens, both black and white, searched for answers. Many wondered why no police officers reported to the bus terminal at the time when the Freedom Riders’ first arrived. Connor responded because it was Mother’s Day, and he gave officers permission to visit their mothers. Despite Connor’s attempt at ignorance, very few people believed his story. Although people differed in their opinions about segregation, they seemed to agree what occurred at that bus terminal was unacceptable. The next day, Birmingham whites criticized Connor and the Birmingham police department for their role in Sunday’s attack. The *Birmingham News* published an op-ed with the headline “Where Were the Police?” In the article, the reporter referenced Harrison Salisbury’s article on the city’s racial climate and admitted “fear and hatred did stalk Birmingham’s streets” the day before, and blamed Bull Connor

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174 Ibid.
for further tarnishing the city’s reputation. Even the Young Men’s Business Club criticized Connor for the delayed response claiming he “[let] the people of Birmingham down” by not staying off the violent mob.\textsuperscript{175} In his own defense, Connor said: “I have said for the last twenty years that these out-of-town meddlers were going to cause bloodshed if they kept meddling in the South’s business.”\textsuperscript{176} This type of backlash from Birmingham whites shows the complexities of racism. Even though the majority of white citizens supported segregation, they each had opinions of how southern racial hierarchy should be preserved.

Birmingham blacks were also critical of what transpired at the bus terminal. For white demonstrators to be attacked by white vigilantes demonstrated the extent to which segregationists would go to preserve the status quo. After the attacks, the ACMHR held a mass meeting at Bethel Baptist Church and invited the Freedom Riders to share their version of events in Anniston and Birmingham. The activists gave a harrowing account, discussed the goals of the protest, and called on Birmingham blacks to rise up and continue the fight for integration.\textsuperscript{177} Adults were not the only ones gripped by the Freedom Ride riot. Black children also tried to make sense of the violence. James Roberson, who was 17-years-old at the time of the Freedom Rides, recalls his encounter with some of the Riders following the attack.

It was in the afternoon when they started bringing the Freedom Riders to Bethel Church. White kids and black kids had been beaten. That was the first time I saw human blood being spilled for the cause. …These kids weren’t too much older

\textsuperscript{175} Manis, \textit{A Fire You Can’t Put Out}, 267  
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 268.  
than I. they were college kids. I knew that the police would beat up black people, so that was nothing unusual for me. But white people beating up white folks…I did not believe a white would do that to their own kind. …I saw that they were bleeding just like we were bleeding. I realized then the connection was not racial. To see the inhuman treatment of their own made me realize it was not the color of their skin but the principle they believed in.¹⁷⁸

As African Americans living in the south, they understood racial violence in terms of black and white; thus to witness white people attacking other whites was shocking. What happened to the Freedom Riders proved that segregationists would turn on their own people to protect and preserve the southern way of life. The attacks in Birmingham taught Roberson an important lesson about compassion and courage. To witness black and white college students putting their lives in harms way as part of an effort to end segregation taught him the battle for civil rights was not a battle fought solely by black Americans, but rather by people whose principles and core values aligned with the movement. The experience also exposed him to youth activism. Recognizing many of the integrationists were no older than him, Roberson could see the fight for civil rights was not about a person’s age or race, but about their commitment to racial equality. Lastly, the young man’s exposure to the Freedom Rides proved the fight for full citizenship was not just taking place in Birmingham or in the state of Alabama, but across the country.

The Freedom Ride attacks also highlighted the political battle between state and federal governments. At this time, the Kennedy administration adopted a moderate stance on matters concerning the civil rights struggle in the South. During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy made promises to both black leaders and southern Democrats. He promised to secure equal rights for black Americans while opposing

federal involvement in civil rights matters in an effort to please southern segregationists within the Democratic Party. However, once elected president Kennedy’s creditability with those black leaders began to wane as his unwillingness to move on matters regarding civil rights and the pace at which he moved on those issues frustrated black citizens and movement leaders. He seemed to hide behind the belief that state and local officials could manage the racial dilemma without federal involvement. The president’s neutrality proved disappointing at the time of the Freedom Rides because many civil rights activists and supporters felt the federal government should have intervened and punished the assailants. Despite the Kennedy Administration’s low-level interest in matters of civil rights, it did not stop the Freedom Riders or Birmingham blacks from moving forward.

The morning after the violent mob scene at the Trailway bus terminal, the Freedom Riders gathered at the home of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth to discuss next steps. Committed to the mission of the Freedom Rides, the integrationists agreed to return to the bus station and travel together to Montgomery. With the help of Shuttlesworth and ACMHR members, the riders arrived safely at the terminal. Once inside the station, the riders learned the bus trip was cancelled as no driver wanted to drive them to Montgomery. As the integrationists sat in the white only waiting area discussing their plan of action, a white mob formed. Only this time the riders had the protection of Birmingham policemen. After discussing their situation, the Freedom Riders decided to cancel their trip to Montgomery and instead fly to New Orleans so they could attend the anniversary celebration of the Brown decision. Once at the airport, the riders went ahead and purchased their tickets with Eastern Airlines. At the same time the riders waited to board the plane, a mob of white vigilantes assembled. It was also reported that airline
officials received bomb threats. Even though the threat proved false, the airlines cancelled the flight. They tried boarding another flight, but this time with Central Airlines, and still no success. All they could do was wait and see if local police could remove the mob members from the vicinity. It took several hours for the police to clear the vigilantes from the airport and set up blockades to prevent future mobs from forming. Finally, at 11:00 p.m. the riders boarded an Eastern flight headed to New Orleans. An hour later they arrived in New Orleans, bringing the first Freedom Ride to an end.\textsuperscript{179}

A new contingent of Freedom Riders from Nashville, Tennessee volunteered to continue the journey. They traveled from Nashville to Montgomery, and then to Jackson, Mississippi where they all were arrested for integrating the bus terminal. Each rider was charged with failing to comply with the peace statute and fined in the amount of $200. Those refusing to pay were then sentenced to 90 days in the state penitentiary at Parchman Farm. There the Freedom Riders, men and women included, were put to work on chain gangs. They were also subject to strip searches, beatings, poor living conditions, and inedible food. Another Freedom Ride brought to an end. The courage of these men and women and the national and international attention their efforts received forced the Kennedy Administration and the Interstate Commerce Commission to outlaw segregation on interstate travel. Sanctions and penalties would be given to those who violated the order. Additionally, the courage and determination of the integrationists inspired southern blacks to adopt civil disobedience as an effective strategy for challenging segregation and discrimination.

\textsuperscript{179} Eskew, \textit{But For Birmingham}, 157-158.
A New Form of Government

Meanwhile back in Birmingham, a new coalition of local white realtors, businessmen, attorneys and reformers emerged. These self-appointed “leaders of tomorrow,” were concerned that the recent Freedom Ride riot and increased racial tensions could result in the same economic decline the city of Little Rock, Arkansas experienced following the racial disturbances over school integration in 1959. To avoid the same economic stagnation from occurring in Birmingham, these reformers sought to restructure the city’s form of government as well as advocate racial moderation. Their plan was twofold. First, they wanted to change the city form of government from a “three-man commission system” to a mayoral council. The purpose was to remove the “archsegregationists, who acted in the interests of heavy industry,” from local political office and replace them with racial moderates who were sympathetic to the emergence of a “service-consumer sector.” Second, the reformers hoped by rehabilitating the city’s negative reputation that it would lead to economic expansion in Birmingham. With the support of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, led by Sidney Smyer, president of the Birmingham Realty Company, and a former supporter of the segregationist White Citizens’ Council, the Birmingham Bar Association drafted a report recommending a mayor-council form of government. Additionally, the Young Men’s Business Club with the help of its members, collected over 11,00 registered voters to sign a petition

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180 Members of the new coalition of reformers included attorneys Tom King, Charles Morgan Jr., and George P. Taylor; realtors Sidney W. Smyer and William P. Engel; and banker Charles F. Zukoski.
181 Ibid., 171.
182 Ibid., 154-55.
supporting the proposed form of city government. The efforts of Smyer and those with the YMBC marked a split in the “Big Mule Consensus.” The Consensus was a group of elite bankers, industrialists, and attorneys who intervened in city politics. They were committed to protecting Birmingham’s “colonial economy” by supporting laws and practices, like discriminatory wages for example, which benefitted the iron and steel economy. The battle between the Big Mules and the new coalition of white businessmen, attorneys and reformers resulted in an increase of racial tension in Birmingham.

Threats of political and race reform drove racial extremists like Bull Connor into office. Connor, along with the other commissioners, attacked the new mayor-council form stating it was designed to “compromise segregation.” He called on his constituency of working class whites not to “turn your city over to people who would integrate it.” On November 8, 1962, citizens of Birmingham voted on the new governmental setup. Despite the best efforts of the Big Mules and their supporters, it was not enough. The majority of Birmingham citizens voted in favor of the new mayoral-council. The change of government resulted in seventy-five people announcing their run for one of the nine positions on the new city council. Of those candidates, four chose to run for the position of mayor. Bull Connor and fellow commissioner Jabo Waggoner both ran as archsegregationists, in hopes that their segregation rhetoric and fear tactics would garner enough support from working-class whites to put one of them in office. On the side of the moderates were attorneys Tom King and Albert Boutwell. Each candidate relied on the

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184 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 166-67.
185 Ibid., 187.
support of white racial liberals, progressive lawyers, and service economy advocates, as well as black voters, to win the election. As the candidates geared up for election in March 1963, Shuttlesworth, ACMHR leaders, and local civil rights activists sought to address the long-standing grievances of the black community with a series of boycotts and nonviolent protests.\textsuperscript{186}

In the spring of 1962 ACMHR collaborated with students from Miles College, David Payne College, and Booker T. Washington Business School to stage a selective buying campaign. Using black consumerism to fight discriminatory laws and social codes, college activists called on black citizens to boycott stores that supported segregation and economic inequality. Campaign organizers launched “Wear Your Old Clothes For Freedom” on March 15, 1962, during the Easter holiday season. Rather than purchasing new Easter outfits, citizens wore clothes from their own wardrobes in solidarity. College students walked the streets of black communities passing out handbills that listed the names and addresses of stores to support along with fliers that read, “Why spend hundreds of dollars at a store where you cannot spend twenty-five cents for a hamburger?” and “Why spend first-class money and be treated as a third-class citizen?” The student activists wanted blacks to educate themselves on the hypocrisies of Jim Crow and to begin challenging its place in society.\textsuperscript{187}

As blacks began boycotting stores across the city, white business owners and city officials retaliated. Local merchants and such stores as F.W. Woolworth, J.S. Newberry, and Sears, Roebuck fired their black employees, while others kept “Whites only” signs in their windows to demonstrate their support of racial segregation. Even local newspapers

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 188-189.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 198-199.
like the *Birmingham News* and the *Post-Herald* responded to the boycotts by providing minimal coverage of the protest in an effort to divert attention away from the city’s tarnished reputation. However, as time passed, commitment on the part of both parties began to wane. Some of the black boycotters returned to shopping at white-owned stores both out of convenience and lack of progress on the part of the ACMHR and the student protesters. Even white businessmen felt the effects of the campaign as their monthly profits declined. Despite minor setbacks, neither side refused to settle.  

After months of boycotting, the city’s chamber of commerce recruited the Senior Citizens Committee (SCC) to assist with negotiations. The Senior Citizens was a clandestine group of eighty-nine white business executives from industrial, manufacturing and service sectors. In late August 1962, the SCC organized a biracial subcommittee to improve race relations among Birmingham’s white businessmen, black community and movement organizers in a moderate fashion. “These racial incidents have given us a black eye we’ll be a long time trying to forget. We’re now as bad as Little Rock,” said Birmingham realtor Sidney W. Smyer who supported race reform for the sake of the city’s economy. Businessmen like Smyer feared racial tensions would lead to economic stagnation as it did in Little Rock following the violence over school integration. The SCC subcommittee received word the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a civil rights organization, planned to host its annual convention in Birmingham the following month.

**The Southern Christian Leadership Conference**

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188 Ibid., 199.
189 Ibid., 171
Founded in 1957, the SCLC served as a coordinating organization for southern civil rights organization. With the Reverend Dr. King as the executive chairman, the organization advised and assisted local grassroots organizations in ending segregation. The SCLC stressed voting power and mass community action. Support for using direct action derived from the MIA’s successful bus boycott in Montgomery. Drawing on that experience, Dr. King and others recognized the power of grassroots, nonviolent protest.  

Montgomery blacks learned together an alternative means of pursuing their own freedom and the SCLC hoped the same would be said for its affiliate organizations; one of them being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights.

Fred Shuttlesworth’s ties to the SCLC dated back to the organization’s founding. As an SCLC officer, Shuttlesworth participated in conversations about the organization’s direction, while also traveling across the South to drum up support for the movement. Shuttlesworth’s association with the SCLC troubled Birmingham officials. Failure to deescalate racial tensions in Birmingham would lead to pressure from both the ACMHR and SCLC, a price the city was unwilling to pay.

Hosting the SCLC conference was a true test for Birmingham. To avoid any potential demonstrations or protests from “outside agitators,” the subcommittee requested the removal of white only signs from local businesses and facilities as a temporary concession. In addition, the SCC subcommittee agreed to discuss improving the rate of black employment in the future. In exchange, Shuttlesworth held a public press conference during which he announced the suspension of all boycotts and demonstrations on the condition merchants held true to their word.

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190 David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1999), 85-86.
The SCLC held its annual convention in downtown Birmingham from September 25 through September 28. During the four-day event, Birmingham city officials along with police and local businessmen worked together to maintain peace and order. After two peaceful days an incident occurred that involved Dr. King and Roy James, a member of the American Nazi Party. James assaulted Rev. King during his closing speech on the last day of the conference. Although Dr. King chose not to press charges, James was charged and later escorted out of the city by Birmingham mayor Art Hanes. The assailant’s punishment served as a warning to white vigilantes that the city would no longer tolerate violent behavior as it only benefited the nonviolent movement in the end. How the judge and mayor responded to the incident also demonstrated a shift in how the city planned to deal with racial violence in the aftermath of the Freedom Ride riots. City officials sided with the SCLC in an effort to deflect negative publicity and possibly salvage Birmingham’s reputation.191

What appeared to have been a victory for black Birmingham quickly evaporated as Jim Crow signs returned to storefront windows at the conclusion of the SCLC convention.192 This came as a great disappointment to black citizens as it showed that concessions they had won were merely put in place to silence the movement long enough for the SCLC to hold its annual meeting and leave the city. Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor used his position in city politics and personal connections with klansmen to ensure that the negotiations between the SCC and the ACMHR ceased and white

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191 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 204; Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 71-72; “Dr. King Assaulted at Meeting By Self-Styled American Nazi” The New York Times; Sep 29, 1962 p.9
192 Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 72; Eskew, But for Birmingham, 204.
dominance restored. Any white business owner who refused to display their Jim Crow signs would be fined and targeted by vigilantes.

Shuttlesworth responded by trying to revive the selective buying campaign during the Christmas shopping season. He reached out to Dr. King, hoping he would return, believing that his presence would increase mass movement participation. But Dr. King declined. Unbeknownst to Shuttlesworth, members of black Birmingham’s traditional leadership group, which had been displaced by him and his cohort, advised Dr. King not to get involved in Birmingham until after the March mayoral election between Bull Connor and Albert Boutwell, who was a moderate on race by Alabama standards. The belief was that if Connor won the election he would enforce segregation to the fullest and force the ACMHR to ratchet up its protests. But if Boutwell won, they assumed there would be greater opportunity to discuss and negotiate racial reform. Any moves before then would sway pro-segregationists and vigilantes to vote for Connor, which would end Birmingham blacks’ chances at equality. King respected the request of his acquaintances and convinced Shuttlesworth to postpone the ACMHR boycott until after the elections. He also promised he would revisit the direct action campaign at the SCLC’s strategy meeting in early January 1963. Accordingly, the ACMHR suspended the Selective Buying Campaign.\footnote{Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 72-73.}

In January, King decided the SCLC’s next civil rights campaign would be in Birmingham. He immediately reached out to Wyatt T. Walker, the executive director of the SCLC, and asked he help him organize a secret planning committee. Walker put together an eleven member committee that included, in addition to himself, Dr. King,
ACMHR leaders Fred Shuttlesworth and Joseph Lowery; SCLC officers Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and Dorothy Cotton; and finally King’s other advisors- Clarence Jones, Jack O’Dell, Stanley Levinson, and James Lawson. On January 10, 1963, they all gathered for a two-day retreat in Dorchester, Georgia to analyze the lessons from the Albany movement and to draft plans for the Birmingham campaign.¹⁹⁴

The Albany movement was a broad campaign in Albany, Georgia, that challenged all social, political, and economic discrimination. From November 1961 to August 1962, local Albany activists utilized various nonviolent strategies and techniques – mass demonstrations, sit-ins, jail-ins, boycotts, and litigation- to challenge Jim Crow. By December 1961, Dr. King and the SCLC traveled to Albany to join the movement. Their goal was to keep the momentum going and to attract national publicity. Despite a valiant effort, the SCLC was no match for Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, who organized a series of mass arrests in order to demobilize the civil rights campaign. After numerous arrests and minimal publicity, on August 10, 1962, Dr. King called a halt to the demonstrations and SCLC’s involvement in the movement. No significant progress was made during his time in Albany, and for that reason, King deemed the SCLC’s involvement ineffective. Despite his disappointment, King would take the lessons he learned in Albany and carry them with him to Birmingham in spring of 1963.

In the discussion of Albany, King reflected on the events and pinpointed key errors from the campaign. From his perspective, the campaign to register black voters and secure full integration was too broad. Instead, the movement should have proposed a specific set of terms to city authorities in hopes that they would take into consideration.

Targeting the city’s white businesses, for instance, could have forced city leaders to negotiate with movement leaders. “Negroes did not have enough votes to move the political power structure,” said King, “but we knew that Negroes had enough money, enough buying power to make the difference between the profit and loss in almost any business.” Another point of contention was Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett’s use of nonviolence to combat the nonviolent movement. By appearing nonviolent in the presence of cameramen and reporters, Pritchett single-handedly kept news of the movement off the front pages. In this way, he made it difficult for the movement leaders to garner the attention and support necessary to pressure city authorities into negotiation. Moreover, his use of mass arrests (more than 2,000 local black residents and out-of-town protesters were jailed) slowed movement momentum. After acknowledging their missed opportunities in Albany, SCLC members anticipated a more successful campaign in Birmingham. King and Walker addressed the planning committee with a blueprint for how the campaign should operate.

The proposed campaign would build strength over the course of mass meetings, economic boycotts, and non-violent demonstrations. During this particular phase of organizing, neither the SCLC nor the ACMHR planned mass marches or to fill the jails with demonstrators. Instead, through nonviolence and moral suasion, they planned to create enough economic pressure to convince city officials to desegregate public accommodations, provide equal employment opportunities, and establish permanent communication between races. The SCLC and the ACMHR hoped to exploit Birmingham’s notorious reputation in an effort to garner support for the movement both

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locally and at large. Also, any attempt at challenging the city’s defense of segregation would attract media attention and could serve as a national symbol of progress. “We knew that we would have at least the spotlight,” said King. In recognizing this advantage they knew they needed to create “a confrontation which would bring the nation to its conscience to recognize the injustice” that existed in the city of Birmingham.196

The ACMHR-SCLC Collaboration

The ACMHR-SCLC collaboration could not have come at a better time, as both civil rights groups needed a victory. The SCLC searched for redemption after an unsuccessful attempt to end segregation in Albany, Georgia a few months earlier. In November 1961, local Albany activists called on King and other SCLC officers to assist them in pressuring Albany city officials to ban discriminatory laws and practices. Together they organized rallies and mass marches on city hall, but to no avail. Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett’s “nonviolent” mass arrests made their direct action strategies ineffective.197 National news reports called the Albany movement a clear defeat for the organizations, especially for Dr. King.198 Both his reputation and the future of the SCLC were called into question. As for Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR, their biggest

196 Ibid., 227.
197 Ibid., 187
198 While Dr. King believed the Albany Movement to be a failure, local activists thought differently. The movement was a “failure” in the sense that no progress was made during the time King and the SCLC were in Albany. As far as the people of Albany were concerned the movement was a success. It helped lay the groundwork for the campaign moving forward. Within two months of King’s departure an African American businessman named Thomas Chatmon received enough votes to force a run-off election for city commissioner. Additionally, the Albany movement inspired African Americans in other parts of Georgia to challenge segregation and discrimination in their respective towns and counties.
challenge proved to be the organization’s inability to “cash in” on its victories as a result of the “intransigence” of Birmingham’s white establishment and Bull Connor’s resistance to race reform. In order to solidify change in the city, Shuttlesworth needed help organizing, recruiting, and training large numbers of protesters. At the conclusion of the weekend King and the SCLC agreed to join the ACMHR in Birmingham. Together they would change the course of the Birmingham Movement and bring the black freedom struggle the national attention it needed.\textsuperscript{199}

**Project X-Birmingham**

For the next two months, ACMHR and SCLC activists worked on logistics and strategies for “Project X-Birmingham,” which was tentatively scheduled to begin on March 14, following the mayoral election. To the surprise of many, Bull Connor’s run for mayor faired better than expected as he placed second to moderate Albert Boutwell. Unwilling to settle for runner-up and determined to keep his political career alive, Connor agreed to a run-off on April 2. Due to the extended election the SCLC decided to postpone the start of its operation until after the runoff results were announced on April 3. Delaying the campaign was not an easy decision as a three-week waiting period could easily result have resulted in a loss of volunteers, as well as disrupted the selective buying campaign scheduled during Easter holiday sales. Notwithstanding possible setbacks, the ACMHR and the SCLC did not want its actions to prompt citizens to vote for Bull Connor. On April 2, voters elected Boutwell the new mayor of Birmingham. Unwilling to accept defeat, Connor joined other commissioners in a lawsuit that challenged newly

\textsuperscript{199} Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 211, 216; Ibid., 208-209; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 690.
elected officials’ right to govern. While the Alabama Supreme Court worked to resolve the dispute, Birmingham operated under two municipal governments. Despite Connor’s antics, the Birmingham campaign was set to commence the next day.200

On the same day that the ACMHR launched its direct action campaign, Fred Shuttlesworth and ACMHR secretary Rev. N.H. Smith released the Birmingham Manifesto, a public declaration of resistance to racial discrimination in Birmingham. “The patience of an oppressed people cannot endure forever. The Negro citizens of Birmingham for the last several years have hoped in vain for some evidence of good faith resolution of our just grievances.”201 In the manifesto, Shuttlesworth and Smith discussed the mistreatments of blacks in Birmingham. They not only called for full support from all those in the black community, they also asked white citizens to join them and make Birmingham a city committed to liberty and justice for all. “We appeal to the citizenry of Birmingham, Negro and white, to join us in the witness of decency, morality, self-respect and human dignity. …This is Birmingham’s moment of truth in which every citizen can play his part in her larger destiny.”202 Over 60 protestors, committed to the creation of “The Beloved Community,” began a series of lunch counter sit-ins and boycotts of segregated downtown department stores downtown that refused to serve or employ African Americans.

Unfortunately, the direct action campaign did not have the exact impact and level of media attention as the ACMHR and SCLC had hoped as a result of preparation on the side of white business owners, police, and city officials. Unlike the violent response to

200 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 211-212; 216
202 Ibid.
the arrival of Freedom Riders in 1961, white segregationists and city officials adopted a far less combative approach to dealing with protesters. During the lunch counter sit-ins, restaurant managers responded to the demonstrators by denying them service, closing their lunch counters, or calling the police to remove the integrationists from the premises. Protesters who attempted to boycott department stores had setbacks of their own. City officials decreased the numbers of storefront demonstrations by denying ACMHR-SCLC organizers parade permits, and those caught protesting faced possible arrest and fines. Taking cues from the Laurie Pritchett’s nonviolent policing, Birmingham pro-segregationists successfully minimized the campaign’s effectiveness. Out maneuvered by Birmingham whites, the SCLC and ACMHR rethought their strategy.

Later that week the ACMHR-SCLC organized a peaceful march for Palm Sunday on April 7. Directed by the Reverend Alfred Daniel “A.D.” King, the brother of Martin Luther King Jr., the march began at the St. Paul Methodist Church and wound its way into town. The marchers were no more than one block away from the church when police officers approached and charged them with parading without a permit. At least twenty people were arrested and sent to jail. As black bystanders grew displeased, a number of them turned abusive toward the police. Bull Connor responded by ordering officers to use police dogs for crowd control. Rather than deescalating the situation, the presence of police dogs made matters worse. In the midst of the chaos, a police dog viciously attacked nineteen-year-old Leroy Allen. As onlookers ran to the aid of the young protester, policemen worked quickly to disperse the crowd. 203 While the demonstration was brief, the public display of nonviolent protest met by police brutality gained national

203 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 226-227; Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 121.
media attention. Reports of a large gathering of defenseless activists assaulted by police officers and their canine companions made newspaper headlines. It was also the lead story on evening news shows. The media’s slightly inaccurate interpretation of the demonstration was precisely what the movement needed. With blame directed at the Birmingham police, support for the local civil rights campaign grew, and what could have been a failed undertaking instead became the catalyst for the launch of a new campaign, “Project C.” Different from the standard sit-ins and selective buying campaigns, Project C encouraged confrontation as a means to generate media coverage and expose Americans to Birmingham’s hostile racial climate. ACMHR-SCLC staff also hoped to convince those of the traditional leadership class to support their efforts.  

Recruitment

The level of disinterest and lack of unity among Birmingham blacks was a critical issue facing the ACMHR-SCLC. Members of the traditional leadership class disagreed with the use of direct action. They declared the movement both dangerous and radical. Much of the disagreement stemmed from the ideological shift from bureaucratic tactics and mass-oriented strategies. Again, upper class blacks preferred more formal, legalistic approaches rather than sit-ins, boycotts, and arrests, which they felt only exacerbated racial tensions. People also chose not get involved in the Birmingham movement because of Fred Shuttlesworth’s autocratic leadership style. “Shuttlesworth sees himself as taking orders from God who speaks to him and through him,” said one of his friends. When King and the other SCLC activists arrived in Birmingham they quickly learned the
ACMHR “was a one man show. It was Fred all the way. He made decisions…he was a dictator. That was his style.” Recognizing Shuttlesworth did not work well with others, some black citizens kept their distance from the local movement.\textsuperscript{206} However, without the support of upper-middle class blacks and community members, the ACMHR-SCLC partnership lacked the necessary finances and human capital to move the campaign forward. As such, the coalition worked to convince others of their needed participation in the movement.

Encouraging old guard black leaders to take part in the Birmingham campaign was not easy. Even so, movement leaders continually reached out to them. On the morning of April 8, Rev. King gathered with over two hundred of Birmingham’s black ministers and attempted to persuade them to join the movement, but he quickly grew frustrated at the lack of support. Raising his voice, he said: “I’m tired of preachers riding around in big cars, living in fine homes, but not willing to take their part in the fight…. If you can’t stand up with your own people, you are not fit to be a leader!”\textsuperscript{207} After Dr. King’s fiery remarks, opportunity struck. John H. Cross, pastor of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church agreed to assist the movement. Securing Rev. Cross’ support had several benefits. With his endorsement came the backing of congregation and access to church facilities for mass meetings. Most importantly, Cross convinced several other conservative ministers to publicly endorse the campaign. While many other ministers, including Rev. Ware, continued to oppose the campaign, the majority of ministers passed a general resolution in support of the campaign.\textsuperscript{208}

\textsuperscript{206} Garrow, \textit{Bearing the Cross}, 238.
\textsuperscript{207} Eskew, \textit{But for Birmingham}, 229.
\textsuperscript{208} \textit{Ibid.}
Later that evening, Rev. Ralph David Abernathy spoke at the weekly mass meeting about Birmingham’s black elite and their lack of involvement in the movement. He said, “They’ve got their hair tinted various colors, trying to fool somebody. Year before last they lived like us, across the railroad tracks, took baths in a tin tub, and went to an outhouse. Now they are strutting around proper. How did they get rich? We made them rich.” Following his critique of the traditional leadership class, Abernathy called for the movement supporters “to talk with your doctor, your lawyer, your insurance man and withdraw your trade from him if he is not with this movement.” While some may have interpreted his speech as an attack on the black middle class, he viewed it as a plea for a unified black community. Division in the black community represented a broken link in the chain.

On the evening of April 9, A.G. Gaston hosted a private meeting at his motel where Dr. King addressed one hundred members of the traditional leadership class about the goals and initiatives of the campaign. Although Gaston opposed the tactics of the insurgent movement, he offered his support by housing SCLC officers and allowing movement organizers to hold meetings at his hotel. Gaston was also a bridge between his fellow conservative leaders and the ACMHR-SCLC. Following King’s remarks, black businessmen and professionals shared their opinions about the direction and pace of the movement. Some suggested giving new mayor, Albert Boutwell, an opportunity to address Birmingham’s racial issue, while others called for “more community cooperation and fewer picket lines” and asked for the ACMHR and SCLC to allow traditional leaders

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209 Ibid., 231.
210 Ibid.
time to organize and coordinate a less radical solution. By the end of the meeting a number of attendees adopted agreed to remain neutral while others expressed a genuine eagerness to help.\textsuperscript{212}

After meeting, Shuttlesworth and King established the “Central Committee” in an effort to appear as a unified black community. Included in the meeting were Shuttlesworth, N. H. Smith, A.D. King, local Hendricks and W.E. Shortridge from ACMHR; along with Dr. King, Abernathy, Andrew Young, James Lawson, Wyatt Walker, and Dorothy Cotton of the SCLC. Also in attendance were A.G. Gaston, Arthur Shores, John and Deenie Drew, Dr. Lucius H. Pitts, Reverend John Thomas Porter, Harold Long, and C. Herbert Oliver representing the city’s black middle class.\textsuperscript{213} The purpose of the committee would be to manage campaign policy and later assist with negotiations between the ACMHR-SCLC, white businessmen, and policy makers. In reality, the Central Committee was symbolic, a peace overture to the black middle class to project an image of racial solidarity. It allowed for the black middle class to involve themselves in the movement in a bureaucratic manner, even though the committee had no political power. Appearing as one for the cause sent a clear message to white segregationists and city officials the Birmingham campaign was not to be taken lightly.\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 229.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 233.
A Letter from Birmingham Jail

In the days following the mass meeting, campaign organizers and supporters continued sit-ins, boycotts, and even attempted to integrate the Birmingham public library. Local police chose not to engage the protesters violently in an attempt to avoid media criticism. This did not, however, prevent officers from arresting protesters for failing to abide by the law. Along with making arrests, on Wednesday, April 10, the city commissioner and chief of police requested a court order prohibiting members of the Birmingham campaign “from engaging in, sponsoring, promoting, or encouraging mass street parades, marches, picketing, sit-ins, and other actions likely to cause a breach of the peace.” The order was granted, and the next morning police officers served ACMHR-SCLC leaders. While police and city officials hoped this would disrupt the movement, campaign leaders did not yield. In a meeting with ACMHR-SCLC staff, King said, “We cannot in all good conscience obey an injunction which is an unjust, undemocratic and unconstitutional misuse of the process.” Refusing to back down, movement organizers scheduled a march for that Friday.\(^{215}\)

On the day of the march, King along with Shuttlesworth, Abernathy and fifty volunteers walked out of the doors of the Sixth Avenue Zion Hill Baptist Church and headed for the streets. More than a thousand people crowded the streets to witness the event. The protesters marched two blocks before coming face to face with Bull Connor who ordered them to disperse in accordance with the court order. The marchers refused to comply and while they waited for the paddy wagons to take them away, knelt down and prayed. Once the demonstrators arrived downtown, police officers separated the

\(^{215}\) Eskew. *But for Birmingham*, 238.
movement leaders and placed them in solitary confinement. As King sat alone in his cell he quickly grew concerned about the direction of the movement. Questions about whether the movement had enough volunteers to continue the demonstrations and mass protests weighed heavy on his mind.

In an effort to keep King abreast of the campaign, members of the ACMHR-SCLC smuggled him newspaper articles when they visited him. "White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstrations" read as the headline on page two in the April 13 edition of the Birmingham News. It caught King’s attention. Eight local clergymen argued that the actions of black citizens working alongside outside organizers exacerbated the city’s racial problems. They stated: “We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.” The clergymen called on black leaders to challenge racism in the courts and through peaceful negotiations with city officials. “We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.”

Angered by the clergymen’s over simplification of the campaign, King drafted a response. In his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which he originally scribbled on the margins of old newspaper clippings. He wrote:

You may well ask: ‘Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path?’ You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such crisis and foster such tension that a community, which has constantly refused to negotiate, is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored… The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation to crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. Too

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long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.  

King felt it necessary to justify the use of nonviolence and direct action. For years black Americans waited patiently for white city leaders to see the error in their ways. Now, King believed direct action was the only way to secure social, political and economic change for black citizens. While King hoped his incarceration would spark support for the campaign, it raised some important questions: If the central organizers were to remain in jail, who would lead the movement? How could ACMHR-SCLC raise money for bonds if their local financial donors were behind bars? In other words, who was best suited to fill up the jails and least susceptible to the economic and political pressures? Unable to come up with a solution, King and Abernathy accepted bond on April 19, and were released from jail. Returning to a struggling campaign, King gathered the ACMHR-SCLC Central Committee to discuss next step strategies.

On April 26, during a Central Committee meeting, movement leaders identified low recruitment and poor media exposure as their two greatest challenges. Recruitment for direct action campaigns and jail-ins was far more difficult than filling up church pews at the weekly mass meetings. Many adult supporters could not risk public protest for fear of the consequences- loss of job, imprisonment, violence, and possible loss of life. “Some people were really afraid because a lot of times their livelihood and their support for their families depended on them keeping their jobs,” said Johnny

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McKinstry Summerville, an ACMHR supporter.\textsuperscript{220} For those willing to be involved, they believed their participation in the protests would “improve their civil rights” and therefore accepted the consequences of those actions. When asked in a survey if mass meeting attendance and protest participation conflicted with employment, 39 percent answered they would attend mass meetings and risk the chance of being fired, and another 54 percent responded that they would tell their employer of their involvement in the movement and what they did on their time away from work was their private business.\textsuperscript{221} While this may seem impressive it was not representative of all black citizens. One woman recalled keeping her involvement in the movement a secret from her employer:

\begin{quote}
The movement was one thing I stayed away from talking to [white employers] about. They would ask me things, but I didn’t know anything. I was at the movement just about every day, but I didn’t know anything when I got to work. I was helping my husband raise our children, and I needed to work at that time. So to keep my job, I just kept my mouth closed.\textsuperscript{222}
\end{quote}

Understanding people’s reaction to getting involved in the movement, ACMHR and SCLC organizers knew it was important they recruit individuals as often as possible.

Media exposure was also another point of contention for the movement, as news coverage of Birmingham was declining. “You know we got to get something going. The press is leaving, we’ve got to get going,” King told his fellow movement organizers.\textsuperscript{223} While it may have surprised some of King’s colleagues to hear him say, “we need the press,” he could not have been more right. Media, particularly television, helped expose

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{220}{Huntley and McHerley, \textit{Foot Soldiers for Democracy}, 20.}
\footnote{221}{Clarke, “Goals and Techniques in Three Civil Rights Organizations in Alabama,” 83-84.}
\footnote{222}{Huntley and McHerley, \textit{Foot Soldiers for Democracy}, 80.}
\footnote{223}{Garrow, \textit{Bearing the Cross}, 247.}
\end{footnotes}
the inequalities and injustices associated with black life in the South. More importantly, news coverage helped galvanize outside support for the movement. As television viewers watched footage of protests or violent attacks against blacks, whites outside the South began to rethink the legitimacy of segregation and Jim Crow.

The Children

Thinking of the Birmingham movement and its potential impact on the South and the nation, the ACMHR-SCLC needed to do something to garner the attention of the mainstream media once more. James Bevel, a former SNCC activist who the SCLC recently recruited as a field worker to help increase youth participation, proposed enlisting schoolchildren for the campaign. This was not the first time Bevel recruited young people. Two years earlier, Bevel and members of SNCC enlisted the help of children during a voter registration campaign in Jackson, Mississippi. The youth’s enthusiasm and willingness to partake in the initiative impressed the college-age activist. Pleased by what he witnessed in Mississippi, Bevel hoped to do the same in Birmingham. Choosing to recruit black children for the Birmingham campaign had as much to do with their lack of financial responsibilities as it did their energy and mobility. In terms of “cohesion and camaraderie” black youth had far more success coming together for the cause and recruiting one another for the movement. Much of this had to do with children’s close proximity to one another- school, sports, and other extracurricular activities. Bevel also recognized children did not suffer from the same communal disunity as the adults. Lastly, youth participation would guarantee media exposure, just as it did in the case of the Little Rock Nine a few years prior. Most importantly, the sight of
schoolchildren challenging Jim Crow laws and practices would raise the attention of both state and federal governments. For these reasons Bevel and his SCLC associates, James Lawson, Dorothy Cotton, Bernard Lee, Ike Reynolds, and Andrew Young, suggested recruiting young people.\textsuperscript{224}

Dr. King balked initially, arguing the dangers of direct action were too great for schoolchildren; not to mention the amount of scrutiny the organization would generate from this decision. But failure was also not an option. So he agreed to include black youth among the demonstrators. The only question left unanswered was “what should be the age limit for demonstrators?” For a time the movement organizers agreed fourteen would be the minimum age for demonstrators, but Bevel made the case for recruiting younger children. He believed adults needed to “stop the age-old custom in black homes of trying to shield black children from something for which there was, finally, no shield.”\textsuperscript{225}

For decades, African American parents struggled raising their children under Jim Crow. As much as they wanted to guard their children from the harsh realities of being black in America, they could not. Segregation and discrimination applied to all black peoples, regardless of age. Knowing this, Bevel argued racism had already shaped the lives of black children and limited their place in America, now was the time for children to take a stand.

While mobilizing youth may have been a new concept for the Birmingham movement, these schoolchildren already had an understanding of what was at stake. A

\textsuperscript{224} de Schweinitz, \textit{If We Could Change the World}, 234.
\textsuperscript{225} David Halberstam, \textit{The Children} (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998), 439.
number of children attended weekly mass meetings with their parents. Shirley Smith Miller, a youth demonstrator, remembers attending weekly meetings with her mother:

My mother always went to the movement meetings. I attended meetings with her. At the meetings there was a lot of praying, a lot of singing, and a lot of preaching. You always left with a euphoric feeling, like you could do anything, go anywhere, and beat any odds when you went. It was like everyone was [in] one accord. As a child, I don’t know if I listened to everything they were saying, but I know a lot of it sunk in. I was thirteen years old.226

Although Miller may have been too young to comprehend everything that was discussed at the meetings, she listened, and it had a profound effect on her. “I became a regular at the mass meetings,” said James W. Stewart. “Churches were filled to the brim. There was standing room only. People sat around on the floors. We heard men like Dr. King, Jesse Jackson. We heard dynamic preachers, and they were talking directly to us. And they were willing to tell us [that] it’s our responsibility, it is up to us to draw a line in the sand and say we need to do something to address the racial problem.”227 For those schoolchildren who were not yet teenagers, they attended youth meetings. These meetings had a decidedly younger flavor. According to Miriam McClendon, the ACMHR and SCLC staffers “discussed the same issues that were being discussed in the larger mass meeting with the adults, but they tailored it to fit the temperament of the students,” she said. The adult facilitators also led the children through songs and rally cries.228 Attending the weekly meetings exposed children to the struggles of Birmingham citizens while also instilling in them a great sense of hope and pride.

226 Huntley and McKerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 183.
227 Ibid., 136.
228 Ibid., 179.
Despite Dr. King’s reservations about youth participation, the central committee agreed to move forward in planning the next demonstration for May 2. Over the next several days ACMHR-SCLC strategists and recruiters began preparing for the demonstration. Bevel, Cotton, and others visited local black high schools seeking volunteers. They blanketed local schools such as Parker and Ullman with leaflets that read, “Fight for freedom first then go to school. Join thousands in jail who are making their witness for freedom… It is up to you to free our teachers, our parents and yourself and our country.” Other flyers included messages advising students to leave school at 12:00 p.m. on Thursday, May 2 and report to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church for a youth march later that afternoon. While canvassing the schools staffers also took the time to talk with students on issues of racial inequality as it related to education and youth culture. They questioned students about their use of second-hand schoolbooks, athletic equipment, and segregated school systems to demonstrate the impact of Jim Crow laws on black youth. Something unique to youth recruitment involved using student social networks as a means to increase student volunteers. ACMHR and SCLC officers reached out to the “popular” students—athletes, homecoming courts, student body presidents—and asked them to use their social clout to convince their classmates to join the movement. Utilizing these social networks enabled the recruitment committee to drastically increase the number of youth volunteers.\(^{229}\)

Once students agreed to join the movement, they attended workshops conducted by the ACMHR-SCLC recruitment team, on the philosophy and methods of nonviolence. They viewed films on student sit-ins in Nashville as well as footage from the

\(^{229}\) Fairclough, 125; Eskew, \textit{But for Birmingham}, 262; de Schweinitz, \textit{If We Could Change the World}, 233-235.
Montgomery bus boycott to prepare them for what was to come. They also listened to Bevel and others preached about the importance of their actions:

You get an education in jail too. In schools you’ve been going to, they haven’t taught you the price of freedom… The white man has brainwashed us, tricked us; but Mr. Charlie’s brainwashing is washing off now… And the most important thing in the struggle is to stay together… We’ve got to start learning to love one another enough to say: as long as one Negro kid is in jail, we all want to be in jail. If everybody in would be arrested, everybody will be free, wouldn’t they?

As momentum grew for the May 2 demonstration, youth volunteers began talking to their friends and classmates about what it meant for their generation to be a part of such an important cause. Students took cues from their peers rather than their parents, which for some resembled conformity and intimidation. “We want you to walk out and go with us downtown because we’re trying to make a statement,” said one youth volunteer, “…We want to send a message.” This generation of youth exuded a level of courage that differed from the adults. They did not succumb to the same fears that paralyzed some adults in the community; instead they embraced the nonviolent strategy of the Birmingham movement. “You just didn’t care… You were just ready for whatever,” recalled Cleopatra Goree. Drawing on the “cohesion and camaraderie” of schoolchildren the ACMHR-SCLC recruited hundreds of demonstrators in record time.

Just as the staff celebrated its successful recruitment drive, they received word the city rejected Shuttlesworth’s request for a parade permit. Nevertheless, the campaign

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231 de Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 209.
staff moved forward with its preparations.\footnote{Wexler, \textit{The Civil Rights: An Eyewitness History}, 172; Huntley and McKerley. \textit{Foot Soldiers for Democracy}, 193.} With one day remaining until the demonstration, the “big three”- Dr. King, Shuttlesworth, and Abernathy- made their way back to Birmingham following a two-day SCLC board meeting in Memphis, Tennessee. Although he was impressed by the efforts put forth by the recruitment committee and the supplemental staff, Dr. King had his reservations about relying on young people. Much of his doubt stemmed from the negative criticism that was being voiced across the city. Many local people feared that involving children younger than fourteen years of age would further discredit the movement and Dr. King as a leader. Mayor-elect Boutwell accused King of misleading the children, asserting “irresponsible and unthinking agitators made tools of children to threaten lives and property.”\footnote{Branch, \textit{Parting the Waters}, 760.} Even members of the black community expressed displeasure with the use of children. A.G. Gaston stated, “As responsible citizens of Birmingham, I deplore the invasion of our schools to enlist students for demonstrations during school hours.”\footnote{Manis, \textit{A Fire You Can’t Put Out}, 368} Critics questioned the extent to which children understood the racial matters that existed in Birmingham and whether they understood the full consequences of their participation in the movement.

Bevel countered that, “If a child was old enough to belong to a church- to accept Christ as the guiding force in his or her life, obviously a decision of considerable permanence and consequence, then he or she was old enough to march for freedom.” Furthermore, “these children had professed their faith in Christ when they were five or six and no one said they were too young,” he argued “now let them live the faith.”\footnote{Ibid., 440} The
pushback against youth participation had more to do with people’s personal beliefs about childhood than it did movement strategy. This widespread notion that cast children as dependent, innocent victims caught in the midst of a racial dilemma, hindered people’s ability to see young people as independent thinkers and agents of change. People concerned themselves more by thinking about what these young demonstrators could lose by participating, when they should have considered what children were willing to sacrifice for the betterment of black Americans.237 Also, rather than talking within the context of “using” children, Bevel wanted adults to recognize these young individuals for their potential contributions to the movement.238

Despite widespread censure, the ACMHR-SCLC moved forward with its plans. That same evening, movement supporters of all ages filled the pews at the St. Paul’s A.M.E. Church to listen as campaign leaders prepared them for the demonstration scheduled the next day. Even as Dr. King stood before the crowd, he contemplated youth participation. When they reached the part of the meeting when they called for volunteers, only children in the audience stood. Moved by the sight before him, Dr. King asked the children to be seated, but they remained standing. Even after explaining jail was no place for boys and girls they showed no fear. Still concerned about youth participation as a tactic, Dr. King failed to see their actions as an expression of their commitment to end racial inequality.239 “Don’t worry about the children,” said Shuttlesworth to the parents of children who volunteered, “They’re in good hands.” Trying to reassure them of their

237 de Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 224
238 Ibid., 239
239 Ibid., 240
children’s safety, he even went on to say, “they might not march tomorrow.”\textsuperscript{240} The meeting adjourned without a final decision on whether the children would march. That evening, as parents, critics, and movement supporters awaited word, hundreds of black schoolchildren laid awake in bed with great anticipation of what was sure to be the defining moment in their young lives.

\textsuperscript{240} Eskew, \textit{But for Birmingham}, 263
Chapter 3

The Children’s March

“We have had enough. We will go to jail. We will do what it takes to bring racism in Birmingham to an end.”

James W. Stewart, youth protester

On the morning of Thursday, May 2, 1963, local WENN disc jockey Shelly “Playboy” Stewart took to the airwaves to remind his youthful audience that “there’s going to be a party at the park.” He told them not to “forget your toothbrushes because hot luncheon will be served.” Only those who knew about the protest march scheduled for later that afternoon could decipher Playboy’s encrypted message. And they took heed. As the students prepared for school, they added a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a bar of soap to their knapsacks.

Some parents knew what was going on, but certainly not all. Many children hid their involvement in the movement from their parents, and for good reason. The thought of children squaring off against police officers and possibly white reactionaries could be overwhelming. Fearing what awaited young demonstrators, some adults forbade their children to march. Gwen Webb’s mother ordered her to go school and stay clear of the march. “I told my mother, ‘I hear you.’ We were raised not to lie. So I didn’t tell her a lie,

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241 Huntley and McKerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 136-137.
and say I wasn’t going. I said, ‘I hear you.’”

Carolyn McKinstry, who was 15-years-old at the time, remembered her father instructing her not to participate: “My father told me I could not be part of that movement and that I better not go downtown.” “He didn’t tell me I couldn’t go to church where it all started in the first place.”

“I wanted to [participate in the Children’s March], and asked my parents and they said no,” recalled Mary Bush, who was 15-years-old in 1963. “My father said no. One, [it was] too dangerous. And two, the other had to be my father’s concern about his job. And his ability to support us if anything happened to his job because jobs were threatened.”

Bush’s father was not the only one concerned about job security. Mary Gadson’s mother, who worked in white homes as a domestic, was grilled incessantly by her employer. “They were constantly asking, ‘Is your child involved in this stuff? I hope she isn’t.’”

James Stewart, who was 16 years of age when the marches took place, remembered having been disappointed by his parents’ lack of involvement in the movement:

I had some feeling about that. At that age, I felt everybody should be involved—we should all go down, the entire city. Even when we began to demonstrate, I saw a lot of older black adults not going, and I judged them at that time. But I began to understand when I got older that they had jobs. I found out that under no uncertain terms, if you were absent, if you were arrested, if you were anywhere near the civil rights movement demonstrations on [D-Day] or any time after, you would be fired. So they had families and mortgages and things like that. And I think that is why [the] youth provided a certain strength and energy to the movement.

Stewart was right. The majority of black adults worked for businesses owned and operated by whites. With their family’s well-being at stake, most parents distanced themselves....

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243 Quoted by Gwen Webb, Mighty Times: The Children’s March
244 Quoted by Carolyn McKinstry, Ibid.
245 Interview with Mary Bush, telephone interview with author, digital recording, July 24, 2014, Chevy Chase, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
246 Ellen Levine, Freedom’s Children, 85.
themselves from the movement, although many supported it secretly.\textsuperscript{248} Despite their parents’ warning, Stewart and others carried on.

Other parents, however, applauded their children’s decision to join the movement. Aware of their personal sacrifice, mothers and fathers looked on with pride. Freeman Hrabowski’s parents supported him in his decision to participate. “My parents were very strong civil rights people, they were race people. And [when] I said I wanted to [join the movement] they were not worried…”\textsuperscript{249} Before leaving their homes, sons and daughters kissed their parents goodbye knowing they would not be returning. “I woke up in the morning, and my family had family prayer with me,” said Bernita Roberson. “I remember that morning,” said Janice Kelsey. “…[A]nd I woke up with my mind set on freedom.”\textsuperscript{250}

Between May 2 and May 6, 1963, nearly one thousand black schoolchildren marched to end racial segregation in Birmingham. Known as the Children’s March, or the Children’s Crusade, this five-day demonstration was a defining moment in the fight for racial equality locally and nationally. Young protesters faced fire hoses and police dogs, and many spent time in jail, to help the ACMHR-SCLC coalition end Jim Crow in Birmingham.

This chapter explores youth participation in the Birmingham civil rights campaign of May 1963. It aims to retell the events of the Children’s March with an emphasis on the role of black youth and how their involvement impacted the freedom struggle in Birmingham and beyond. Many scholars have studied the events of May 1963, but few

\textsuperscript{249} Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
\textsuperscript{250} Quoted by Janice Kelsey, \textit{Mighty Times: The Children’s March}
have focused specifically on the children. Drawing on oral histories with former
protesters, this chapter seeks to enrich the Birmingham civil rights narrative by centering
those activists, who as children, dared to risk everything for freedom.

“IT’s Time!”

The majority of youth protesters gathered at their respective schools before
making their way to Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on May 2. “They wanted [us] to go
to school so we could really help to turn the children out of the school,” said Arnetta
Streeter Gary, who was 17-years-old in 1963.251 Each school had a group of students
assigned to alert their schoolmates when the time to leave came. They were supposed to
pull fire alarms and run through the hallways signaling the students to walkout.
Gwendolyn Sanders Gamble, a 16 year-old youth leader, remembered being assigned to
Samuel Ullman High School.

We had different assigned classrooms to go to. We never entered into the
classroom. We passed by the door, gave a cue, and the next thing you knew, they
were following us because the word was already out that we were going to turn
the school out that day. …We knew which door to take them out of, which route
to take to the destination. So all we had to do was give them a cue after they got
the word, and those who wanted to follow followed.252

At approximately 11:00 a.m. students began gathering outside of Birmingham’s black
public schools holding homemade signs that read, “IT’s time!” As word spread, students
began pouring out of their schools, exiting any and every way possible, hopping out of
windows even. “Ullman High School had over twelve hundred kids at that time, and
eleven hundred of us were over the fence. We were gone!” said Mary Gadson.

251 Huntley and McKerley. Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 120.
252 Ibid., 147.
At Wenonah Junior High, students walked up and down the hallways calling on others to leave their classrooms. At Parker High School, students used the signal “sock hop” while organizers held signs across the street that read, “It’s time!”253 “We began to hear someone down the hall saying, ‘Let’s go!’” recalled Carl Grace, who attended Fairfield [Industrial] High School. “Then all of a sudden, it sounded like horses. You could hear the footsteps coming down the hall.”254 Washington Booker, III, remembered leaving school with his friends. “I went in the school, through the school, and out to the courtyard.”255

Teachers responded differently to the mass exodus. Jerome Taylor recalled that his schoolteacher Mrs. Cleopatra Goree looked away as students fled her classroom. “Our teacher Mrs. Goree turned her back as we got up, and we took it from there.”256 Turning her back to the students was taken as a sign of solidarity. In fact, Goree, and many teachers like her, would have loved to join the students, but she knew she would be fired if she did. Instead she lived vicariously through them; she was happy to see them go. And before she knew it, only two kids remained in her classroom. Miss Woolfolk also turned around and looked at the chalkboard while students marched out the room. “I was teaching American government, what the Constitution guarantees what democracy should be about,” she said later. “And sitting in a segregated school system and going to the back door of restaurants-it made sense for students to take a stand.”257

253 Levinson, We Have a Job, 72.
255 Ibid., 193.
256 Quoted by Jerome Taylor, Mighty Times: The Children’s March
257 Levinson, We’ve Got a Job, 72.
Of course, not every teacher or school official responded as positively as Miss Woolfolk and Mrs. Goree. Some adults feared what might happen to those found in support of the local movement. Willie A. Casey’s teacher at Carver High School supported his students’ decision to leave. “He told us, ‘This is something I can’t tell you not to do, but I think it is something you should do. If I were you, I would probably do it, but I can’t. I have a job and family to feed.’” Birmingham’s black adults had obligations and responsibilities, thus making them vulnerable. Any sign of them protesting, marching, or demonstrating could result in the loss of their job or their home. “It wasn’t that middle class people were not good people, they were just worried. These people had mortgages and banks were trying to say they were going to call in the mortgages. So it was understandable that people were very worried,” said Hrabowski, who was 13-years-old when the demonstrations happened. Others chose not to support the campaign because they disagreed with the tactics and strategies of the movement and feared such an aggressive approach would exacerbate racial tensions. “We were in Miss Major’s classroom, and we began to hear someone down the hall saying, ‘Let’s go!’” remembered Carl Grace, age 15 in 1963. “…We all got up, and Miss Major stood in the door and tried to stop us.” Wanting to disassociate themselves from the protest, school administrators tried to prevent students from leaving by locking the doors, but their effort was for naught. “Olive Porter pushed her out of the way, and we all just hit the hallway. The kids rushed on out. Many teachers tried to stop us, and many

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259 Ibid., ixi.
260 Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
teachers were for us going.”261 Their kids were on their way to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to meet Rev. James Bevel and the rest of the ACMHR-SCLC officers.

At first, only a trickle of students turned up at the church, but that trickle quickly turned into a tidal wave as thousands more arrived. They came from every corner of Birmingham, and some from beyond the city’s limits. “And when we heard that students were coming from out of town, we grew more excited” said Gwen Webb.262 James Orange, a youth demonstrator, recalls traveling to Fairfield, about twelve minutes from Birmingham, to pick up kids who wanted to join the movement: “I had a cool car you know. So they said, ‘Okay then, we need you to ride round to Fairfield. There are students outside the classroom who won’t go back in.’ Lo and behold, when I got out to Fairfield, the whole campus was outside the building. They all said, ‘We goin’ to Birmingham!’”263 About ten children jumped into Orange’s car, while another eight hundred followed behind him. “I had a Chevrolet on my right foot and one on my left,” said Andrew Marrisett, a student protester who walked nine miles to Birmingham.264 Other students walked as far as eighteen miles to get to the march.

Soon, the city swarmed with schoolchildren. “Every once in a while you look back” remembered Webb, and there was “more children coming from somewhere. And you would say, ‘Where all these kids coming from?’”265 The support of students from neighboring communities proved that the fight for equal rights was bigger than the city of Birmingham. These black youth joined the campaign in hopes that a victory in

262 Quoted by Gwen Webb, *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*
263 Quoted by James Orange, *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*
264 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 73.
265 Quoted by Gwen Webb, *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*
Birmingham would lead to the dismantling of white power structures in their own communities.

Once the students arrived at Sixteenth Street Baptist, the level of excitement intensified. Much like a school pep-rally, Bevel and his associates led the throng of demonstrators in song. “Ain’t gonna let no body turn me around, turn me around, turn me around…. Walking on to freedom land,” they sang, along with other cheers and chants. While movement organizers worked to excite the young demonstrators, others collected vital statistics – names, ages, parents’ names, and home addresses - from the children. They also passed a basket and instructed students to dispose of their weapons. “They asked us if we had any weapons,” James Stewart recalled. “They passed the basket around… Nobody put anything in it.” Again, the organizers passed the baskets and on the second go round, “it was full of pocket knives; somebody had brass knuckles, any little thing that people thought would give [the demonstrators] an edge.”266 Shuttlesworth reminded the children, “[You are] freedom fighters, as much as those in the army. But without weapons… Still you are expected to be as disciplined as soldiers.”267

If the movement was to have any success, it was important for the demonstrators to be nonviolent. ACMHR-SCLC’s strategy of nonviolent direct action combined moral and spiritual principles with the strategic dramatization of those principles. By organizing boycotts and sit-ins, marching in the streets, and filling the jails, movement organizers sought to create a “crisis of social disruption” in Birmingham.268 Wyatt Tee Walker, executive director of the SCLC was one of the masterminds behind the nonviolent

266 Levinson, We’ve Got a Job, 74.
267 Ibid., 73.
268 Aldon Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 84.
movement. He said, “My theory was if we mounted a strong nonviolent movement the opposition would surely do something to attract the media, and in turn induce national sympathy and attention to the everyday segregated circumstance of a black person living in the Deep South.”

The success of the movement rested on the opponents—Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor, policemen, and firemen—responding negatively to the protesters. As print and television news media disseminated photographs and film footage of adult white men assaulting nonviolent demonstrators with billy clubs, fire hoses and police dogs, it placed Birmingham’s white segregationists and Jim Crow culture in an indefensible position. In order for the ACMHR-SCLC to maintain a decisive advantage over racist opponents, African Americans had to remain nonviolent.

When movement organizers recruited students, they made it a point to remind them that demonstrators must always refrain from retaliating. “Bevel would tell us, Ms. Cotton would tell us. If you can’t restrain from being violent, maybe the movement was not for you,” recalled Gwen Webb. “We were told,” said Willie A. Casey, “‘If you have any knives, guns, or weapons, put them in these baskets with your name and address.’ If you were violent or potentially violent, you couldn’t be in the march. This was a nonviolent march, and they didn’t want anything to excite or provoke the police.”

Even as schoolchildren agreed to act peacefully, they had to be reminded what it meant to embrace nonviolence. Though reasonable in theory, the concept of nonviolence did not

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appeal to everyone. James Stewart refused to give up his pocket knife at first. The notion that a person could not retaliate against white agitators and vigilantes proved difficult for some. The frustration did not stem from wanting to harm another person as much as it had to do with self-defense. However, failure to do so would compromise ACMHR-SCLC’s chance to generate enough northern white awareness and sympathy for the black freedom struggle to force the Kennedy administration into drafting, supporting, and signing civil rights legislation that would protect all American citizens regardless of race. An opportunity this great was not worth losing because a few kids wouldn’t surrender their pocketknives and brass knuckles. “I don’t know if it was Dr. King or someone else who spoke to us more assertively, kind of like a minister who didn’t get enough money the first time the basket was passed.” On the second-go-round, Stewart obliged. “We had to give that up for the greater cause, and we did.”

Meanwhile, back at the Gaston Motel, Dr. King spent the day in his room wrestling with his conscience over the decision to allow youth participation. Fears of what might happen to the young demonstrators weighed heavy on his heart. But to a certain extent, his worrying was irrelevant because just being black in Birmingham put their lives at risk. With that understanding, Dr. King decided he would stand by the children and their decision to fight.

Having not received word from Dr. King about postponing the march, Bevel decided to move forward with the plans and at 12:00 p.m. the doors of the church opened

274 Huntley and Mc Kerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 137.
and the schoolchildren flooded out. Singing “We Shall Overcome,” the students marched in groups of fifty toward downtown Birmingham. “I was shocked by the number of people…” remembered Stewart. “I could see reporters …I remember hearing many saying, ‘They’re coming out! They’re coming out!’ There were lights all around.”

When police officers approached the initial group of marchers, they informed them of the court injunction prohibiting public demonstrations, and soon began arresting and loading them into paddy wagons for violating the order. “When they put us under arrest, we stepped up into the paddy wagons,” Bernita Roberson said. “I looked back at my daddy. He kind of smiled in support because he knew that somebody from the family was going. And it was his baby child… I wasn’t afraid. I felt good that I could make a difference. I did not want to be intimidated by whites.” Once in custody, the police transported the marchers to the city jail.

Although arresting demonstrators had become routine for Birmingham policemen, they had not anticipated so many demonstrators. “[The] first group came out of the church quietly singing, ‘O freedom, O freedom, O freedom over me, and before I be a slave I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free,’” said Myrna Carter. “They went down Sixteenth Street and immediately WHRRRR, you could hear the motorcycles rev up and start out after them. Then the police arrested them.” As the police arrested the first batch of marchers, another group immediately took their place, followed by another group and then another. “While they (the police) were busy doing that, the leaders gave us signs and told us to go out Sixth Avenue in the opposite

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275 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 74.
276 Levine, *Freedom’s Children*, 83.
277 Levine, *Freedom’s Children*, 87
Bevel released the groups of marchers in such a way as to give the appearance of one large group. “The police thought the first group was all there was going to be that day. So my group got downtown to Newberry’s… When the police realized what happened, someone called the paddy wagon. They lined us up and snatched our signs from us.” The police crammed a dozen or more youth demonstrators into paddy wagons that were meant to hold a maximum of eight people. “Two in each of the four cubicles that they had,” recalled James Stewart. “They crammed three and four of us into one cubicle, and they continued to press the door until they got it shut and locked.”

The city police ran out of paddy wagons within the first hour and began transporting children in school buses. It was quite the sight. Children in school buses waved merrily from the windows while being hauled off to jail. “The children were being arrested in wholesale numbers,” said police officer James Parsons. It also surprised policemen to see these schoolchildren unafraid. According demonstrator Gwen Webb, the police “had strange looks to see that we were happy and singing and glad to be arrested.” By 4:00 p.m. Bevel called for an end to the day’s demonstration. Nearly one thousand schoolchildren had been arrested.

Later that evening, thousands of men, women, and children gathered at the Bethel Baptist Church to hear from ACMHR-SCLC movement organizers. Surveillance detectives also attended the meeting hoping to gather intelligence on any future protests. The meeting began as usual with a series of songs, prayers, and offerings followed by

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278 Ibid.
279 Ibid.
281 Quoted by Gwen Webb, *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*
words from Dr. King. In his remarks to the crowd the leader of the SCLC said, “I have been inspired and moved today. I have never seen anything like it.” Cheers and words of praise rang out as people celebrated the demonstration. He went on to announce that close to one thousand children had participated with more than half arrested on charges of parading without a permit. Without delving into next-day details, Dr. King said, “If they think today is the end of this, they will be badly mistaken.” After informing the crowd that comedian-activist Dick Gregory would join them soon, and discussing other movement news, he welcomed Bevel to the pulpit. Looking out at a room full of supporters he shouted, “There ain’t gonna be no meeting Monday night, because every Negro is gonna be in jail by Sunday night!” The church erupted with applause as people began walking up and down the aisles in song and praise. Day one of the Children’s March proved to be a success. The presence of protesters, policemen and onlookers disrupted business in Birmingham’s downtown shopping district. Also, a strong media presence had begun to form as local and national media outlets covered the day’s demonstrations. Lastly, the tremendous number of protesters and arrestees proved to be more than Bull Connor and the city’s police had anticipated, causing them to reconsider tactics and strategies for the days ahead. Proud of what ACMHR-SCLC accomplished on the first day, movement organizers and their supporters looked forward to the next day.284

Double D-Day

On May 3, more than 3,000 student protesters and onlookers filled the streets of Birmingham. Unlike the day before, Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor wanted his

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283 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 265.
284 Ibid.
officers to keep the marchers away from the downtown business sector without arresting anyone because the city and county jails were filled to capacity. Toward this end, Connor ordered Captain G.V. Evans of the Birmingham Fire Department to use fire hoses on the demonstrators. The fire hoses, explained Connor, “were equipped with monitor guns that had the ability to remove bark off a tree at a distance of one hundred feet.” Capt. Evans warned the marchers to disperse, and when they ignored his command, he signaled the firemen to hose the schoolchildren. In the nonviolent workshops conducted by James Bevel and other movement organizers, the children learned to protect themselves by placing their hands on their faces and tucking their bodies into a ball. But the pressure from the hoses forced many demonstrators to retreat. “The little bit of training we had did no good,” said Arnetta Streeter Gary. “[We were] hugging together, and the water just washed [us] down the street.” Evans then ordered all marchers and onlookers to evacuate Kelly Ingram Park as the firemen continued to point their hoses at the schoolchildren.

While many fled the scene, a small group of demonstrators stood their ground. Huddled together, ten youths chanted the word “Freedom” over and over. Crowds of protesters and spectators reemerged. Suddenly, the firemen faced over 500 protesters. Angered by the rising number of demonstrators, Bull Connor, standing nearby, shouted: “Shoot the water on those niggers.” The firemen continued to drench the marchers. One person reported having seen “two black girls run through Kelly Ingram Park clad in

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286 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 82.
287 *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*
their undergarments after the water streams ripped away their outer clothing.”

“Once that water… hit me,” said Gwendolyn Sanders, “I didn’t know if I was going to survive it or not because the pressure from that hose was so great that it would knock your breath away.”

Carolyn McKinstry said of her encounter with the fire hoses:

> The water hose hurt a lot. I was hit with the water hose on this side running from the water. I had a navy blue sweater on. The water tore a big hole in my sweater and swiped part of my hair off on that side. I just remember the sting and pain on my face. It was very painful, and you couldn’t escape. There were a few points where we were trying to stand up and hold onto a wall. It was a terrific pain from the force, which I later learned was something like one hundred pounds of force per inch. That was the point at which I started thinking, ‘Do I really want to be a part of this, or do I have what it takes to continue on this level?’ I think I made the decision then that I would offer my contributions in another way, that I would assist in some other ways. I honestly was afraid of dogs, did not like being wet up. I felt very disrespected when I was wet up with the water and my hair. We were just marching.

McKinstry’s questioning of her own participation in the demonstrations speaks more to the intensity of the movement and less about her age. While youth demonstrators practiced nonviolence, Bull Connor practiced violence, turning to water hoses and police dogs to restore order. No amount of nonviolent training could have prepared the schoolchildren for that level of retaliation. McKinstry’s experience made clear the lengths white segregationists would go to enforce segregation and racial discrimination in Birmingham. More importantly, her decision to serve the movement in another capacity, reflected a kind of courage and maturity far beyond her years.

Arnetta Streeter Gary also remembered some of what happened that day:

> We had been taught that if they put the water hose on you, to sit down and cover your face so that the pressure of the water would not hurt your eyes. If we balled

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288 Ibid.
289 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 82.
up into balls, then the water would not hurt as much. But that was not so. I can remember us balling up hugging together, and the water just washing us down the street. Sitting and balled up, and the water just washed us down the street. Forceful. It was like pins maybe, sticking you in your arms and legs and things. The water was very, very forceful.”

As marchers screamed, firemen could be heard yelling, “knock the niggers down.” Some of the spectators grew angry at the sight of young people being knocked down by the torrents of water. Arnetta’s parents witnessed it all. “My daddy and mother, a lot of adults, came around… Little did my daddy know I was participating, When he saw the firemen putting water on me, he got upset,” she said. “He was going to go…turn the water off. My mother, she was struggling with him to keep him from going over there. They would have killed him. That’s what she told me…” You could have gotten your father killed.’” While Mrs. Streeter successfully restrained her husband, other bystanders began to retaliate by throwing rocks, soda bottles, and bricks at the officers and firemen. Washington Booker III had not attended the nonviolent workshops and there was no one there to restrain him and his friends. “We would throw a brick, a bottle, and then we’d take off… That’s what we were doing while everybody else was peacefully marching-looking for opportunities to strike a blow.” Connor responded by ordering the police department’s K-9 unit to the park. “All you gotta do is tell them you’re going to bring the dogs. Look at ‘em run… I want to see them dogs work. Look at those niggers

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291 Ibid., 120.
292 Levinson, *We've Got a Job*, 83.
293 Ibid., 84
run,” said the police commissioner. Mary Gadson, a teenage demonstrator, vividly remembered Bull Connor threatening to sic dogs on her and some other marchers:

> We were in a group that was supposed to march downtown, but we never made it because the police stopped us. Bull Connor was right out [there] on Sixth Avenue. He had the dogs out there, and he said if we marched, he was going to turn the dogs on us. They had the fire hoses also. That water was strong. It could knock you down. And he let’em go and sprayed us. I got wet and almost got bitten.

Numerous protesters, spectators, news reporters and even firemen went to the city hospital as a result of the violence. And despite Connor’s desire not to arrest anyone else, close to 300 went to jail that afternoon, bringing the total number of arrestees to 1,000.

The sights and sounds of “Double D-Day” caught the attention of people across the country. Local movement critics, particularly black conservatives, found their dissent against the movement beginning to wane as many of them reflected on the events of the past two days. A.G. Gaston could not believe his eyes as he watched firemen turn a hose on a small female protester. The force of the water rolled the young girl down the street. “My people are out there fighting for their lives and my freedom,” Gaston said. “I have to go help them.” Appalled, Gaston phoned David Vann, a white lawyer who campaigned against Bull Connor, demanded he and others work to remove Connor from his job as police commissioner. Witnessing such violence forced opponents of the movement’s tactics to question their stance on the matter.

Infuriated by the swell of sympathy for the movement and its young marchers, Birmingham’s white moderate leaders voiced their disapproval of the use of children.

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296 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 86.
Mayor-elect Boutwell blamed “irresponsible and unthinking agitators” for using children as a means to threaten city officials into supporting desegregation.

The respectable people of Birmingham, white or colored, did not create this danger. We are not contributing to it. We are innocent victims ….I cannot condone, and you cannot condone, the use of children to these ends. I do not need to emphasize the difference between demonstrations by adults and the terrible danger of involving immature teenagers and younger children.²⁹⁷

City Judge Talbot Ellis, whose juvenile court was full of young demonstrators, also complained about the use of children. He said whoever “misled these kids” into joining the movement “ought to be put under the jail.”²⁹⁸ However, no matter how much they tried to portray themselves as victims, national, as well as international, print and broadcast media conveyed a different message.

Media coverage from the second day of the Children’s March generated sympathy and outrage nationally and internationally. Dr. King and other movement organizers timed the protests to take advantage of the deadlines for nightly news programming and print media.²⁹⁹ Images and film footage of young protesters being sprayed with high-pressure hoses and attacked by police dogs drew attention to the “horrors of segregation and the moral authority of southern black folk.”³⁰⁰ This was exactly what ACMHR-SCLC had intended when they organized D-Day and Double D-Day; they wanted to expose America’s racial dilemma. “We knew we were being mistreated by our society and we wanted a different world,” said Freeman Hrabowski. “We wanted society to look us in our faces and treat us as human beings worthy of respect. We deserved respect; we

²⁹⁷ Levinson, We’ve Got a Job, 95.
²⁹⁸ Branch, Parting Waters, 761-62.
²⁹⁹ Levinson, We’ve Got a Job, 105.
³⁰⁰ Huntley and McKeberley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, xv.
were American citizens. We were asking our country to live up to its Constitution.”

News reporters and photojournalists provided the Birmingham movement a national platform from which to call on citizens and politicians to put an end to racial discrimination in America.

In Washington, when President Kennedy opened the Saturday papers, the images he saw repulsed him. His brother, Robert Kennedy, the US Attorney General, remarked: “Continued refusal to grant equal rights and opportunities to Negroes makes increasing turmoil inevitable. However, the timing of the present demonstrations is a dangerous business. An injured, maimed, or dead child is a price that none of us can afford to pay.”

Despite efforts by the Kennedy administration to avoid the civil rights matters, the events in Birmingham compelled the federal government to take action. President Kennedy called Dr. King and asked him to remove children from the protests, but he refused. Dr. King recognized the welfare of these black schoolchildren afforded the Birmingham movement the leverage it needed to move the state and federal governments to act in their favor. Also, with the movement receiving international coverage, Dr. King used it to place additional pressure on the Kennedy administration, since it wanted to

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301 Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
maintain its “authority as the self-proclaimed leader of the ‘free’ world.” This shift in momentum reflected the power of the student demonstrations.

Back in Birmingham, hundreds of marchers, onlookers, and the parents of those arrested assembled at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church for the evening mass meeting. At the beginning of the meeting SCLC’s Andrew Young condemned the violent actions of the black spectators earlier that day. “We have a nonviolent movement,” said Young, “but it’s not nonviolent enough.” Although he understood that police officers and firemen escalated the situation, he asked people not to throw rocks and bricks, but to instead pray for their enemies. “The police don’t know how to handle the situation governed by love, and the power of God. During these demonstrations we must tell the crowd how to behave.”

Washington Booker III, who was 14-years-old in 1963, attended the mass meeting after watching the day’s demonstrations at Kelly Ingram Park. Listening to Young speak, Booker disagreed with his message on nonviolence. “[I] saw those people willingly turn themselves over to the police…” he said. He knew the police to be “torturers and murderers” and the idea of schoolchildren voluntarily submitting themselves “to be taken away with them” was unfathomable. His reaction: “Wow, they must be crazy.”

Dr. King made his way to the pulpit after Young. He too spoke to the crowd about the importance of nonviolence, and discussed loving thy neighbor despite his or her actions. He encouraged those in attendance by saying, “No, we are not alone in this…. Don’t let anybody make you feel we are alone.” Dr. King deemed it important to let the

305 Ibid., 762.
306 Ibid, 763
307 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 19; 79.
people know their actions and sacrifices were reaching people throughout the South, the nation and other parts of the world. He announced that the demonstrations would continue through the weekend, which received a roaring applause. Extending the campaign into the weekend let people know the ACMHR and SCLC remained committed to the cause and refused to quit until city officials met their demands. Before the meeting came to an end, Dr. King took time to talk about the “little catalysts” at the center of the campaign. By now, some children had been in jail for forty-eight hours and stories about rat bites, inadequate food, a lack of beds, and aggressive interrogations were beginning to circulate. “Don’t worry about them,” he told the parents. “They are suffering for what they believe, and they are suffering to make this a better nation.”

Dr. King’s words came across as confident and serene.

**Youth Protesters go to Jail**

Even with Bevel’s activist training, nothing could prepare the young people for their time in jail. “Jail was a totally different experience,” recalled Larry Russell. “I’d never been on the other side of the big wall before.” Charged with violating municipal code 1159 - parading without a permit - Bull Connor ordered every demonstrator interrogated. Audrey Hendricks, who was 9-years-old at the time, recalled: “They were asking me a lot of questions about ‘Why did you march? Who told you to march? Did they force you to march?’” By the end of the first day, one of the city jails had reached capacity. As a result of the overcrowding, other jails and the fairgrounds had to be used. Girls ages 13 to 18 were housed at the 4-H Club building, while the Jefferson County Jail

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308 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 88.
309 Huntley and McKerley, *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, 84.
and the Bessemer Jail took in the young boys. Police held those children younger than thirteen in the same cellblocks as the older children. “We was in there about two weeks. About two weeks, and we be singin.’Oh my God we be singin,’’ said Mary Hardy Lykes. “When they put us in jail, the guys was in one side and the girls in another side, and you could hear them. And they would sing songs, then the girls would sing a song to answer them back.”

When a New York Times reporter interviewed a group of black girls at the Jefferson County Detention Home and asked if they wanted to go home they all replied, “Yes!” 12-year-old Anita Woods, however, added that she would do it all again. “I’ll keep marching till I get freedom.” The reporter then asked her what is freedom and she answered, “It’s equal rights. I want to go to any school and any store downtown and sit in the movies. And sit around in a cafeteria.” Freedom for her meant enjoying the same rights and privileges afforded whites.

Not every demonstrator remembered his or her time in jail fondly. The jails and detention facilities had difficulty meeting demands for food and shelter. James W. Stewart recalled being in a cell with close to three hundred boys and deplorable toilet facilities. “You went to the bathroom in front of [between] three or four hundred people. The only ventilation was a screen that ran across the ceiling, right up over the toilets, and the ceiling was very high.” An article written in the Chicago Daily Defender reported that it took officers over four hours to serve a breakfast of grits, applesauce, and bacon to

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311 Quoted by Mary Hardy Sykes, Mighty Times: The Children’s March
314 Huntley and McKerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 138.
the demonstrators. “It took from 4:30 a.m. until 9:00 a.m. to feed the 1,319 persons, which included 800 demonstrators, breakfast at [one particular] jail.” According to chief city jailer Robert Austin, one jail “ran out of food and had to provide a slim diet for breakfast.” When no more beds were available, prisoners, both male and female, slept shoulder-to-shoulder on the jailhouse floors. Some of the children had the fortune of sleeping with a blanket, but others had only the clothes they wore, and the body heat of a nearby demonstrator to keep them warm.

When the jail cells reached maximum capacity, which meant the officers could not cram another soul into the space, they started putting children in isolation chambers. Miriam McClendon recalled being placed in a “sweat box” as a form of punishment. “The sweat box was a little small room, closet size and you had to step down into it. Just a few inches, not far and they had water at the bottom of it. It was like a steel coffin.” McClendon was forced to stand in the “sweat box” with a group of girls. It was so tightly packed, the warden and a guard had to use their own body weight to shut the door. She remembers feeling the heat from the other bodies and hearing the other girls cry and moan from discomfort and fear. A similar experience took place at the Southside jail where officers placed male protesters into “The Pit,” a “three-story high room with a concrete floor where drunks usually dried out.” The ladies had a lot of stories of being mistreated - not abused necessarily, but just mistreated,” said Carolyn Maull McKinstry. “Many felt deprived, disrespected.”

She recalled stories of imprisonment from a female classmate that included a young woman stationed at the state fairgrounds.

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316 Huntley and McKerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 179-180.
318 Huntley and McKerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 156.
who shared with an officer her need for certain personal products but no one tended to her requests during the five days she spent in jail. Reports of these types of conditions worried parents and others. Then again, filling up the jails strained the city’s financial and personnel resources. The jail-in put added pressure on the city to negotiate.  

May 4, 1963

Over the next two days, people came out to see the youth protesters in action. This time, marchers concealed their involvement in the movement by hiding in the crowd; they looked like ordinary pedestrians and spectators. The goal was to confuse Bull Connor and policemen so they could make their way downtown before being stopped and sent to jail. Movement organizers referred to day 3 as “Operation Confusion.” As students exited Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the staged protesters began making their way downtown. This made it difficult for Connor and his officers to contain the protesters and prevent them from entering Birmingham’s business district. However, that did not work, in part because of the actions of Arnetta Streeter-Gary’s mother and family friend Mrs. Robey. These “movement mothers” drove youth demonstrators to the white business district. Once again, Connor resorted to police dogs and fire hoses to coral marchers. Protesters and onlookers ran in the streets and around Kelly Ingram Park to avoid being attacked. Other police officers arrested demonstrators. Freeman A. Hrabowski III squared off against Bull Connor in front of the steps of City Hall. “My heart was pounding, and my head was swimming with fear.” Before he and the other

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320 Levinson, Freedom’s Children, 104.
demonstrators reached the steps, Connor stopped them and asked Hrabowski, “What do you want little Niggra?” “We want our freedom.” he replied. From there, the policemen shoved Hrabowski and his fellow demonstrators into paddy wagons to be taken to the city jail for booking, and then to the county fairgrounds.321

In addition to changes in protest tactics, black adults became more involved in the campaign. A number of them joined youth marchers on the front lines, while others continued to stand on the sideline, showing support through their presence. For the first time since the start of the marches, James Bevel led parents and movement supporters on a peaceful walk to the city and county jails as a show of solidarity and to check on youth detainees. From behind the fence parents tossed food, clothing, and blankets to the children. Emma Smith Young remembers her granddaughter going to jail for marching without a permit. “One of my grandchildren was jailed at Fair Park. She started calling back to her mother, saying that she wanted to get out of that place. They had her in there in the rain. They didn’t have anywhere else to put them. They put them out there in that [jailhouse] yard with the high fence. Up so high, they couldn’t get over the fence.”322 Although parents found it difficult to see their children in custody, they applauded their efforts. Ruth, Anita, and Yvonne Woods, ages nine to twelve, all spent time in jail for participating in the movement. When their father, Rev. Calvin Woods, was asked by Jet magazine about his children’s involvement in the campaign, he remarked, “I’ve become convinced they are serious and want to bear witness to their demand for freedom, and I

321 Quoted by Freeman Hrabowski, Mighty Times: The Children’s March
322 Huntley and Mc Kerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 6.
am going to have to let them go.” As much as it hurt parents to have their children under police custody, they remained faithful in believing their efforts would reap long-lasting results.

May 5, 1963

On Sunday, May 5, the ACMHR-SCLC held a mass rally at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church. This gathering concluded with a march to the city jail and a peaceful demonstration in Memorial Park across the street. Spearheaded by the Rev. Charles Billups of New Pilgrim, more than 1,000 people walked toward the Southside jail, but not before police units stopped them. Fire trucks and paddy wagons prevented the men and women from walking any further. Bull Connor made his way through the police barricades to confront the marchers. With Connor drawing near, Billups knelt and began to pray. Taking their cue from the reverend, others assumed the prayer posture. In prayer, Billups called out to Connor, “Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here ‘til we die!” Connor ordered the hoses on, but the firemen refused. “You turn it on yourself,” said a fireman. “I am not going to do that.” These firemen rejected Connor’s violent tactics. Not every white citizen in Birmingham supported using violence to maintain segregation, firemen and policemen included. Birmingham police Captain George Wall told another officer, “Ten or fifteen years from now, we will look back on this and we will say, ‘How stupid can you be?’” Though they were a small minority of whites, there were enough to put a stop to Connor that Sunday afternoon. With tension

325 Ibid., 96
building, Wyatt Walker approached Connor and two police officers and informed them the marchers would not continue their journey to jail, but were going to gather across the street at a black-only public park for prayer service. Connor, without support from the firemen, allowed the protesters to proceed to the park unharmed. As the marchers made their way to the segregated park, city police and firemen retreated. For the first time since the start of the May demonstrations, nonviolence won over Bull Connor.326

The evening of May 5, Assistant U.S. Attorney General Burke Marshall, whom Robert Kennedy had sent to Birmingham to help resolve matters, recruited a number of white moderates and black conservatives to participate in secret negotiations. Marshall recruited traditional black leaders Arthur Shores and A.G. Gaston as well as Birmingham businessman Sidney Smyer, lawyer David Vann along with other white merchants. Most white citizens were outraged by the ACMHR and the SCLC “outside agitators” for instigating trouble there in Birmingham. Thus, Marshall thought it might be best to select two African Americans from the leadership class in hopes that they would negotiate and be more accommodative. They met downtown for some preliminary negotiations. Even as they lamented the ACMHR-SCLC’s dangerous protest tactics, the black negotiators defended the movement’s four demands. Unfortunately, the white negotiators rejected them as offensive. They refused to be pressured by black demonstrators into an agreement that would situate the ACMHR and SCLC as the victors. That day, no agreement was reached, so the protests continued.

May 6, 1963

The next morning, May 6, Burke Marshall met Dr. King at the home of John Drew, a close friend of the movement leader, to discuss postponing the demonstrations scheduled for that afternoon. Marshall argued further protests would hinder rather than help with the negotiations. He went on to explain that white merchants might be willing to meet some of the demands from the four-point plan, but hesitated to do so because of possible prosecution for breaking city segregation ordinances. Marshall asked Dr. King to be patient and hold off on future demonstrations until the courts decided on Boutwell or Connor for city mayor because any negotiations before could easily be revoked should the judge rule in favor of Connor. Dr. King responded that Birmingham’s merchants had the power to stand by the negotiations regardless of who became mayor. Dr. King did not want another repeat of Albany. He did not concern himself with politicians; instead he focused his efforts on city merchants who needed black customers to make their businesses profitable. He believed social and political advancement would come from economic pressure. As a result, Dr. King rejected Marshall’s request to suspend the marches.

Later that afternoon, protesters gathered for another day of marching. Students once again walked out of their classrooms and made their way to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. “I went straight through the school. In one door, and right out the other,” Washington Booker III remembered. “There must have been three to four hundred kids leaving [Ullman high] school, headed toward downtown.” To help keep the number of youth demonstrators high, movement leaders distributed fliers at the local black schools.

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328 Branch, Parting Waters, 769.
329 Levinson, We’ve Got a Job, 110.
“Fight for freedom first, then go to school,” read the flier. “Join the thousand in jail who are making their witness for freedom… It’s up to you to free our teachers, your parents, yourself, and your country.” Once again, youth demonstrators marched out of their classrooms and started making their way towards the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. This time, Bull Connor decided he would use a more peaceful approach when trying to corral the demonstrators. Rather than turn on the fire hoses and unleash the German shepherds, he adopted Laurie Pritchett’s “welcome-to-jail” strategy. In other words, Connor used his police officers to as a human barricade, sealing off Kelly Ingram Park. Next, he allowed approximately two thousand people to stand on the sidewalks near the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to watch the young marchers. To minimize the chance of violence, Connor and James Bevel agreed that once protesters walked out the church, they would be escorted into a paddy wagon and sent to jail; they would be arrested without being assaulted. As much as it pained the police commissioner to compromise, he knew the city could not risk any further negative publicity for the city and loss revenue for white businessmen downtown.

Back at the church, Dr. King preached about the importance of peaceful protest as they lined up in front of the church doors. Once Bevel signaled to Dr. King that all parties were in agreement, activist comedian Dick Gregory led the first group of youth demonstrators out of Sixteenth Church. After the police issued their standard warning for parading without a permit, they called for a paddy wagon and took the protestors off to jail.

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Ibid.
While locked up, Gregory had an unforgettable exchange with one of the movement’s youngest protesters: “I’m in jail and everybody singin’ and laughin’ and enjoying themselves. And I see this little four-year-old boy, two o’clock in the morning. I said, ‘hey man what’s your name?’ ‘Tim.’ ‘Okay,’ I said. ‘How old are you?’ He said, ‘four.’ I said, ‘What you here for?’ and he said ‘Teedom.’ He couldn’t even say freedom man.”

For a child of his age to exhibit such courage demonstrates the power of youth activism. “Children can sense when they’re four or five years old when people mistreat them,” Freeman Hrabowski said. “We knew we were being mistreated by our society and we wanted a different world, we wanted society to look us in our faces and treat us as human beings worthy of respect.”

Although the child could not articulate himself well, his passion and commitment were unmistakable.

Outside the city jail, demonstrations continued for another two hours. Spectators looked on as marchers repeatedly walked out of the church and into paddy wagons, but eventually the onlookers grew restless. A few, despite calls for restraint, began throwing bottles and rocks at the police. Fearing a riot, ACMHR-SCLC staffers called off the demonstration and asked protesters to return to the church. To assume the role of the “aggressor” would discredit ACMHR-SCLC’s nonviolent philosophy and tactics. It would also draw negative publicity to the movement that would result in a loss of vital support. Lastly, violent behavior on the part of black protesters could jeopardize any political leverage with the Kennedy administration. If the ACMHR-SCLC had any

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332 Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
chance of emerging as the victor in this battle for equality, the movement could not be perceived as violent.

Police arrested over 2,000 demonstrators and spectators that afternoon and much to the delight of movement leaders, the ACMHR-SCLC filled the jails.\textsuperscript{333} Policemen transported children to the City Jail and once it became too crowded they bused them to Juvenile Hall. When they arrived, the officers placed the youth protesters outside in the courtyard. “We sang and we sang—all the Movement songs, all the gospel songs…” said Washington Booker III. “And there was a young sister. She sang ‘The Lord’s Prayer.’” The schoolchildren got on their knees, bowed their heads and began to pray. “I remember seeing the white people in the window who worked there, these clerks and all. They were all looking at us,” said Booker. “It was a different kind of look. It was one of the most emotional things in my life. Everybody was quiet. She had such a beautiful voice. The prayer is a beautiful prayer, and she sang it.”\textsuperscript{334}

Meanwhile, inside Juvenile Hall, young inmates learned what was going on with the campaign from the new arrestees. Audrey Faye Hendricks, who was 8-years-old in 1963, remembered receiving good news from the new inmates. “We would get all excited and smile…and whisper, ‘Did you hear the news? We filled up all the rooms!’ We’d be all proud about the jails filling up.”\textsuperscript{335} The children’s ability to fill the jails exceeded everyone’s expectations, including their own. ACMHR-SCLC’s jail-in strategy put a heavy financial strain on local authorities who had to pay the cost of incarcerating the demonstrators. Jail-ins were an important part of the nonviolent strategy. Seeing children

\textsuperscript{333} Branch, \textit{Parting Waters}, 770-771; Eskew, \textit{But For Birmingham}, 275.
\textsuperscript{334} Levine, \textit{We’ve Got a Job}, 113.
\textsuperscript{335} Ibid.,
crammed into jail cells dramatized the injustice of southern blacks and intensified the struggle for racial equality. The strategy helped gain additional media coverage, which led to greater support for the movement. “The experience in jail was a frightening one and empowering one for sure. It taught me what was possible when you set a goal,” remembered Freeman Hrabowski.336 These children endured mistreatment, emotional distress, and time away from their loved ones all in the name of freedom. “These children wanted a better life. They wanted to have opportunities that they didn’t have. They wanted the world to be different from the world they had right there.”337 Though the risks and sacrifices were many, these kids remained steadfast in their fight for equality.

Later in the evening, the ACMHR-SCLC held its weekly Monday mass meeting. Between five and ten thousand people attended meetings at St. James Baptist, Thurgood Church, St. Luke’s, and St. Paul’s Church to listen to the movement leaders. Each church filled with songs and praise. Movement organizers spoke to the crowds about the day’s demonstrations, the status of the negotiations with white merchants, and shared testimonials from those in jail. All the while, concerned parents waited patiently to receive information about the whereabouts and wellbeing of their children. Prior to the mass meeting, several had visited the fairgrounds where the police held more than 800 children in hog pens. Separated by high barbed wired fences parents tossed food, clothing, and blankets to the children. As they stood yelling out to their children, it began to rain. Police officers walked to their cars and sat inside to stay dry. With nothing to keep the children from being rained upon, parents grew increasingly concerned about

336 Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
337 Ibid.,
their children’s safety and demanded that the ACMHR-SCLC leaders address the situation.

A Visit to the Fairgrounds

Back at the mass meeting, SNCC’s executive director James Forman listened as parents at one of the mass meetings shared their concerns. Forman, having heard enough, approached Dr. King and insisted he inspect the conditions at the makeshift jail. He agreed to visit these young “political prisoners” at the fairgrounds. Dr. King, Bevel, Forman, and Billups arrived at the grounds to find schoolchildren penned up like hogs, crouching together trying to keep one another dry. Bull Connor also came to check on the soaked protesters. Frustrated by the poor conditions, Dr. King demanded the police commissioner find shelter for the children and even phoned Burke Marshall and requested federal attention be given to these young boys and girls.338

With the images from the fairgrounds fresh in their minds, Dr. King and his associates returned to the mass meetings and proceeded to publicize the deplorable conditions in an attempt to mobilize adults. Dr. King shared that he had notified Marshall about the current state of the detainees, and asked the attorney general to remedy the situation as “it was the City of Birmingham’s duty to shelter these prisoners, to feed them, and give them a place to sleep, since they had arrested them.” From there, Dr. King redirected the conversation to focus on the children and all they had given to the cause in an effort to deter parents from keeping their children home the next day. “There are those who make history. There are those who experience history. I don’t know how many

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historians we have in Birmingham tonight. I don’t know how many of you would be able to write a history book. But you are certainly making history, and you are experiencing history,” said Dr. King. “And you will make it possible for historians of the future to write a marvelous chapter. Never in the history of this nation have so many people been arrested for the cause of freedom and human dignity!” He then told the concerned parents “Don’t worry about your children. Don’t hold them back if they want to go to jail. For they are doing a job not only for themselves but for all of America and for all mankind.”

Dr. King’s speech conveyed a very important message. Everyone knew that what had taken place over the past week in Birmingham had never been done before. Black schoolchildren had made history by successfully filling Birmingham jails, something no adult civil rights group had achieved on their own. Mary Bush, who was friends with many of the demonstrators, was proud of them. “When you see kids marching, it was hard for people to ignore. The marches had to be pretty troublesome. It makes me very proud that children, young folk, could have an impact like that, that they could be committed, and determined about freedom. It made me very proud.” Their fearlessness and boundless energy gave the Birmingham movement the momentum it needed to bring awareness to the plight of local blacks, and to begin dismantling the structures of white supremacy.

After the last mass meeting, Dr. King and the other movement leaders gathered at the Gaston Motel to discuss strategy and negotiations. As the ACMHR-SCLC organizers

reviewed the day’s events, they noticed a key sign of progress: the downtown business
district had not had many customers, black or white, since the start of the demonstrations.
This gave movement leaders the necessary leverage needed to set their demands in
motion. The ACMHR-SCLC agreed to postpone future marches to jail, and instead
focused on shutting down Birmingham’s shopping district. The next morning, ACMHR
treasurer William Shortridge and his associates scoured the city in search of youth leaders
who could assist with recruiting.

As movement organizers prepared for a mass rally, white negotiators gathered to
examine the socioeconomic distress brought on by the Birmingham movement. White
merchants and city officials had begun to feel the pressure of the movement. They knew
ACMHR-SCLC had another protest planned for later in the day, and with the city and
county jails at maximum capacity, and the eyes of the nation and the world on them, there
was a good chance that either President Kennedy or Alabama Governor George Wallace
would send in military troops to restore order. With the odds against them, they reached
out to the Senior Citizens Committee (SCC), an 89-member committee of Birmingham’s
most prominent businessmen charged with solving the city’s race problems. The identity
of each committee member was kept private. The reason being, SCC members feared
retaliation from arch-segregationists who opposed negotiating.341

Negotiations

Meanwhile, Dr. King hosted a press conference at the Gaston Motel to update
news reporters. At the same time, hundreds of young protesters began to make their way

341 Branch, Parting the Waters, 775-776; Levinson, We’ve Got a Job, 107
to Sixteenth Street Church in preparation for the afternoon rally in the downtown business district. That same morning “fewer than 14,000 black students—out of 34,000 enrolled in Birmingham city schools—were present for roll call,” reported the Birmingham News. 342

Hundreds of students marched out of the church and onto the street where they dispersed in every direction with the goal of meeting downtown in time to disrupt the lunch-hour rush. Nearly three thousand African Americans reached the shopping district. ACMHR-SCLC officers led groups of protesters into segregated department stores and offices while others walked the streets holding picket signs and singing freedom songs. Even adults participated in the downtown protest. A group of adult members of ACMHR knelt down in the middle of a sidewalk and prayed. Policemen could no longer arrest protesters because city, county, and nearby counties’ jail were at capacity. Officers could do nothing but confiscate signs and order people to disperse.

Birmingham blacks shutdown the business district for almost an hour before movement officers called off the demonstrations. With the rising amount of civil unrest, representatives of the white business elite decided to negotiate. 343 For the rest of the afternoon, Burke Marshall met with the Senior Citizen Committee to discuss racial reform. While some of the negotiators found it difficult to move away from the city’s racist power structure, others understood the need for change. “If we’re going to have a good business in Birmingham, we better change our way of living,” said Smyer, real

342 Levinson, We’ve Got a Job, 117.
estate businessman and member of the SCC. ""Gentlemen, we’ve got to get things straight."

After much discussion and debate, Burke Marshall phoned the White House at eight o’clock to tell President Kennedy that the meeting with the businessmen was successful. The next step would be to meet with the black leaders and work out a settlement. Later in the evening, black and white negotiators gathered at the Chamber of Commerce to initiate discussions about dismantling racial discrimination in Birmingham. For hours these two groups debated the terms of a compromise, but to no avail. By midnight, it became clear to both parties an agreement could not be finalized without Dr. King’s approval. Determined to reach some type of resolution, Mayor Boutwell sent his chief assistant, Billy Hamilton, to bring Dr. King to the meeting. When Dr. King arrived, he joined Arthur Shores, A.G. Gaston, L.H. Pitts, the president of Miles College, and ACMHR-SCLC representative Andrew Young. Over the next four hours, these five men went back and forth with white negotiators about the details of their agreement.

Much of the dispute had to do with timing. White negotiators favored reform that was slow and vague, meanwhile black negotiators demanded precision and stressed urgency; they feared backpedaling on the part of the whites. With neither side backing down, Andrew Young took charge. He proposed a somewhat watered-down version of the ACMHR-SCLC’s original demands. His suggested plan of action included ‘token’ employment of African Americans effective immediately, establishing timetables for the desegregation of public accommodations, and increased employment for Birmingham

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blacks downtown. By four o’clock in the morning, both parties more or less agreed to Young’s recommendations and decided to reconvene later in the day to finalize the details. At the conclusion of the meeting, Dr. King and his fellow negotiators returned to the Gaston Motel to discuss whether to hold another mass street protest in the shopping district like the day before. Conservatives Gaston and Pitts advised that the ACMHR-SCLC place a moratorium on marches and other forms of protest while both parties worked on a settlement. Others opposed the idea because they feared the white negotiators would renege on the agreement if the ACMHR-SCLC postponed future demonstrations. Moments later, Dr. King sided with Pitts and Gaston; he would call for a moratorium. But not everyone supported Dr. King’s decision.347

People like James Forman felt that calling off the demonstrations was premature and could hinder the ACMHR-SCLC’s chances of real progress in Birmingham. With the two organizations gaining local and national support, they could pressure city officials to settle on terms extremely favorable to the movement. By agreeing to postpone future protests, Dr. King aligned himself with black conservatives and their traditional leadership style, which went against the values of the local grassroots movement all together. The ACMHR-led movement stood for direct action and nonviolent protest, not backroom negotiations with the same individuals who supported and benefited from the city’s white power structure. In addition, the young arrestees had yet to hear details regarding when they would be released, whether charges against them would be dropped, and what would, if any, be the cost of bail? The longer these questions remained unanswered the more anxious parents and some schoolchildren became.

347 Eskew, But For Birmingham, 286.
For Dr. King to suspend the movement based on unsecured promises implied it was more about securing a public win in Birmingham and less about achieving a full-fledged victory for the Birmingham. Instead of him holding out until he and the other black negotiators (which at this time no longer included a member of ACMHR) could extract real concessions from city officials and merchants, he settled for immediate actions and future discussions. Dr. King declared a moratorium on the demonstrations without having met all of the original goals they created. This compromised the efforts of over two thousand schoolchildren and adult protesters who marched and went to jail, and remained in police custody.\footnote{Andrew M. Manis, \textit{A Fire You Can’t Put Out}, 380-384.}

No one expressed more disappointment than Rev. Shuttlesworth. When he heard about the moratorium, he made his way to Drew’s house to speak with Dr. King. After asking Dr. King to confirm the moratorium rumors, he proceeded to argue with the SCLC leader about who spoke for black Birmingham. “Well, Martin, you know they \textit{said} in Albany that you come in, get people excited and started, and you leave town. But I live here, the people trust me, and I have the responsibility after SCLC is gone, and I’m telling you it will not be called off,” said Shuttlesworth. He went on to say: “You and I promised that we would not stop demonstrating until we had the victory. Now, that’s it. That’s it. And if you call it off … with the last little ounce of strength I got, I’m gonna get back out and lead.” Despite Shuttlesworth’s strong disapproval, the decision had been made and there was no going back. Even after Burke Marshall tried to calm the ACMHR leader, he continued to rant and rave. “I’ll be damned if you’ll have it like this. You’re mister big, but you’re going to be mister S-H-I-T. I’m sorry, but I cannot compromise my
principles and the principles we established.”349 Frustrated and disappointed, Shuttlesworth went home.350

Birmingham and Cold War Politics

Despite criticism from within the movement, President Kennedy supported Dr. King’s decision. At the time, segregation caused tremendous problems internationally for the administration. Cold War friends and foes, which included decolonized and decolonizing Asian and African countries, scrutinized the president and his administration for failing to protect African Americans and their rights as citizens. In South Africa, citizens viewed racial troubles in America as hypocritical. “Why is the United States sticking her nose in South African apartheid [segregation] policy when she can’t control her own Negroes?” German newspapers endorsed the efforts of the Kennedy administration, although some citizens referred to America as a hypocrite. One German reporter stated, “Look who’s talking about the way we treat Jews. The Americans suppressed the Negroes, why we were no worse than they are now.” This type of news coverage sent a message to the global audience that America’s racial dilemma was a direct reflection of the country’s views toward people of color. Leaders from African countries also voiced their concerns about the mistreatment of American blacks. Jomo Kenyatta of the Kenya African National Union condemned President Kennedy for allowing racial violence and oppression in the American South: “It is ironic that a country such as the United States, which claims to be a home of democracy, should show itself as a state where oppression and discrimination are rife.” Kenyatta warned: “If

349 Eskew, But For Birmingham, 286.
the United States wishes to maintain the respect and goodwill of the people of Africa, it must stand firmly by the fundamental principles of freedom and equality enshrined in its Constitution." If political actors condoned domestic human rights violations against African Americans, what did it mean for their developing countries of the African continent? Such negative publicity gave the organizers of the Birmingham movement leverage over the President.

The events of Birmingham, especially images of black children fighting off police dogs, affected the United States’ positioning in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union disseminated more anti-American propaganda than any other country. Headlines from the Communist press read, “Monstrous Crimes Among Racialists in the United States,” and “Demonstration in Alabama. Big Action Against Racial Discrimination in Terror-center of the U.S.A. Southern States.” Domestic racial conflict posed a threat to the federal government’s effort to extend its political and economic reach, particularly to nonwhite people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Racist laws and practices in America jeopardized the nation’s moral legitimacy and status as a global superpower. As the self-proclaimed “leading ambassador of democracy,” the White House worked to halt the global spread of communism yet denied black Americans the same human rights it promoted abroad, thereby reducing “the sale value of democracy as a political commodity.” America’s geopolitical aspirations and domestic conflict with black Americans became a growing concern as it threatened the nation’s

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351 Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 293.
global reputation. Given its Cold War imperatives, the White House had no choice but to assist with negotiations and ensure the outcome defused the situation, and if that meant an outcome favorable to blacks in Birmingham than so be it. Because the Cold War was heating up, the Birmingham movement took on international significance in a way few could have imagined. In a memorandum sent from the United States Information Agency to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy included a compilation of international reactions to the events in Birmingham. Cairo’s Arabic press disapproved of the “‘ruthless and cruel police measures’ against Negroes ‘whose only crime is just black skin.’” In Mexico an editorial deplored the “dangerous medieval practices in [the] U.S. …to set dogs against Negroes of Birmingham and to disperse them with fire hoses.” Other international press, like The Ghanaian Times, applauded the work of movement leaders and demonstrators. An article headlined, “Is This America the Beautiful?” that congratulated Dr. King and the other movement organizers for their efforts in putting an end to segregation in Birmingham. It read: “Your fight for dignity of the black man in the fight for every son and daughter of Ghana, of every man and woman born of Africa…."


May 9, 1963

Two days had passed since the biracial committee began negotiations and still there was no agreement. For every day the negotiations went on and the ACMHR-SCLC chose not to demonstrate, movement momentum declined. Dr. King’s ability to maintain pressure on the white negotiators also began to wane with each passing day. On Thursday, May 9, Dr. King rescheduled his press conference three times in hopes that extending the deadline would help the biracial committee reach a consensus. Instead, it gave movement supporters the impression Dr. King had begun to lose confidence in the ACMHR-SCLC’s ability to successfully dismantle Birmingham’s racist power structure. Later that afternoon, Dr. King held his press conference with Abernathy at his side. The tone of his remarks and choice of words seemed to suggest the final terms of an agreement would not reflect the original demands of the ACMHR-SCLC. He informed reporters that movement leaders would accept desegregation of cafeterias and public facilities without a specific timeframe, and agreed to a “gradual” hiring of black employees. In the negotiations, Dr. King also endorsed the creation of a new bi-racial committee for future negotiations on matters such as school desegregation, voter registration, and the hiring of black policemen within a reasonable timeframe. This would keep the city and all negotiators accountable and keep pressure on both parties. Lastly, Dr. King pleaded with white negotiators to drop all criminal charges against the young protesters. Days before the press conference, the negotiation team went back and forth over the fate of the demonstrators who remained in prison. Whites pledged to make a

concerted effort to have the children released, but Dr. King wanted more than just effort. In thinking about the children’s contributions to the movement, Dr. King could not bear having to tell mothers and fathers their children would remain in jail. Eventually, it was agreed that the young people would be released on a $250,000 bond. Although the ACMHR-SCLC wanted the city to release the children without any penalty, the challenge of raising funds for bonds seemed much more promising than having 500 prisoners face trial.

Dr. King’s press conference marked a critical turning point in the Birmingham movement. The degree to which those representing the black community in these biracial negotiations diluted the original demands of the ACMHR-SCLC raised concerns about their willingness to fight for what would be in the best interest of all Birmingham blacks. Fred Shuttlesworth accused Dr. King of selling out to the white power structure and interpreted King’s decision to halt the protest marches and demonstrations as him giving up on the local movement. Shuttlesworth was not alone in his opinion. A year after the campaign, Burke Marshall reflected on Dr. King’s actions: “As far as Dr. King is concerned, I think that he wanted a success himself. He wanted success for himself and he wanted success for his people.” Partly cynical and partly sincere in his interpretation of success, he explained that it appeared Dr. King “wanted to be the Negro leader who had success. In part he was

357 Members of the ACMHR-SCLC Central Committee were gravely concerned about the youth protesters. Reverend Ralph Abernathy reported at the Central Committee meeting on May 10, that negotiators agreed all charges against the students would be dropped. However it was not written into the official negotiation document. See ACMHR-SCLC Central Committee Meeting Minutes, May 10, 1963, pgs. 39-40. Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Birmingham, AL. April 2009.
358 Branch, Parting the Waters, 787.
359 Eskew, But For Birmingham, 288-89.
just trying to accomplish something.” While no one can prove or disprove the reason for Dr. King’s behavior, his decision to suspend the Birmingham movement short of its publicly stated objectives and to put the conservative black leadership class back in the position to petition on behalf of the greater black community, set the stage for false promises and future racial tensions.

After another late evening of negotiations, the bi-racial committee finally reached a compromise. White attorney Chuck Morgan collaborated with Arthur Shores and Andrew Young in drafting a document that outlined the accord. The negotiators decided ACMHR-SCLC leaders would be the ones to announce the agreement, as no white merchants wanted “to speak for the business community” or white city officials. As much as the white politicians and professionals deplored the mass protests and arrests, they despised the negotiations perhaps even more. “I’m unwilling to make decisions virtually at gunpoint or as the result of agitation,” said Mayor Albert Boutwell. Others criticized the white businessmen for “selling the white folks down the river.” The truce had less to do about “winning” and more to do with each party being able to save face while agreeing to some concessions.

The settlement called for desegregating lunch counters, department store dressing rooms, public restrooms and drinking fountains within the next 90 days; hiring and promoting African Americans on a nondiscriminatory basis; hiring blacks in stores and other industries by a newly appointed private fair employment committee within 60 days;

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360 Ibid., 292.
361 Ibid., 293.
releasing movement demonstrators on bond or “on their personal recognizance;” and creating an official biracial committee to convene two weeks later.\textsuperscript{362}

**May 10, 1963**

On Friday afternoon, May 10, leaders of the ACMHR and SCLC held a press conference to announce the terms of the settlement. Shuttlesworth was asked to read the opening statement as a show of unity. He did so reluctantly. The statement read in part: “The city of Birmingham has reached an accord with its conscience. The acceptance of responsibility by local white and Negro leadership offers an example of a free people uniting to meet and solve their problems.”\textsuperscript{363} Shuttlesworth collapsed after reading the formal statement. The stress and anxiety of the movement put a strain on the founder of the ACMHR. After he was taken to the hospital, Dr. King addressed the crowd. “We must not see the present development as a victory for the Negro. It is rather a victory for democracy and the whole citizenry of Birmingham—Negro and white!” Turning his attention to the black community, he remarked: “As we stand on the verge of using public facilities heretofore closed to us, we must not be overbearing and haughty in spirit. We must be loving enough to turn an enemy into a friend.”\textsuperscript{364} Before the press conference concluded, Dr. King announced he would remain in Birmingham for two more weeks before returning to Atlanta. He also mentioned he and the other movement leaders would reconvene in ninety days to assess implementation of the accord.

\textsuperscript{362} Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 294.
\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., 295.
\textsuperscript{364} Ibid.
Although white negotiators decided not to comment on the settlement or make known their involvement, businessman Sidney Smyer released a statement. “It is important that the public understand, the steps we have taken were necessary to avoid a dangerous and imminent explosion.” Smyer also mentioned how proud he and other businessmen felt “to have been in a position to be of service” to their city, though they shared “the bitterness” which white citizens must have felt about the “demonstrations and their timing.” He even gave thanks to God for “a chance to re-establish racial peace,” and added the white power structure intended on desegregating the city all along. Lastly, Smyer addressed Birmingham citizens asking them to work together to maintain the peace that had been bestowed upon the city by way of the accord. While his words may have been disingenuous, he and the rest of the white negotiators brought the protests to an end.  

Later in the evening, thousands of people attended one of three mass meetings to celebrate the accord. At St. John’s Church, the crowd clapped and sang “Oh Freedom” as Reverends Abernathy and King made their way to the pulpit. Abernathy cheerfully read aloud the written statement from earlier in the day and reviewed the projected implementation. After a roar of applause, he addressed the people to warn them of those who may try to minimize, negate, and ignore the progress made by the Birmingham movement. In defense of the accord and efforts put forth by the movement, Dr. King told the crowd: “Do not underestimate the power of this movement! These things would not have been granted without your presenting your bodies and your very lives before the dogs and the tanks and the water hoses of this city!” He went on to share all the positive

\[365\] Ibid.
feedback he received about the campaign from spiritual leaders, professional athletes and entertainers. In closing, Dr. King reminded the crowd that what occurred in Birmingham over the past two weeks should make the city’s citizens, black and white, proud.366

White Retaliation

The next evening, May 11, the Ku Klux Klan held a rally in the nearby town of Bessemer to express its outrage at and opposition to the accords. Grand Dragon Robert Shelton criticized white negotiators for their involvement. “These stores that want the Negro trade so much, these people who are selling out the whites, they don’t need our business.” Threatening to harass those responsible for the recent settlement, Klansmen returned to Birmingham, raiding black neighborhoods, setting off a series of riots. At 10:45 p.m. a group of vigilantes bombed the home of Dr. King’s younger brother Reverend A.D. King in an attempt to kill the SCLC leader. Luckily, all seven members of his family made it out safely. Nearby neighbors quickly ran to the scene of the explosion to check on the King family. As news of the bombing spread more than one thousand people converged on the site. A number of bystanders suggested retaliating against the vigilantes as well as the police officers who were trying to disperse the crowd. Afraid a riot might breakout, A.D. King addressed the bystanders about the importance of nonviolence. Just as the reverend and other church leaders worked to disperse the crowd, a second bombing occurred at the Gaston Motel. Vigilantes targeted Room 30 in hopes Dr. King would be there, but the SCLC leader had already left town to spend the

366 Branch, Parting the Waters, 790-91.
weekend in Atlanta. Moments after the explosion a crowd of black onlookers formed near the motel.367

When law enforcement arrived, bystanders broke into frenzy. “We threw rocks at white folks’ cars,” said Washington Booker, “roamed the streets, vandalized, burn anything the white folks owned.”368 Once peaceful bystanders now began throwing bricks and bottles at police officers. Chanting, “kill’em, kill’em”, they took to the streets, attacking patrol cars, fire trucks and storefronts. As fires raged, Birmingham’s evening sky glowed in hues of red and orange. Not everyone went downtown to riot. Some came out of curiosity. The Streeter family drove downtown that night. “We got into a car and we came downtown. It was scary - a full riot,” remembered Arnetta Streeter Gary.369 Audrey Faye Hendricks rode downtown as well. As they neared the Gaston Motel, they saw fires and turned around. “It was a dangerous situation,” Hendricks said. James Stewart’s parents decided not to go downtown, but he was aware of the rioting and what it all meant. “The battle intensified,” he said. “We went to jail…and we won-like a soccer game… The bombing were at a different level; they were trying to kill somebody.”370

After having spent days in jail, some of the youth demonstrators were shocked by the amount of violence following the agreement. At its height, nearly 2,500 people vandalized white and black owned businesses, as well as looted grocery stores, liquor stores, and other businesses.

Local law enforcement and state patrolmen arrived downtown determined to restore order. They stormed the streets beating rioters, releasing police dogs, and

367 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 300.
368 Levison, We’ve Got a Job, 132.
369 Ibid.
370 Ibid.
threatening to shoot protestors. With so many rioters and onlookers crowding the roadways, it was impossible for firemen to extinguish burning buildings or for medics to care adequately for the injured. Bull Connor’s infamous white armored truck thundered across the city, with an officer blaring through its loudspeaker, “Everybody get off the streets now. We cannot get ambulances in here to help people unless you clear the streets.” Witnessing the violence and the increasing danger, movement leaders began assisting police in their effort to restore calm. SCLC’s Wyatt Walker used a megaphone to speak to the crowd. “Please do not throw bricks anymore,” he pleaded. “Ladies and gentlemen, will you cooperate by going to your homes?” The rioters refused to comply; some even yelled back: “They started it! They started it!” A.D. King tried to reach the people. “We’re not mad anymore. We’re saying: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.’” He voiced his vehement opposition to the use of violence claiming it was the “tactic of the white man” and asked the people to join him in prayer and song before returning home peacefully.371 A few hours before dawn, the demonstrators finally made their way back to their homes. The riot, the first of its kind in the 1960s, was over. The uprising, though, illustrated to citizens, black and white, that it would require more than schoolchildren and nonviolent protests to fix Birmingham.372 Only dismantling the city’s historic white power structure and the ideology of white supremacy would provide black citizens full rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Until then, the unholy trinity of economic, social, and political oppression continued.

371 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 302-303.
372 Ibid., 301.
Kennedy and Birmingham

On Sunday morning, President Kennedy and members of his administration held an emergency strategy session to discuss the violence in Birmingham and decide on next steps. They debated whether to deploy troops. Attorney General Robert Kennedy argued that sending troops would be interpreted as the federal government intervening in state matters. Furthermore, it would create the perception the White House had an alliance with civil rights organizations and black Americans, something Kennedy hoped to avoid, as he needed the support of Southern Democrats to win a second term in office. In a last minute effort to avoid martial law, Burke Marshall phoned Dr. King to assess his opinion of Saturday’s riot and to discuss the possibility of future demonstrations and violence. Dr. King, having returned to Birmingham after a brief time in Atlanta, informed Marshall that so long as no other incidents occurred, he and the other movement leaders could keep the black community calm. Most of his concerns centered on white negotiators and making sure they would not renege on the earlier settlement. He feared that recent events, along with threats of martial law, would lead white merchants to go back on the negotiated agreements. Should businessmen not abide by the accord, racial warfare would continue in the streets of Birmingham. Marshall reached out to Sid Smyer, president of the Birmingham Realty Company and chairman of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, to assess the situation from the white perspective. Smyer reassured Marshall that both the white negotiators and the Senior Citizens committee would adhere to the agreement. Like Dr. King, Smyer wanted to avoid military intervention. As he told segregationists who favored federal troops: “When martial law takes over, local civil

373 Branch, Parting the Waters, 797-798.
authorities and local courts are abolished. The community is under the heel of the military. No longer can we solve anything ourselves. Answers are provided for us.”

Back in Washington, President Kennedy supported dispatching troops to Alabama. Citing Title 10, Section 333, of the U.S. Code, Kennedy justified his order as an attempt to suppress insurrections. Following the president’s decision, Marshall and other cabinet members drafted Kennedy’s statement on racial violence in Birmingham. Later in the evening, the president held a widely publicized live news conference. “The Birmingham movement agreement was a fair and just accord,” he stated. “…The federal government will not permit it to be sabotaged by a few extremists on either side.”

Movement leaders approved Kennedy’s remarks and in an effort to restore peace to the city, Dr. King and others visited pool halls, bars, and walked the streets of Birmingham on Monday, May 13 preaching nonviolence to whomever they encountered. In the afternoon, the SCLC-ACMHR held a rally at the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church. Excitement at the rally grew when retired baseball player Jackie Robinson and former boxing champion Floyd Patterson arrived.

Robinson addressed the crowd, praising the people for their courage. “I don’t think you realize here in Birmingham what you mean to us up there in New York. And I don’t think white Americans understand what Birmingham means to all of us throughout the country.” Overwhelmed with emotion, Robinson went on to say, “…I wish that this same kind of enthusiasm that has been shown right here in this church tonight could be shown to Negroes throughout America.” Following the baseball legend’s heartfelt

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374 Eskew, But For Birmingham, 304.
statement, Dr. King encouraged those assembled not to lose faith in the movement. “We are not going to allow this conflict in Birmingham to deteriorate into a struggle between black people and white people,” he said. “The tension in Birmingham is between justice and injustice.” As he brought his speech to an end, Dr. King made one last plea for calm: “There may be more blood to flow on the streets of Birmingham before we get our freedom, but let it be our blood instead of the blood of our white brother. The agreements that have been made will be met. There will be integration in Birmingham in the next few weeks.” Until then, Dr. King asked people to remain patient and optimistic.

A Badge of Courage

While movement leaders continued to focus on maintaining the accord, those children arrested during the demonstrations had to redirect their attention toward school and life. After receiving financial support from citizens, politicians, celebrities, and businesspeople, the children posted bail. “When I returned to school, some of the teachers allowed us to talk about our experiences, while others continued with the schoolwork for that day,” said Malcolm Hooks, who spent one night in jail. “My friends viewed me getting arrested as a badge of courage. If you went to jail you were perceived as achieving something.” Youth demonstrators like Hooks, returned to school with a great sense of pride and an increased level of maturity. Some schoolchildren swapped stories about being hosed by firemen and about time spent in jail. Willie Casey, who

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376 Branch, Parting Waters, 801-802.
377 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 305-306.
379 Huntley and McKerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 172.
spent four days in the Bessemer city jail located sixteen miles south of Birmingham, remembered his friend, and fellow demonstrator, James Orange congratulating him on his participation in the movement. “He said, ‘You’re a real man now.’ It made me feel real good. That was the first comment I really got.” Arenetta Streeter Gary’s teacher, Miss Woolfolk announced to the class that she had been arrested for participating in the demonstrations. “She gave me a big hug,” said Arnetta, “made me feel proud.” These children knew they had done something special, and now so did their teachers and classmates.

Aside from the recognition, the movement increased the students’ political awareness, transforming them into advocates for social change. While critics may have accused movement organizers of “using” black youth for mere shock value, Hrabowski’s thought otherwise. “Dr. King said if we show the country that we are not happy with the way life is, that we do believe we deserve more, an American’s basic rights that the world will say shame on you America for treating these children like this and that is exactly what happened.”

Not everyone received a hero’s welcome upon returning to school. James W. Stewart, a high school senior at the time of the demonstrations, received word from his homeroom teacher that the Birmingham Board of Education had expelled him.

When we got back to school, I remember my homeroom teacher came in crying. Her name was Mrs. Evans. She came in crying, and she called our names, and said, ‘You all have been expelled.’ Now, I am working on a 3.9 average in my senior year, and I am told I am expelled along with the rest of us.”

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381 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 134.
382 Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
383 Huntley and McKerley, *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, 139-140.
On May 20, the board of education expelled 1,081 black schoolchildren for having been arrested during the protest marches earlier in the month. With less than one week left in the school year, students like Stewart were forced to attend summer school in order to receive their high school diplomas. “We were just shocked. We left school, and we spent a couple of days just walking around, sitting around, talking about what had happened: ‘What does it all mean? What is going to happen to us? Will we get back into school?’” Stewart and his classmates posed some important questions. After having spent time in jail for the right to equal treatment, how could they be denied their education? To make matters worse, some teachers and administrators from the black schools assisted the superintendent in identifying students for disciplinary action, illustrating the lengths whites authorities would go to reassert their power.

Outraged by Superintendent Theo Wright’s decision to punish students for demonstrating, the NAACP filed suit to stop the expulsions. When movement lawyers faced U.S. district Judge Clarence W. Allgood, he ruled in favor of the school board: “This court was shocked to see hundreds of school children ranging from six to sixteen, running loose, and without direction over the streets of Birmingham and in the business establishments.” Dissatisfied with the judge’s decision, the lawyers presented the suit to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta. This time, the federal court sided with the movement. On Wednesday, May 22, Chief Judge Elbert Tuttle reversed Allgood’s

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385 Ibid., 139-140.
387 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 308.
decision and ordered the students to be readmitted to school. The decision of the NAACP to file suit on behalf of 1,000 youth demonstrators was a sign of respect for and recognition of the sacrifices made by these young men and women.

While organizations such as the NAACP may have disagreed with the ACMHR and SCLC’s methods of protest and willingness to recruit young people, they acknowledged the local and national significance of the Birmingham movement.\textsuperscript{388} For years the NAACP came to the defense of young blacks. In 1931, it famously defended the Scottsboro 9, a group of African American teenagers accused of raping two white women on a train in Alabama. In the 1950s and 1960s, the organization also provided legal aid to student sit-in demonstrators, to students denied entry to white colleges, and to members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Though movement strategies and tactics changed over the years, the NAACP’s legal expertise proved invaluable.

The next day, May 23, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled on the municipal government conflict in Birmingham. The justices sided with Birmingham voters and declared Albert Boutwell and the rest of the newly elected city council the official governing body of the city. And just like that, Bull Connor’s career as a political leader was over. His removal from office marked another symbolic victory for the Birmingham movement as it signaled the end of his reign of terror in the black community.

Ironically, Bull Connor’s violent temper and public disdain for black Americans worked to the movement’s advantage. “The civil rights movement should thank God for

\textsuperscript{388} Ibid., 308-309; Barnett Wright, \textit{1963}, 55.
Bull Connor,” said President Kennedy. “He’s helped it as much as Abraham Lincoln.”
Connor’s aggressive crowd control tactics initiated ACMHR-SCLC’s “Project C” strategy and later spawned a media firestorm that movement leaders could not have imagined but benefited from greatly. His villainous behavior made it easier for movement organizers to generate sympathy and support from Americans and people across the world. With Connor’s political career behind him, Birmingham blacks hoped for better days ahead.

Effects of the Children’s March

Birmingham significantly impacted people’s interpretation of racial injustice in America. Television and print media helped to unveil the racial violence and intolerance that permeated the Southland. Citizens across the country found themselves transfixed by images of snarling police dogs and footage of youth demonstrators pinned against buildings as firemen blasted them with their hoses. Much of the shock and dismay stemmed from the mistreatment of the children. As these young protesters courageously fought Birmingham’s white power structure, the nation had no choice but to confront the marginalization of black children specifically, and black Americans generally. Such vivid displays of social injustice called for Americans to re-conceptualize what once seemed to be a “southern dilemma” as a national crisis and begin to critique the nation’s moral character.

389 William Nunnley, Bull Connor, 164.
The Birmingham campaign also pressured the Kennedy administration to take a position on civil rights and advocate both for democracy on the home front and abroad.\textsuperscript{391} The mass demonstrations and arrests of black youth had a significant impact on the nation’s diplomatic interests in the newly independent and emerging nations and colonies of Africa. As the United States battled the Soviet Union for political influence over these developing countries, Africans kept abreast of the black freedom struggle in America. According to Prime Minister Milton Obote of Uganda, nothing was “more paradoxical than that these events should take place in the United States and at a time when the country is anxious to project its image before the world screen as the archetype of democracy and the champion of freedom.” In his message to the president, Obote also said “it [was] the duty of the free world and more so of the countries that hold themselves up as leaders of that free world to see that all of their citizens, regardless of their skin [were] free.”\textsuperscript{392} How could the United States, a country that prided itself on being a global leader, enforce discriminatory laws and practices against its own people of color? Concerned by the possible implications of the nation’s racial dilemma on foreign diplomacy, the White House and the State Department insisted on federal involvement in Birmingham. Burke Marshall’s presence in the city helped to strengthen the president’s commitment to domestic racial issues. By mediating negotiations between movement leaders and city officials, Marshall alleviated some of the political pressure on the


\textsuperscript{392} Dudziak, “Cold War Civil Rights,” 172.
president and his administration by those who questioned the president’s commitment to the spread and protection of democracy and human rights.

The events in Birmingham redeemed Dr. King’s reputation as the nation’s premiere civil rights activist and it vindicated the SCLC. The beginning of 1963 marked a low point for Dr. King and the SCLC. It had been eight years since his victory in Montgomery with the bus boycott. Recovering from a less than successful campaign in Albany, Georgia, Dr. King and the SCLC desperately needed a win. As a result of the events in Birmingham, Dr. King received requests from across the United States to speak about the struggle, and the SCLC also experienced a new level of popularity that translated into an increase in monetary donations. During a fundraising event hosted by California governor Edmund G. Brown, SCLC raised $75,000. People applauded ACMHR and the SCLC for their efforts and viewed the accord as both a local and national victory. Its winning protest strategies, ability to bring the downtown business sector to a halt, and the removal of Bull Connor from public office, proved that the most segregated city in America could be transformed by nonviolent, direct action, protest.

Despite these achievements, the accord did not meet all of the movement’s objectives. Shuttlesworth argued the bi-racial committee’s agreement lacked the necessary guarantees to ensure concrete local reform, claiming the movement had “lost an opportunity for change.” He wanted to continue demonstrations and protests until the city met ACMHR-SCLC’s original demands. Shuttlesworth’s frustration with the accord had largely to do with Dr. King altering his position at the time of negotiations. At the start of the movement, Shuttlesworth was under the impression that Dr. King and the

393 Branch, Parting the Waters, 804.
394 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 296.
SCLC were joining the ACMHR to “achieve the nonnegotiable demand” to stop racial
discrimination in Birmingham. The local movement was to be the focal point. Any
regional or national repercussions resulting from the campaign would be a secondary
benefit. Until the negotiations began, Dr. King and Rev. Shuttlesworth were in
agreement. However, once the Kennedy administration intervened, Dr. King’s
positioning changed. Instead of demanding an end to racial discrimination, he followed
the lead of attorney Arthur Shores, entrepreneur A.G. Gaston, and Miles College
president Lucius Pitts. From that point forward, Dr. King accommodated the interests of
the traditional black leadership and the racist establishment, sacrificing the wishes and
desires of the ACMHR and its supporters. This decision negated any leverage the
ACMHR-SCLC gained as a result of the demonstrations, making it easier for the white
business establishment to ignore the accords after they had been signed. It appeared the
return of black conservative leadership would pose a significant threat to the future of the
local movement, but the exact extent remained undetermined.

People may have criticized the ACMHR-SCLC for recruiting schoolchildren or
questioned the youth’s understanding of Birmingham’s problems, but the judgments
could not detract from their impact on local and national civil rights movements. The way
in which these young protesters publicly challenged racial discrimination compelled the
federal government to take a stand against the second-class status of black Americans.
Their efforts provided ACMHR-SCLC with a platform from which to voice the concerns
of Birmingham’s black citizenry, while also addressing the plight of black Americans

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across the South.\textsuperscript{396} While the ACMHR-SCLC campaign did not reach the level of success it originally wanted, Birmingham’s black youth brought the civil rights movement to the forefront of the nation’s political and social consciousness. “It’s really funny to think about it, that the police, fire department, and the Ku Klux Klan were beaten by kids,” said Gwen Web. “…[T]hey were not looking for us. They were never looking for the children, the secret weapon.”\textsuperscript{397} Youth participation saved the Birmingham campaign. At a time when the number of adult volunteers began to wane, schoolchildren showed up. Their youthful innocence, paired with their courage and tenacity, proved no match for Jim Crow’s supporters.\textsuperscript{398}

\textsuperscript{397} Quoted by Gwen Webb, \textit{Mighty Times: Children’s March}.  
\textsuperscript{398} Wright, 1963: \textit{How the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement Changed the World}, 67.
Chapter 4

The Age of Innocence

“The death of those little children may lead our whole Southern land from the new low road of man’s inhumanity to a man to the high road of peace and brotherhood…”399

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

On September 15, residents across the city woke up to attend Sunday worship services. Addie Mae Collins, age fourteen, chose a pretty white dress to wear for Youth Day at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where she would be one of the youth ushers. On this special day children of the church assumed the responsibilities of the adult members. They taught Sunday school classes, ushered, sang in the choir, and led prayer. This day not only allowed children to explore different ministries, it also introduced adult congregants to the future leaders of the church. Traditionally, the church celebrated Youth Day once a year, but after much consideration, pastor Reverend John H. Cross decided to celebrate the church’s youth congregants monthly. This decision stemmed from the overwhelming amount of youth participation in the Birmingham movement. When Rev. Cross allowed the ACMHR and the SCLC to hold movement meetings at the church that year, he could not have anticipated Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a church home to members of the traditional leadership class, becoming the base for the Children’s

March. Wanting to make the most of this new verve in the church, Rev. Cross expanded his ministry to include monthly youth fellowship beginning that Sunday.400

Primped and ready for Youth Day, Addie, along with her two sisters Junie and Sarah, set off for their sixteen-block walk to Sixteenth Street. Dressed in their Sunday best, the three sisters walked daintily so as not to scuff their shiny shoes. No more than two blocks from their home, the girls decided to play a game of football to pass the time. Using Addie’s purse as a football, the young ladies played catch and chased one another on the way to church. Taking pleasure in the moment, this would be the last time the Collins sisters would share in each other’s happiness.401

“Young lady, your slip is hanging below you dress!” harped Gertrude Wesley to her fourteen-year-old daughter, Cynthia, who was about to leave for church with her father Claude. “You don’t put your clothes on any way when you’re going to church, because you never know how you’re coming back,” said Mrs. Wesley as Cynthia took a moment to adjust her slip before running to her father’s car. Those would be a mother’s last words to her daughter. Meanwhile Carole Robertson, also fourteen and a close friend of Cynthia rode to church along with her dad, Alvin.

Eleven-year-old Carole Denise McNair, known by her family and friends as Denise, arrived at church last with her mother. Originally, Denise asked if her father could drive her to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church before heading to St. John AME Church where he worshipped, but he was running late. “That’s okay, Daddy, go ahead.” Denise told her father as she waited for her mom to finish getting ready. Before heading

out the door Denise went up to the family dog, Whitey, gave him a pat on the head and told him goodbye.\(^{402}\)

Congregants who arrived an hour before the 11:00 a.m. service attended Sunday school. The adults held their classes in the sanctuary located on the main level while the children attended their classes downstairs in the church basement. Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson both attended Ms. Ella Demand’s youth class. Close to 10:10 a.m., Cynthia and Carole asked Ms. Demand if they could be excused to go to the women’s lounge, as both girls had been assigned the role of usher at Youth Day service and wanted an opportunity to freshen up before having to report upstairs at 10:30 a.m. At the same time, Denise McNair asked her Sunday school instructor, Mrs. Clevon Phillips, if she could have permission to go to the lounge. Her teacher obliged. Just a few minutes later, the Collins girls arrived at church. “This is the best time we’ve ever had coming to church,” said Junie to her two younger sisters. Running the whole way to church caused them to perspire. “We can’t go into church looking like this.” Sweaty faces and dresses disheveled, Junie and her sisters walked downstairs and into the women’s lounge to straighten up. It only took Junie a few short minutes to freshen up and make her way to the sanctuary. Another girl Marsha Stollenwreck left the restroom shortly after Junie, leaving only Addie, Sarah, Denise, Cynthia, and Carole in the lounge.

Sarah walked over to the sink to wash her hands, while Carole and Cynthia stood in front of the mirror checking their appearance and using their hands to comb through

\(^{402}\) Ibid., 3-5.
their hair. The sash on Denise’s dress had come undone so Addie volunteered to help tie it back into a bow.\textsuperscript{403}

While these girls remained in the bathroom, Carolyn Maull was upstairs in the church office answering telephone calls and assisting church secretary, Mrs. Mabel Shorter, with worship preparations. That morning the church received numerous phone calls, and when Mrs. Shorter went to answer, the caller remained silent. Having been delayed by what seemed to be prank calls, Shorter sent Maull to collect Sunday school rosters before the start of service. Carolyn’s first stop would be in the basement. She retrieved attendance records from the Sunday school instructors, and before making her way back to the office she stopped by the women’s lounge where she saw her best friend Cynthia along with Addie, Carole, and Denise. She greeted them then headed upstairs to collect the attendance from the adult classes held in the sanctuary. “As I ran up the stairs, I heard the phone ringing in the church office.” She rushed into the office and grabbed the black receiver. “I opened my mouth to say hello, but before I could say anything, a male voice said simply, ‘Three minutes.’”\textsuperscript{404} Remembering her early conversation with Mrs. Shorter about the mysterious phone calls, Carolyn ignored the message and entered the sanctuary. Once inside, Maull glanced at the large antique that hung on the church wall. As she passed the stained-glass window of Jesus, she heard what sounded like loud thunder. Someone shouted, “Hit the floor!”\textsuperscript{405}

\textsuperscript{403} Ibid., 10; 4 Little Girls, directed by Spike Lee (1997; Burbank, CA: Home Box Office, 2010), DVD.
\textsuperscript{405} Ibid, 53-56.
Racial violence had struck Birmingham like never before. A bomb had gone off at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church killing four young girls, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, and badly injuring a fifth, Sarah Collins. Following the blast, two more children lost their lives to gun violence. Johnny Robinson was killed by a white police officer and Virgil Ware was shot and killed by a white teen. Black parents and adult members of the community worked hard to protect the youth from racial violence as much as possible. The loss of six lives reinforced the notion that no black man, woman, or child was safe in Birmingham.

This chapter examines the events of September 15, 1963 and their aftermath. Previous works that study the Birmingham civil rights movement of 1963 tend to focus solely on the four girls who died tragically in the Sixteenth Street Baptist church bombing, thus neglecting the two young men who also lost their lives that Sunday. However, this chapter examines the deaths of all six children. Whether a child died in the church bombing or on a side street, each life mattered and therefore deserves historical recognition. Also included in this chapter are oral histories from men and women who as children experienced the events of September 15. Their testimonies provide an account of what it was like to have experienced that historic day, and the days that followed, as a black child. Oral histories will also give readers insight into how black families and the black community responded to the racial violence. Lastly, the chapter aims to give readers an understanding of how September 15, 1963 compelled American citizens and politicians to challenge African Americans’ second-class status by supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
“Two, four, six, eight. We don’t wanna integrate!”

On July 12, the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals directed the Birmingham Board of Education to begin desegregating its public schools in autumn. The court ordered the school board to present a desegregation plan to the district court no later than August 19. Overturning Judge Lynne’s decision marked a clear victory for Birmingham’s black community. School desegregation signified equal access and opportunity for a new generation of African Americans. Almost two weeks after the court ruling, the Birmingham City Council repealed segregation ordinances covering restaurants, movie theaters, restrooms and other public facilities. For the first time, African Americans could enjoy the same public places as whites without being treated like a second-class citizen.

One week after the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, on Wednesday, September 4, five black children desegregated three of the city’s public schools. Richard Arnold Walker registered at Ramsay High School, Josephine Powell and Patricia Marcus enrolled at West End High School, and brothers Dwight and Floyd Armstrong, attended Graymont Elementary School. For the first time, black children had access to schools once closed to them. After months of protests, marches, sit-ins, and imprisonment, school integration brought the Birmingham movement full circle, and the children had much to do with the progress made. That morning, hundreds of segregationists picketed in front of the schools waving Confederate flags and holding

406 On August 28, more than 250,000 peaceful protesters of different races and national origins, made their way to the nation’s capital for the March on Washington. Gathered around the Lincoln Memorial, Americans young and old, heard remarks from John Lewis, national chairman of SNCC, James Farmer, director of CORE, Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The purpose of the march was to address black unemployment and poor job mobility and the systematic oppression of African Americans.
signs that read “Close Mixed Schools” and “Keep Alabama White.” Protesters first
picketed in front of West End High School then made their way to Graymont. They
surrounded the school waving anti-desegregation signs and chanting, “Get the niggers out
of that school” and “Two, four, six, eight. We don’t wanta integrate.” Many parents
chose not to send their children to school that day both as a form of protest and for fear
there might be trouble. It had been estimated more than half of the white parents refused
to register their children for school as a result of desegregation. White schoolchildren also
vocalized their disapproval of integration. “Who wants to go to school?” said one white
schoolboy, whose parents decided not to register him for school. “The niggers can have
the place,” he told a reporter. Just as civil rights activism transcended age, so too did
racism. Conditioned to believe blacks were inferior, white schoolchildren rallied
alongside their parents in support of segregation. Despite the protests, all five black
schoolchildren enrolled successfully, marking another historic victory for the
Birmingham civil rights movement.407

Unfortunately, the turmoil surrounding school integration prompted retaliation on
the part of white vigilantes. That evening two sticks of dynamite exploded at the home of
attorney Arthur Shores. The only one to suffer serious injuries was his wife, Theodora,
who lost consciousness after slamming her head on a nightstand when the force of the
explosion threw her from the bed.

Outside the Shores home a crowd of black neighbors gathered. Many of them
expressed anger and disbelief at the recent bombing, as this was the second time in two
weeks white vigilantes targeted the Shores’ home. Residents soon took to the street. The

Birmingham News reported that they threw bricks, rocks, and bottles at police officers. Twenty-one people suffered injuries and one 21-year-old black male died following an altercation with the police. As a result of the violence, the Birmingham Board of Education made a pre-dawn decision to close its three integrated schools for the next several days. The ACMHR also responded to the tense racial climate in a statement titled, “A Call For Calmness and Restraint During the Racial Crisis.” In it the ACMHR asked for black citizens to remain nonviolent. “Birmingham is a great city,” wrote Shuttleworth, “and its future will be much brighter if all its citizens will not allow themselves to be overwhelmed by tides of frustration, nor consumed in fires of hate.”\(^\text{408}\) The ACMHR’s statement may have kept black residents from retaliating, but it did not stop white vigilantes from resorting to violence. Four days after Shores’ house was bombed, two Molotov cocktails smashed through the living room window of A.G. Gaston’s $75,000 antebellum mansion. Gaston and his wife were not injured. Most of the damage occurred in the living room where the “incendiary devices” set fire to a lampshade, window curtains, an expensive rug, and damaged the interior walls.\(^\text{409}\)

The next week, on September 10, President Kennedy ordered Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara to utilize the Alabama National Guard and any additional military resources needed to enforce school desegregation in Alabama. The same day, over 1,000 white students refused to attend West End High School, boycotting Josephine Powell and Patricia Marcus’ enrollment. Despite the protest the two black teenagers

attended class. By week’s end, unrest surrounding school desegregation began to dwindle and the majority of students returned to class.

Enrolling black children signified a turning point in the city’s racial order. Integrating schools challenged the ideology of white supremacy. With access to the same curriculum, facilities and educators, white students would no longer have this privilege over their black peers. Integration represented the end of southern life as white people knew it. Scared that their way of life may be gone for good, some whites resorted to violence. In less than one week after the integration at West End High School, the citizens of Birmingham witnessed some of the most unspeakable acts of racial violence of the entire era.

**September 15, 1963**

At the sound of the blast, those gathered in the sanctuary of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church dove to the floor, and lay motionless and silent for several seconds. The rear of the church was badly damaged. The force of the explosion shattered several of the stained-glass windows, splintered wooden pews, and caused one of the skylights to fall directly on the pulpit. Downstairs, in the basement, adults tried their best to keep the children safe and calm. Sunday school teacher Effie J. McGraw recalled ordering her students to lie on the floor. Ms. Ella Demand, who sent Carole and Denise to the lounge, did not hear the blast in her classroom. It was not until she heard the sound of glass breaking and felt a warm surge of air circulate through the room that it occurred to her something bad had happened. She walked over to the classroom door and from there could see smoke billowing and hear people screaming. “The building seemed to be
shaken off the foundation,” recalled Barbara Cross, the daughter of Rev. Cross. “I remember something hit me in my head and I realized it was a light fixture… I remember hearing a lot of screams from the children… Frantically, I tried to search for my younger sister Lynn, age four, only to learn later that she was among the many injured taken to the hospital.”

At that moment, teachers began leading their children from the basement to the main entrance located on the Sixth Avenue side of the church. Navigating her students to safety, Mrs. Young saw smoke filling the hallways near the lounge area and feared the worst. Down the hall, in the women’s bathroom, a terribly frightened Sarah Collins called for her sister, “Addie! Addie! Addie!” But neither Addie, nor any of the other three girls responded. Less than a minute before, Sarah stood in front of the sink washing her hands when the outside wall of the church crumbled. The explosion blew out the basement wall in the women’s lounge creating a gaping hole filled with bricks, mortar, and shards of glass, wires, and other debris. Sarah could not see the extent of damage as she had fallen blind as a result of the flying materials. Covered by the rubble, Sara, scared and alone, cried softly for help.

Stunned congregants quickly made their way out of the church and into the streets where police officers and crowds of people from the black neighborhood gathered. Bystanders took notice of the blood-soaked faces and other visible injuries and began shouting: “You bombed our church!” “You hurt our people!” Outside, police officers had already arrived onsite to survey the crime scene. The force of the bomb damaged nearby

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411 4 Little Girls
cars and businesses. Officers put up barricades, then stationed themselves around the building. At the same time, stunned church members began exiting from the front of the church. Bruised and bloodied, men and women quickly began to look for their loved ones, particularly their children. As tensions began to build, so too did people’s fears as they frantically searched for their family members.  

Parents in particular seemed anxious, as many of their children had been in the basement attending Sunday school. Rev. Cross, along with adult church members went back into the church to find the children. Adults searched every classroom and led the Sunday school instructors and their students out of the basement. Thankfully no children suffered any serious injuries, only minor bruises. With the classrooms cleared, Cross and others headed to the northeast side of the church where the explosion occurred. “We saw this bunch of debris there and they started digging down [in the demolished women’s lounge] and less than two feet down we saw a body,” remembered Cross.  

As the men dug deeper they found three more bodies, one on top of the other, as if they had huddled around one another at the time of the explosion. Deacon M.W. Pippen recognized one of the bodies as his granddaughter Denise. Although her clothes had been blown off he noticed her patent-leather shoe. Medical rescuers removed the bodies from the rubble one by one. Onlookers wailed and screamed as rescuers brought each lifeless body out on a stretcher. When it seemed all hope had been lost, Deacon Samuel Rutledge heard cries and moans coming from a pile of debris. After sifting through the rubble Rutledge found a girl buried alive. Initially, no one recognized the victim because her face was covered in blood, but they soon realized

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412 Ibid.
that it was Addie’s youngest sister, Sarah. A black owned ambulance transported Sarah along with the four other victims to the whites-only University Hospital. She was the only one in the lounge to survive the bombing. A day meant to celebrate the children of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had become the church’s greatest tragedy.  

Hundreds of people followed the ambulances to University Hospital and waited as mothers and fathers arrived to identify their daughters. Claude and Gertrude Wesley, parents of Cynthia, whom they adopted at the age of six, could barely recognize their little girl as her head was severed from her body. The parents’ used the birthstone ring she was wearing to identify her. In an interview with Frank Sikora, reporter and author of

*Until Justice Rolls Down*, Mrs. Wesley recalled her last days with Cynthia:

I remember the Saturday night before. Cynthia was at home and she was reading the newspaper and she came across a story in the obituary column about a little baby dying. And she came to me and showed me the paper. She said, ‘I didn’t know babies died like that. I just thought old people died.’ And I said to her, ‘Well, when you go into a flower garden and you don’t always get something in bloom. Sometimes you pick a bud. See, the Lord wanted a bud this time, and he took that baby.’ And Cynthia thought about it and said, ‘Oh.’

Next morning she was getting ready to go to church and I told her about her slip showing and telling her to be careful about your appearance, because you never know how you’re coming home. And she never did come home again. It really got to me. I kept thinking about her talking about the baby dying and me saying something about the Lord taking a bud, and about never knowing how you’re coming back. She never came back. I didn’t see her anymore. And I didn’t want to see her that way.  

Gertrude was not alone in her sadness. The families of these young girls were devastated. In the midst of her grief, Alpha Robertson, the mother of Carole, recalled her last hours with her daughter:

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She was wearing medium high-heeled shoes, the first time she had ever worn them. We had bought them the day before. She and I had gone shopping and we found the shoes, which were shiny black ones. She liked them. We went to Odom, Bowers, and White, which was a department store in the downtown. And we also picked her out a winter coat and put it on lay-away. Before we left, Carole also found this necklace which she liked, so we bought it, too. And on that Sunday morning she wore the new shoes and her necklace…. About a week after it happened, I had a friend call the store and told them to take Carole’s winter coat off layaway that we wouldn’t be getting it.\footnote{Ibid., 16-17.}

Denise McNair’s father, Chris, arrived at the hospital looking for his daughter. Once in the waiting room, he read through a list of those who had been admitted. To his delight, Denise’s name did not appear. Soon after, a member of the hospital staff asked Mr. McNair to visit the morgue where four little bodies lay covered in sheets. “I saw a little foot sticking out from under one of the sheets,” said McNair. “A scarred patent-leather shoe covered in dust. I suppose every little girl’s foot looks about the same, but I knew it was Denise. I didn’t need to look under the sheet to know it was her.”\footnote{McWhorter, \textit{Carry Me Home}, 509.}

Mothers and fathers were not the only ones given the difficult task of identifying their daughters. FBI agents requested Junie Collins, the oldest child of the Collins family, to visit the hospital in her parents’ absence to identify Addie. Initially Junie was under the impression her sister was still alive and under observation at University Hospital. However, once they arrived at the hospital, the agents escorted her to the mortuary where she saw what appeared to be the body of a young black girl. “If my life depended on it, I couldn’t say \textit{this} was my sister,” said Junie in a later conversation with friend, Carol Maull. “But then I saw this little brown shoe-like a loafer-on her foot. And I knew it was
Addie.** Having enjoyed the company of her sisters just a few hours earlier, Junie now stood at a medical table staring down at her sister’s lifeless body in complete sadness. To lose a sibling at such a young age and under such violent circumstances would be one of the most difficult experiences of the first sixteen years of her life. In spite of this dark moment, the Collins family found peace in the knowledge that Sarah, the youngest of the three sisters, survived the blast. Treated in the same hospital, doctors removed twenty-one pieces of glass from her face and eyes, as well as other parts of her body. The debris from the blast caused her to lose sight in her right eye, but the doctors seemed confident she would regain vision in the left. For the next several days she laid in her hospital bed with her eyes protected by medical bandages. During that time, Sarah’s family chose not to tell her about Addie’s death. Later in an interview, Sarah would say she overheard a few of the nurses talking about what happened to her sister. She knew then that Addie had died in the bombing. Sarah remained at University Hospital for the next two months for medical treatment and rehabilitation.**

**Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware**

While the families of the victims mourned, violence filled Birmingham’s streets. Angered by the church bombing and the senseless loss of life, black residents began pelting policemen and cars with rocks and bricks. Others overturned vehicles and set fire to abandoned homes and small storefronts. Before sunset two more black teenagers died as a result of racial violence. Johnny Robinson, age sixteen, died from a gunshot to the back. Officer Jack Parker shot the young man while he ran down an alley after he and a

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**418 Maull, *While the World Watched*, 67.**

**419 Sikora, *Until Justice Rolls Down*, 15.**
group of teenagers reportedly threw rocks at a vehicle with the sign “Negro, go back to Africa” affixed to one of the car doors. An ambulance transported Robinson to Hillman Hospital where doctors pronounced him dead on arrival.\footnote{420}

On the other side of town, nearly two thousand whites gathered in Midfield, a suburb south of Birmingham, to attend a rally protesting school desegregation. A parade through Birmingham was scheduled immediately following the segregation rally, but coordinators chose to postpone it after receiving word about the bombing and rising racial tensions. Once the rally concluded, attendees went their separate ways. Two white sixteen-year-olds, Michael Lee Farley and Larry Joe Sims, left the rally riding double on a red motorbike with a Confederate flag attached. At the same time, two black teenagers, brothers Virgil and James Ware, ages 13 and 16, began making their way home to Pratt City, a black residential community outside of Birmingham, after taking a three-mile bike ride to purchase a bicycle for Virgil for his newspaper route. Neither boy was aware of the bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church or the racial unrest. Virgil sat on the bar handles while his brother James pedaled. As the Ware brothers rode along, Farley and Sims approached from the opposite side of the street. Sims quickly pulled out a pistol and fired two shots in their direction before speeding away.\footnote{421} Virgil fell sideways off his brother’s bicycle, crying out, “Ware, I been shot.” He had been hit once in his left cheek and then in his chest. James jumped off the bike and ran to him. He stood over his brother and said, “No, you ain’t. Just stop trembling; and you’ll be okay.”\footnote{422} Five minutes later, a white couple driving down the road stopped to help. “I told them what happened, and I

\footnote{420} Eskew, \textit{But for Birmingham}, 321; McWhorter, \textit{Carry Me Home}, 513. \\
\footnote{422} Ibid., 21.
told them where we stayed,” remembered James. The white man checked Virgil’s pulse, but by then, it had already stopped. “So they turned around and went back to Blount, and were about a mile [or] a mile and a half from home. They turned around and brought my mom and dad and people down there. He was dead by that time.”

Later that afternoon, the Birmingham police dispatched a report to its on-duty officers about the shooting and death of a black youth. The alert sent by the dispatcher order all officers to be on the look out for two white teenage males on a red motorbike. At the same time Birmingham policemen Dan Jordan and J.A. McAlpine set out to patrol the scene, an off-duty officer with the Mountain Brook Police Department overheard the BOLO (“Be On the Look Out”) alert while driving in his private car. Moments later, Couch spotted two white youths riding a red motorbike. He even thought he saw a pistol in the back pocket of one of the individuals. Sensing they might be the culprits, Couch took down the bike’s tag number and called it in to the police station. Meanwhile, Officers Jordan and McAlphine arrived at the home of the Ware family in hopes of gathering information about the victim and his assailants. As they approached the house they noticed a large gathering of family and friends and decided it might be best not to disturb the family just then. Soon after, the two officers got a call on the radio to contact officer Couch who had news about the suspects. After they called and spoke with Couch they ran the tag number on the bike and retrieved a name and address.

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423 Huntley and McKerley, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 123.
The next day, Jordan and McAlphine arrived at the Farley residence to speak to the owner of the motorbike, sixteen-year-old Michael Lee Farley. They questioned the young man about the incident but he denied any involvement. Next, they went to the Sims home to speak to Farley’s friend, Larry Joe, also sixteen. This time the police officers got a confession. Sims wept as he explained what happened the day before. He said the gun, a .22 caliber pistol, belonged to his friend and he had it in his possession. Sims noted when he and Farley came in contact with the two black boys, his friend told him to scare them by firing a gunshot, and so with his left hand – Sims was right-handed – he fired. “I guess we were expecting rocks to be coming at us,” says Sims. “I thought I was shooting at the ground. I remember pop-pop and then thinking ‘Oh no, I might have hit [Virgil] in the leg.’” Afraid that he may have injured Virgil, Sims and Farley sped away on the motorbike to Farley’s house where they hid the gun. Over the next few months, Sims and Farley would prepare for their day in court.

Six Black Children Dead

Before nightfall, six black school children had lost their lives. News about the day’s tragedies shook the city’s residents. It was not a secret, Birmingham had a history of racial violence, but how could white Americans ignore the violent death of one black child, let alone six? The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in particular proved most troubling as four young girls, none of whom had been involved in the May demonstrations or recent school desegregation battle, found themselves caught in the

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cross-fires between the struggle for racial justice and the fight to maintain the status quo. Unlike the case of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, who two adult white males murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman in 1955, these had not violated racial etiquette. The fact Addie, Carole, Cynthia, and Denise died in the women’s lounge of their church, an institution that teaches love, peace, compassion and forgiveness, unscored their innocence.\(^{427}\) The deaths of Johnnie Robinson and Virgil Ware also raised concerns. Whereas both deaths appeared to be accidental—both shooters claimed they had no intentions of killing their victims—they reinforced the notion that black life had no value, and could be threatened or harmed with little or no regard for humanity. The blood of black youths had stained the hands of Birmingham’s people, and once again the whole world was watching.

The church bombing was front-page news nationwide. Alabama newspapers like *The Birmingham News*, printed editorials entitled “The Shock and the Shame” read: “Not one word or a million makes up for the deaths of four innocent children in the Sunday School bombing yesterday morning…. Every white man certainly should be asking himself how he would feel if for years the unidentified had made his wife, his children, his home, his church, the object of hatred.”\(^{428}\) In the *Talladega Daily Home*, an editorial expressed deep empathy and disbelief with the recent events: “This should be Alabama’s cry in the wake of our blackest day. May God forgive this newspaper and all others for any mishandling of news, any editorial comments which may have helped to sow the

\(^{427}\) McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 514.

seeds of violence. May God forgive the bombers who put a bloody ‘amen’ to the hour of worship. The shame will be ours forever.”

Black newspapers like the *Chicago Daily Defender, Cleveland Call and Post,* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* also reported on the tragic events. With headlines that read “They Are Fed Up,” “How Long Can We Take It?” “How Racial Justice is Handled in Birmingham,” and “A Nation Mourns Four Children” black press gave voice to African Americans in Birmingham and across the country who were tired of the violence committed against blacks and the lack of legal protection. Journalists wrote about black Americans losing patience in waiting for “justice, human dignity and human rights.” They questioned how much longer would it be before African Americans abandon nonviolence and take up arms. Black press also called for state and federal government officials to protect all its citizens. In an article one journalist asked how would Governor George Wallace respond if his daughter Lee, named after General Robert E. Lee of the Civil War Confederate Army, suffered the same fate as the four girls in the church bombing. Would he not demand justice? These articles sought to evoke sympathy and intolerance toward racial violence and discrimination. Most importantly black newspapers gave the voices of African Americans a national platform at a time when such access was limited, especially in the South.

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430 “How Racial Justice is Handled in Birmingham,” *Cleveland Call and Post;* October 19, 1963; pg. 8B.
The United Press International (UPI) circulated an article capturing Dr. King’s response to the church bombing. “I am deeply appalled and distressed that such a barbaric and inhumane act can continue to take place in the United States,” King stated. “It must also be said that this tragic harvest of murder is a result of the seeds of apathy and compromise placed all over the nation. Our whole country should enter into a day of prayer and repentance for this terrible crime.”

National newspapers also covered the events in Birmingham. Similar to black newspapers, national papers like The Chicago Tribune, New York Times, and Washington Post criticized Birmingham as well as the rest of the American South for its racist and violent culture. Articles such as “Bombs and Rights” in The New York Times examined race relations in Birmingham in effort to expose mainstream, white Americans to the plight of southern black Americans. National papers also paid close attention to how the Kennedy Administration addressed the racial crisis in Birmingham. Newspapers were particularly interested in the federal government’s involvement in state matters and its implication as it pertained to civil rights legislation.

By reporting on the events in Birmingham, national press exposed their readership to what it meant to be a black man, woman, or child in America. Moreover, the amount of coverage on the death of the four girls was in response to societal gender norms and cultural beliefs that women, young and old, were always to be protected and kept safe. These four, church-going girls

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434 “‘Ala. Church Bombing Barbaric:’ Dr. King” Chicago Defender, 16 September 1963, A3.
killed in the bombing represented purity, innocence, and respectability. The idea that these young, innocent, respectable girls could not be kept safe troubled many as it challenged American societal and cultural norms. It was journey of mistreatment, violence, terror, and second-class citizenship. Exposing these realities to mainstream America forced white citizens who otherwise were oblivious or indifferent to the black freedom struggle to confront racism and race relations in the United States.

With the help of black press and national newspapers, the deaths of those six black children, especially the girls who died in the church bombing, would not be forgotten. As the nation and people across the world followed the stories, it placed greater pressure on the federal government to support the black citizens of Birmingham and those living throughout the South.437

**White Americans React**

The reaction of white Americans to the bombing was perhaps the most shocking. Walter Cronkite, who was formerly a Special Correspondent for CBS News, said of whites and America’s racial crisis:

> I don’t think the white community really understood the depths of the problem and of the hate of the Klan and its friends in the South until that incredible, mean spirited crime that blew up those kids in the Sunday school basement. At that time it was looked at primarily as an interesting kind of social development that would become along somehow in other generations to come. At that moment when the bomb went off and those four little girls were blasted and buried in the debris of the church that America understood the real nature of the hate that was preventing integration particularly in the South and throughout America. This was the awakening.438

438 *Four Little Girls*
Local white citizens also shared their reactions to the recent killings. A 33-year-old woman named Marjorie Lees Linn asked in *The Birmingham News*, “How can responsible, clear-thinking white people possibly believe that there is any excusing such acts or for that matter, any excusing their own prejudice against the colored race?” Her criticism regarding the church bombing made it clear that what had occurred crossed a line in terms of what was considered acceptable methods of enforcing racial segregation. Thus, the homegrown terrorism that targeted black youth compelled white citizens to think critically about racism and prejudice.\(^439\)

Even white children expressed their views of what happened Sunday morning. In a *New York Times* article, journalist John Herbers published excerpts from essays written by twenty-five white fourth graders from Birmingham in response to the deaths of the four girls. A girl wrote, “I don’t believe the children had nothing to do with it. The one did that should be ashamed doing that in church because that is God house…. God loves all his children.” A young boy shared his thoughts on the bombing, “I think the peoples [sic] who bombed the church ought to be put in jail for life. And I feel sorry for those six children who got killed.” Another male student wrote, “I think the person that bombed the church should get a trial and sentence [sic] for life. And I think the Negroes that have a right to fight back. And I think if the people would [sic] stop waving the confederate flags [the bombers] wouldn't [sic] do all this.”\(^440\) Their honesty, compassion, and matter-of-fact reactions demonstrated that people were born to love, but taught to hate.


Another local resident, lawyer Charles J. Morgan Jr., shared his sentiments on the racial violence in the city and the collective guilt all Birmingham residents shared during a meeting of the Young Men’s Business Club. His speech later appeared in *The Birmingham News* and elsewhere. He said: “Four little girls were killed in Birmingham yesterday. A mad, remorseful worried community asks, ‘Who did it? Who threw that bomb? Was it a Negro or a white?’ the answer should be, ‘We all did it.’ Every last one of us is condemned for that crime and the bombing before it and a decade ago. We all did it.” Though the question, “who did it?” may have seemed inconsequential, it called for a deeper look at how Birmingham’s white citizens each contributed to the death of six black children. “The ‘who’ is every little individual who talks about the ‘niggers’ and spreads the seeds of his hate to his neighbor and his son. The jokester, the crude oaf whose racial jokes rock the party with laughter.” From Morgan’s point of view, the daily actions and inactions of the white citizenry made it possible for such a hostile environment to exist. He also pointed blame at politicians at all levels of government for turning a blind eye to the racial hostility that permeated southern cities like Birmingham. He said: “The ‘who’ is every governor who ever shouted for lawlessness and became a law violator. It is every representative who in the halls of Congress stands and with mock humility tells the world that things back home aren’t really like they are.” The moderate lawyer even criticized white spiritual leaders and clergymen for failing to come to the aide of their black counterparts. To him, no one was innocent; everyone had blood on his or her hands.\(^{441}\)

In closing, Morgan asked, “who is really to blame?” to which he answered, “each of us.”\footnote{A Time to Speak: A Speech by Charles J Morgan Jr., Teaching Tolerance on YouTube (16 September 1963) Accessed: August 27, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KCP8yZgxW4} Then he added:

Each citizen who has not consciously attempted to bring about peaceful compliance with the decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States, every citizen who has ever said, ‘they ought to kill that nigger,’ every citizen who votes for the candidate with the bloody flag, every citizen and school board member and schoolteacher and principal and businessman and judge and lawyer who has corrupted the minds of our youth; every person in this community who has in any way contributed during the past several years to the popularity of hatred, is at least as guilty, or more so, than the demented fool who threw that bomb. What’s it like living in Birmingham? No one ever really has known and no one will until this city becomes part of the United States. Birmingham is not a dying city; it is dead.\footnote{Ibid}

Morgan called on white citizens to decide whether they wanted to stand on the side of justice in this moral dilemma or not. While the lawyer directed his commentary to an audience of white moderates and closeted segregationists, his remarks regarding personal accountability transcended race. Just as Morgan blamed whites for establishing and protecting a culture rooted in hate and violence, certain sectors of the black community could be criticized for not supporting the efforts of mass based movement. A change for Birmingham would require change from all its citizens.\footnote{Andrew Cohen “The Speech That Shocked Birmingham the Day After the Church Bombing,” accessed June 2014, The Atlantic.com.}

On the same day Charles Morgan addressed the Young Men’s Business Club, White House Press Secretary, Pierre Salinger, delivered a statement by President Kennedy about the “cruel killing of innocent children.” It read:

I know I speak on behalf of all Americans in expressing a deep sense of outrage and grief over the killing of the children yesterday in Birmingham, Alabama. It is
regrettable that public disparagement of law and order has encouraged violence, which has fallen on the innocent. If these cruel and tragic events can only awaken this entire nation to realization of the folly of racial injustice and hatred and violence, then it is not too late for all concerned to unite in steps toward peaceful progress before more lives are lost.\textsuperscript{445}

He went on to thank Birmingham black leaders for their help in keeping peace among the city’s black citizenry. “The principles of peaceful self-control are least appealing when most needed.” Kennedy also mentioned that Assistant U.S. Attorney General Burke Marshall had traveled to Birmingham to meet community leaders and law enforcement officials to discuss next steps and assist with the federal investigation as needed. At the end, Kennedy reassured the American people that both he and the White House would continue to fight for equality and peace for all citizens. “This nation is committed to a course of domestic justice and tranquility and I call upon every citizen, white and Negro, North and South, to put passions and prejudices aside and to join in this effort.”\textsuperscript{446} To show his commitment to “domestic justice and tranquility” Kennedy ordered the Justice Department to send FBI agents to Birmingham and to investigate the bombing. Interestingly, he also issued a statement to Governor Wallace naming him as someone responsible for the deaths and violence in Birmingham. The president believed the governor’s “public disparagement of law and order” and strong support of segregation “encouraged violence which [had] fallen on the innocent.” Kennedy’s public criticism of the Alabama governor illustrated a shift in his political stance regarding matters related to the civil rights movement. Whereas in the past the president and his administrators

\textsuperscript{445} Office of the White House Press Secretary. “Statement By the President--Birmingham--.” White House Press Release (September, 16, 1963)
\textsuperscript{446} Ibid
deemed civil rights an issue best left for the states to address, the White House stepped out from behind its own shadow to address the plight of black Americans head on.

**Little Caskets**

At the same time federal agents began their investigation of the church bombing, the families of the murdered girls began making preparations for their funerals. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church gave each victim’s family money to assist with funeral costs. Carole Robertson’s parents held their daughter’s funeral on Tuesday, September 17, at St. John’s AME church. The Reverend John H. Cross of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church eulogized Carole. Looking over the crowd of mourners, he said:

> This atrocious act was committed not against race, but against all freedom-loving persons in the world. Somehow, out of this dastardly act, we have been brought together again as never before. May we not seek revenge against those who are guilty, but find our refuge in love and the words of Paul, who said, ‘All things work for good for those who love God.’

Rev. Shuttlesworth also shared a few words. In his remarks, he referenced the children’s deaths as “another installment” paid on “this precious thing called freedom.” Close to two thousand people attended. As for the families of Addie, Cynthia, and Denise they agreed to have one mass funeral for their three daughters.

The next day, September 18, some six thousand people gathered at the joint funeral service for the three girls at the nearby Sixth Avenue Baptist Church. Inside the 2,000-seat sanctuary were three child-size coffins each draped with a blanket of flowers. Those attending the mass service included black and white Birminghamians, as well as

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out-of-town clergy, politicians, and civil rights activists from the SCLC, NACCP, and SNCC.

At the start of the funeral service, a group of black girls dressed in white dresses walked down the main aisle of the sanctuary carrying bouquets of flowers in memory of Addie, Denise, and Cynthia. “There was nothing like seeing those three families there and the three coffins,” remembered a friend of Denise McNair who was a flower girl for the funeral. Not everyone could bring themselves to attend the service. Carolyn McKinstry recalled Mrs. Robertson, mother of Carole, calling her home to ask if she would be a flower bearer at the mass funeral. “I told my mom, ‘Please don’t make me go.’ I was not sure what I would see. I knew I was really hurting inside and grieving that my friends were gone. I just did not want to be -I didn’t want to see them. I didn’t want to be there- part of that.” McKinstry was not alone in her decision. For each child who attended the memorial services, another stayed home. Parents as well as children had mixed feelings about attending as they felt it would be too overwhelming or traumatizing for the young griever. “I went to the mass funeral, it was at my church,” said Mary Bush. “[I felt a strong sense] of sadness and pain. Wherever I put it, I put it way down deep. Sometimes …things can be so painful that you have to put them way down deep because otherwise how do you keep going.” Regardless of who went to the funeral the fact remained that a generation of African Americans would forever be changed by the events of September 15.

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449 Interview with Mary Bush, telephone interview with author, digital recording, July 24, 2014, Chevy Chase, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
Emotions ran high throughout the service. People sobbed and wailed as they stared at three small white coffins. Some women collapsed with grief. “You are so hurt,” said Junie Collins, sister to the late Addie Collins. “It hurt and one of your sisters is in one of the caskets and all I could do was feel. And all I felt was hurt.” Following the procession of flowers, Rev. John Cross of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church began the service with prayer before sharing his condolences with the grieving families and the Birmingham community.

Next, Dr. King took to the pulpit to deliver the eulogy. His tribute to the four girls served a dual purpose. His assessment of the loss of Addie, Denise, Cynthia, and Carole acknowledged the tragedy of the event. “These children, unoffending, innocent, and beautiful, were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity…And yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity.” It also depicted their deaths as an unfortunate sacrifice in the long black struggle for human dignity and freedom. He wanted every minister, politician and citizen, black and white, to accept the recent killings as a reflection of the warped, racist, and violent societies that existed inside America. He said:

They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. They have something to say to a federal government that has compromised the undemocratic practices of southern Dixiecrats and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing northern Republicans. They

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450 Four Little Girls
have something to say to every Negro who had passively accepted the evil system of segregation and who has stood on the sidelines in a mighty struggle for justice.  

The plan was not for people to feel sorry for the victims’ families, but to experience shame and guilt on behalf of a nation that failed to protect its own. Claiming them as “martyred heroines,” Dr. King transformed their deaths from a symbol of hatred to a conduit for change. “And so my friends, they did not die in vain. God still has a way of wringing good out of evil… The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city.” He called on all Americans to examine the effects of racism and prejudice in society, contemplate their own involvement in the existence of these evil systems, and engage in actions focused on social justice. “The spilled blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future. Indeed this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience.” The eulogy provided King a platform to preach about the plight of black Americans in a national context. This helped many understand the issues they faced were not regional, existing only in the American South. The death of those children brought shame not only to the city of Birmingham and the state of Alabama, but also to the nation; therefore should be dealt with by all. It was a sad and tender moment.

At the close of the funeral service, young honorary pallbearers who attended school with victims helped carry each small coffin out the church where thousands of emotional onlookers stood. Men and women moaned and wailed as the grieving families

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452 Ibid
453 Ibid.
followed behind the caskets holding their dead daughters. Photos taken outside the church showed tearful young spectators comforting one another as they watched the caskets being loaded into hearses.\textsuperscript{454} From there, the memorial service relocated to two black-only cemeteries for burial. Both Cynthia and Addie’s bodies were laid to rest at Woodlawn Cemetery. Denise’s family had her transported to the Shadow Lawn Cemetery, where Carole had been buried one day earlier.

Almost forgotten in the mass funeral for the three girls were the funeral services for Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware. Neither of their deaths received the same attention as the victims of the church bombing. Much of this was because mainstream society did not view black boys as innocent. In fact, they were often not even viewed as boys, but rather as men, with a natural proclivity for violence. Such was the case with fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. Each family held private services. It is unknown as to why these two young men did not receive the same public outpouring of grief.\textsuperscript{455} Perhaps it was because at the time of his death Robinson had been throwing rocks at white owned vehicles. His participation in the riot following the church bombing complicated his narrative as victim; that the children who died on September 15 were “unoffending, innocent” victims of racial intolerance and violence. As for Virgil Ware, his death went unnoticed then and in many ways is hardly recalled. For years, Ware was buried without a headstone, as his family could not afford one. Finally, in 2004, following an article

\textsuperscript{454} “B’ham Race Victims Were All-American Youths” \textit{Jet} Magazine October 3, 1963. Accessed October 23, 2015. https://books.google.com/books?id=gcEDAAAMBAJ\&pg=PA26\&lpg=PA26\&dq=funeral+for+Virgil+Ware\&source=b\&ots=_asgYHR_Mt\&sig=VC2dNX5TRvw7AwL9QaZgNAsgUl4\&hl=en\&sa=X\&ved=0CCMQ6AEwA2oVChMlxaeltdjbyAIVg0omCh3rKQHf\#v=onepage\&q=funeral\%20for\%20Virgil\%20Ware\&f=false

\textsuperscript{455} Ibid
written by *Time* magazine that honored the lives of Robinson and Ware, readers donated money and Ware’s body was reburied in a well-tended grave at the George Washington Carver Memorial Gardens with a new marker.\footnote{“A Martyr Gains History’s Embrace” USA Today.com Accessed October 24, 2015. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2004-05-03-birmingham_x.htm}

**Children Grieve**

Both the church bombing and the killings of Johnnie Robinson and Virgil Ware took a toll on Birmingham’s black youth. Not since the murder of Emmett Till eight years earlier, were young people faced with the loss of one of their own, let alone six. They could not begin to understand how or why someone would mistreat children this way. Birmingham’s homegrown terrorism was especially hard to comprehend. In a series of interviews, memoirs, and personal reflections years later, the children of the era reflected how the events of September 15 affected their lives.

Carolyn Maull McKinstry, who was 15 in 1963, recalled having been surprised when on Monday, September 16, children woke up, dressed, and made their way to school as if nothing had occurred the day before. “If this tragedy had happened today instead of in 1963, Monday morning would have, no doubt, been set aside as an official day of mourning in Birmingham,” reflected McKinstry in her adult years. Unfortunately that was not the case in 1963. Returning to their daily schedules, disturbed only for a brief moment that Sunday morning, students stared at the empty desk chairs in their classrooms, pondering what happened to their schoolmate and wondering if they too would one day share in the same fate. McKinstry wrote in her memoir, *While the World Watched*, “I decided that I was probably going to be killed with one of these bombs.”
admitted, “I was afraid. I was frightened. And it seemed there was no control. There was no way to protect yourself. Helplessness is what I felt.”

To discuss the six dead children was taboo. Like so many other children, McKinstry wanted someone to take notice of her, to acknowledge her feelings. “No one asked me, ‘Carolyn, are you okay?’ ‘Carolyn, do you miss your friends?’ ‘Carolyn, are you afraid?’ ‘Do you want to talk about what happened at church?’ She was not alone. These schoolchildren needed crisis counselors, or at the very least teachers and administrators to help them cope with their grief. 457

Charlotte Clark Houston, who was 13-years-old at the time, reminisced over Addie Mae Collins whom she met days before the bombing at an all-day pool outing:

We clicked, spending all day chatting in the corner of the swimming pool while most of the other kids swam and ran about. A month later I was horrified to learn that she was one of the victims of the bombing that killed her and three other girls that I knew by name…. It was an early disruption to my happy childhood of innocence, fun and protection growing up in a supportive [black] Birmingham community. 458

Although Houston’s interactions with Addie Mae Collins may have been short-lived, her death caused her new acquaintance to question her own well-being and safety as a black child living in Birmingham. For those children who may have been sheltered from the racial hostilities between blacks and whites, the events of September 15 exposed them to the volatility of local race relations. Once protected within the confines of their segregated communities, black children felt vulnerable and afraid. McKinstry explained, “Before September 15, 1963, I didn’t know how to worry about dying because of my skin

457 McKinstry, While the World Watched, 89-92
color. But the thought kept echoing and refused to leave my mind: ‘People will actually kill us over this! What is this thing about skin?’

Dale Long, who was 12 at the time and another survivor of the church bombing, found himself fearing that his life could end at any moment just like his friends. “I thought African American people were doomed and would all die violently any day.” Adults could no longer shield children from the harsh realities of Jim Crow, because for them, the racial dilemma had become far too real and far too personal. Regardless of whether a child was a friend, classmate, sibling, or an acquaintance of the victims, they all lost a piece of their innocence. Freeman Hrabowski mourned the loss of innocence:

I think we were all numb. It was so awful. It was so horrible, it was the same way people have gone through war or major tragedies, it’s so painful. It’s hard to even think about it. You have nightmares, you feel numb, and you fight because if those little girls can be killed in church why won’t the rest of us be killed? A lot of us were thinking, ‘how can we be safe?’ You wonder will it happen to me? If kids can be in church dressed in white serving their God and be killed, who’s safe? It took all our security away as children.

In spite of prior understandings of the racial dynamics in the city, the killings brought the realities of what it meant to be a black child in Birmingham to the forefront of their minds.

The brothers and sisters of victims found it even more challenging to confront the loss of their siblings. Virgil Ware’s brothers attended school less than twenty-four hours after the fatal shooting. “It was real sad when I had to go back to school,” remembered

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460 Interview with Dale Long, telephone interview with author, digital recording, July 8, 2014, Dallas, Texas. Recording in possession of author.
461 Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in possession of the author.
Melvin, Virgil’s younger brother. Some of his teachers and classmates took up a monetary collection and bought him flowers as a show of support. Aside from this act of kindness Melvin was treated as though nothing particularly noteworthy had occurred. “It was sad. I don’t think my teacher tried to protect me; she treated me like any other kid. I lost my brother.”463 In an interview years later, James Ware’s daughter, Sonya, mentioned that her father blamed himself for taking the shortcut.

The same went for Leon Robinson and sisters Carrie Johnson and Diane Robinson Samuels who went to school the day after their brother Johnnie died. Returning to school and having not received any form of counseling made it difficult for students to focus on academics.464 Janie and Junie Collins had a hard time coping with the loss of their sister Addie. The devastating experience caused Junie to suffer from panic attacks. “One day I was real afraid to be on the inside and outside of anywhere because the bomb went off in a church. You would normally feel safe, you know.”465 As for her younger sister Janie, she too struggled to heal. Reminders that her sister would never return home were excruciatingly painful. She explained:

You remember such a good time you used to have. You knew you was gonna have a good time when you got home because you would be with your sister. That’s the kind of relationship we had. That I knew when I got home Addie and I was gonna have ourselves a good time playing. I rushed home [one] evening from school thinking I was rushing home to play and then I remembered that Addie

463 Huntley and McKerley, *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, 123.
was dead and that hurt me. That thing hurt me so deep inside. As devastating as it may have been for friends and classmates to mourn the loss of one of their own, nothing can compare to grieving the death of a sibling. Their absence from the world would forever pull at the heartstrings of their brothers and sisters.

In raising black children during the height of Jim Crow parents did everything possible to ensure their children’s safety. But no one could keep those six children from dying. Their deaths gave black children pause about adults and their ability to safeguard them from racial violence. I thought that white people [weren’t] gonna stop,” said Deborah Walker, age 12 in 1963. “They killed four girls. It was really scary. Their hatred was so great; they’re not going to stop! Nobody can stop them. No one in the black community would stand up and tell them to stop. It was utter despair. The grief was so powerful Children also began to wonder “what they had to do or not do” as African Americans in order to stay alive and free from physical harm. “I felt numb. What am I supposed to do now?” said Carolyn Maull McKinstry, a friend and acquaintance of the four girls killed in the church bombing. “Do churches get bombed and children get killed, and then we all go on living life as usual? Is this just another day in the lives of black people in Birmingham?”

Like McKinstry, youths also appeared critical of adults in terms of how they valued children’s lives based on their actions in the days after September 15. They looked to their parents and adult community members for cues on how to respond when tragedy

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466 *Four Little Girls*
469 McKinstry, *While the World Watched*, 90.
strikes, only to be disappointed by what they saw. Leon Robinson, brother of Johnnie Robinson, explained that his parents did not discuss such matters with their children. He noted, “They didn’t sit down and talk to us…. Kept everything inside, you know, and so we had to just deal with it ourselves and that’s what we did.” Deborah Walker also learned to cope privately, causing her to become very introverted. “[I] began to internalize the pain, just like my mom did. Stuffing [it] down became a coping mechanism.”

Young blacks did not want to suffer in silence like the adults. They wanted adults to talk more openly about racial issues rather than whisper about them, and to publicly take a stand against racial violence and oppression. It did not matter that parents and friends were afraid, children sought to learn how to act despite their fears.

What these children may not have understood was that internalizing the pain was a major coping mechanism for African Americans. For blacks to react to racial violence publicly could increase the potential for more violence. Suffering in silence was what black citizens did to survive.

Children who participated in the May 1963 demonstrations took the deaths of the four girls especially hard. Janice Wesley Kelsey, age 16 in 1963, believed her participation in the movement led to the deaths of the four girls. “When I heard that Cynthia was the Wesley girl who had died, I was shocked! There were so many thoughts and emotions going through my mind.” Like so many other children, Kelsey participated in the spring demonstrations months earlier. Sixteenth Street Church had been at the

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472 Rebecca de Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 215-216.
center of the ACMHR-SCLC Children’s March. There, organizers hosted weekly mass meetings, training sessions for the young demonstrators, and used it as the daily check-in location during the protests. “In my heart, there was sadness, confusion, anger and guilt. Did someone do this because we met and marched from that location? Am I partly responsible for the death of those girls? They did not march; they were completely innocent.” I didn’t share my thoughts or feelings with anyone.473

Not all children accepted blame for the killings. “Did I feel guilty? No. We didn’t kill those children,” said Freeman Hrabowski, who was 13 at the time. “Hatred killed those children. Racist dogs killed those children. People who were not fit to be called human would put a bomb under a commode in a church killed those children.”474 For him, the ideology of white supremacy and racial terrorism killed his friends.

As for 25-year-old Carl Grace, the six deaths produced feelings of anger and helplessness. He recalled:

I remember hearing [about it]. I wasn’t near there, but it was all over TV. It was just a sad situation. It was just unbelievable. It was like you wanted to do something. Have you ever been in the situation where you just want to do something and you know that you can’t do anything? I can remember being a child, and I guess basically I just wanted some vengeance, to just be honest about it. I wanted to take vengeance. To see those kids destroyed like that.475

Knowing those children did nothing to warrant their deaths, especially when thinking about how they died, made it all the more difficult for the young men and women to cope. James W. Stewart, who was 16 years of age in 1963, also participated in the spring

474 Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
475 Huntely and McKerely, Foot Soldiers for Democracy, 167.
youth march and was a close friend of Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson. “That had a major impact on me. That was like a real blow, a setback,” he said, adding:

To have them just die innocently like that, I will never forget. I was a pallbearer in Carole’s funeral. Just to see people coming out and to know that somebody hated us as a people-didn’t know any of them, but they hated us so much that they decided the way to win is to now kill their children…. It raised the stakes, and it made me angrier, but it made me more determined.\textsuperscript{476}

No matter if these children knew the victims directly or indirectly, they still identified with them. Addie, Cynthia, Carole, Denise, Johnny, and Virgil were kids just like them. They went to school, hung out with their friends, loved and fought with their siblings, and dreamt about their futures. And in an instant their lives were gone. Their fear, anger, and in some cases guilt, derived from knowing that no black citizen, children included, could escape racial violence.

The bombing and shootings occurred a few short weeks after the integration of three all-white public schools, thus proving the struggle for equal rights to be far from over. It also indicated racial desegregation would not be achieved without significant retaliation from white segregationists. The rationale behind racial segregation and the use of violence to preserve the existing racial hierarchy troubled black citizens who believed a person’s skin color should not determine how he or she was treated. Similar to the reaction of youth to the Till lynching in 1955, these murders galvanized young people, making many more committed to challenging the “invisible hands” of racism and prejudice that had a strong hold on black Americans.\textsuperscript{477}

\textbf{Justice for the Deceased}

\textsuperscript{476} \textit{Ibid}, 141.
\textsuperscript{477} de Schweinitz, \textit{If We Could Change the World}, 216-217.
In the days, weeks, and months following September 15, city law enforcement officials and FBI agents worked to bring justice and some sort of resolution to the citizens of Birmingham. For Johnny Robinson, whose life had been taken by white police officer Jack Parker, the local grand jury decided not to indict him. According to witnesses, the three police officers who rode in the car with Parker at the time of the shooting called it an accident. One officer told FBI investigators at the time the shot was fired that the driver slammed on the brakes, which could have caused Parker to shoot his weapon. Another reported that the car might have hit a dip in the road that would have led to a misfire. Aside from the policemen’s testimonies, other witnesses said they heard two shots directed in the vicinity the victim but did not recall hearing a verbal warning from any of the officers. Despite the evidence, the Robinson case went nowhere. In a 2010 interview, retired lawman Doug Jones, who prosecuted two men responsible for the church bombing, suggested in “cases involving the excessive force of discretion of a police officer are very difficult to make, even in today’s world – much less in 1963, when you would have an all-white, probably all-male jury who was going to side with that police officer, by and large.”

In January 1964, Larry Joe Sims and Michael Lee Farley both went on trial for the death of Virgil Ware. In an interview in 1997, James Ware, Virgil’s older brother and witness to the shooting, remembered attending the trial:

That was the first time I had seen [Farley and Sims] was at the trial. They had said at the time that they thought we had rocks. We didn’t have anything. [Virgil] had both his hands on the handlebars, and it took all I could for pedaling, so we didn’t have anything. At the trial, that was never brought up. If it was, I don’t remember.

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They asked me to point him out, and I pointed to the two guys. They asked me to point him out, and I pointed to the two guys. The trial jury found the two teenagers guilty of second-degree manslaughter and sentenced them to seven months in jail, but not before the judge reduced their sentences to probation, as he believed Sims and Farley came from “good families.” “The verdict wasn’t right,” said James Ware. “I figured they would have gotten way more than what they did for what they did.” In both the Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware cases, justice fell victim to white racial solidarity. Meanwhile, the parents of the four dead girls had even less success in finding the culprits behind the church bombing.

In the beginning, things appeared hopeful. President Kennedy had the FBI sent several dozen FBI agents to Birmingham to work on the case, and Mayor Albert Boutwell worked with the city council to raise reward funds, with the expectation people would come forward with information about the bombing. Boutwell established the funds several weeks prior, after the bombing of Arthur Shores’ home, but pledges came slowly. However, after the church bombing, donations from residents in Birmingham and other towns across the state came in. In three short days, September 18, the fund reached $76,000. Donations came in from private citizens, religious organizations, community groups, and companies like the Pratt Coal Company, which pledged $500, while The Birmingham News and Birmingham Post-Herald gave $4,000. But not all of the offerings were well intended. One mailing at Birmingham City Hall had $500 in Confederate bills, and $100,000 in fake money. Nevertheless, Mayor Boutwell and the city council

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remained hopeful the money raised would be enough to encourage someone to come forward with information about the bombers.

Meanwhile, city lawmen assisted FBI agents in their continued search for the bomber. Many of their early leads pointed them to known Ku Klux Klan members in Birmingham who they brought downtown for questioning and polygraph testing. On September 30, an announcement was made three white Klansmen – Robert Edward Chambliss, John Wesley Hall, and Charles Cagle – had been arrested. Unfortunately, law officials did not have enough hard evidence connecting them to the bombing. The best they could do was charge the three with possession of dynamite, a misdemeanor with a $1,000 fine and six-month of in jail. The judge later rescinded his prison sentence. Two weeks passed and the search for the church bombers continued.\textsuperscript{482}

\textbf{A Call for Black Enforcement}

As the search for the bombers continued, citizens of Birmingham took steps as a community to heal from the tragic events of September. In the Sunday edition of The \textit{Birmingham News} on October 6, a group of nearly eighty-eight mostly white city leaders and residents published a full-page ad in the paper encouraging the Mayor Boutwell and the city council to consider hiring African American police officers. It read: “For many years the use of Negro policemen had been discussed by the citizens and former city officials of Birmingham. Negro policemen have been successfully employed in many Southern communities, including cities in Alabama. Their services have been particularly valuable in the enforcement of law and order in the Negro communities in which they

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{482} Ibid, 31-32.
serve.” The group asked for the city to build a police station in the black community; the personnel board worked swiftly to advertise the required examinations necessary for employment at the black precinct; and the new police station operate and report to Birmingham’s chief of police. Those who signed the ad demanded the mayor and other city officials fulfill these obligations within six months time. Days after the advertisement appeared in the newspaper, members of the Birmingham Public Safety Committee gathered to discuss possibilities for hiring black officers and opening a police precinct in the city’s black residential community. Regardless of amount of public support for the proposed initiatives, politicians and civic leaders decided Birmingham was not ready for such changes.\(^{483}\) Even after the recent acts of racial violence, white officials chose not to provide black citizens equal protection and representation under the law.

At the same time, African Americans pressured city officials to improve the racial climate. Members of the traditional black leadership class, including A.G. Gaston, J.L. Ware, and Lucius Pitts, worked to reestablish their high standing in their community. By now both Dr. King and Rev. Shuttlesworth spent the most of their days away from Birmingham. Shuttlesworth returned to Cincinnati, Ohio to resume his duties as full-time pastor at Revolution Baptist Church, and Dr. King continued his travels across the country, speaking out about the racial injustice. Although both leaders remained active in Birmingham affairs, they could not keep traditional leaders from reclaiming their privileged position. At the beginning of the month, conservative black leaders presented a list of demands to the mayor and city council that reflected requests once submitted by the ACMHR-SCLC coalition earlier that year: Equal employment opportunities for black

\(^{483}\) Wright, 1963, 85.
citizens, particularly in the civil service sector—policemen, firemen, city clerks; desegregation of public parks and facilities; and an end to police brutality. Without the grassroots mobilization efforts of the ACMHR-SCLC, their request went unanswered. Unable to advance racial reform without the big leaders of the Birmingham movement, conservative leaders aligned themselves with the ACMHR-SCLC duo once more.

On October 20, over one hundred local black religious, civic, and business leaders signed a petition titled “Birmingham’s Moment of Crisis: A Statement of Concern and Conviction” that appeared in The Birmingham News. First, the statement addressed the absence of protection and responsibility of police and government officials, from the City Hall to the White House. “The protection of [black citizens] and the allaying of their just fears is the responsibility of any government, and the Birmingham government must not allow threats of reprisal nor unnecessary bureaucratic machinery to stand in the way of its clear and present duty.” The events of September created a state of crisis for Birmingham’s black community. Thus, black citizens wanted city leaders to take responsibility for allowing violence and racism to exist and begin taking steps to make Birmingham a place where liberty and justice applied to all its citizens. Second, the signatories announced their endorsement of Dr. King and Shuttlesworth as important leaders in the struggle for racial reform in Birmingham. Expressing their support of the two leaders suggested that a united black front, albeit strained, still existed. So long as Dr. King and Shuttlesworth remained active in the local movement, white city officials would have to respond accordingly or risk another series of demonstrations. Third, the group listed what they considered the steps necessary in order to put an end to the mistreatment of Birmingham blacks. Those action steps included: an immediate hiring of
black policemen, the removal of Jim Crow signs on city-owned property, hiring of blacks in all municipal offices, desegregation of public facilities and hospitals, and desegregation of privately owned businesses that serve the public. The petitioners made it clear that their demands were just the beginning; more requests would be coming soon.

“For Birmingham has much unfinished business in the difficult undertaking of making basic constitutional rights available to all its citizens, without regard to race.”484 They understood racial reform to be a long process but to them the time had come for the city to take immediate action on behalf its black citizens.485

The day after the full-page ad went to press, Shuttlesworth and Dr. King announced that demonstrations would resume should the city fail to hire black policemen by the deadline of October 29. But the ultimatum failed. City officials rejected the demand, stating the city could not “recommend that anyone be employed as a matter of special privilege only.”486 Mayor Boutwell provided his own explanation in a statement: “The methods of hiring public employees are not and cannot be dictated by individuals or groups. It is dictated purely by good and effective laws which have provided to this city as fine a staff of municipal employees as any city in the nation.”487 Having heard the mayor’s decision, Dr. King decided not to pursue another demonstration. He believed that organizing another mass protest would imply the spring campaign had been unsuccessful. Having regained his popularity after a failed Albany Movement he did not

484 This quote was taken from a full page ad published by black leaders arguing for the hiring of black police in Birmingham. A.G. Gaston and Arthur Shores were two of the 114 leaders to have their signature listed. “Birmingham’s Moment of Crisis: A Statement of Concern and Conviction” The Birmingham News, October 20, 1963, A-9
485 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 324-325
487 Ibid.
want to backtrack. Instead, movement leaders directed their attention to the biracial Committee on Group Relations that Mayor Boutwell reactivated in an effort to alleviate racial tensions and prevent future demonstrations. Unfortunately, none of the movements’ more vocal leaders had been selected to serve on the nineteen-person committee. Nine black conservative men, including J.L. Ware and Lucius Pitts participated; working class and poor blacks were totally excluded. To make matters worse, the group operated as an advisory committee that Boutwell often ignored. With no real ability to implement change, the ineffective committee disbanded at the start of 1964. Birmingham blacks were in a period of crisis as great as they had ever known. Unfortunately, things worsened before they improved.  

A Nation Mourns

On Friday, November 22, shortly after 12:30 p.m., President John F. Kennedy was assassinated near Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas. The president had traveled to Texas as part of his nationwide tour to discuss disarmament and other matters related to the Cold War, but also to begin campaigning for re-election. The nation mourned the tragic death of its 35th president. The morning of Monday, November 25, all of Birmingham’s city offices and schools closed as sign of respect. American flags flew at half-staff as citizens attended memorial services across the city. Most Americans, despite political affiliations, took Kennedy’s death to heart, but black Americans particularly found it difficult considering his growing support of the civil rights movement. Beginning with his election in 1960, parts of Kennedy’s political success had to do with the support he

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488 Eskew, But for Birmingham, 325-326.
received from black constituents for his promise to secure full legal equality for black Americans. Black voters helped him win his first term, and had it not been for his untimely death, they would have carried him to his second term as president of the United States. Despite his reluctance to get involved in the southern racial conflict and efforts to appeal to both black and white voters and southern democrats, Kennedy became one of the most revered presidents among black Americans. “We have lost one of our greatest presidents of the United States since the days of Abraham Lincoln,” said the Rev. Edward Gardner, pastor of Mt. Olive Baptist Church. “I also consider the Negro group has lost a great friend, Mr. John F. Kennedy.”

The Rev. Abraham Woods Jr., vice president of the ACMHR and pastor of First Metropolitan Baptist Church, offered: “November 22, 1963, will indeed be recorded as one of the blackest Fridays in the annals of history…. The world has lost a great statesman, this nation has lost a great leader, and oppressed, exploited, and deprived people everywhere, people who yearn to breathe the invigorating air of freedom, justice, and equality have lost a great friend and benefactor.”

1963 had tremendous impact on Kennedy’s political career. Kennedy found his voice when it came to civil rights and in return movement leaders felt they had an advocate in the White House. His untimely death stunned the movement and with Lyndon Baines Johnson sworn in as president, people doubted whether or not full equality would occur for blacks. “That Friday, Nov. 22, 1963, I was in Mrs. Riles’ geography class. She stopped and went to the door. I heard her wail,” said Condoleezza Rice. “’The President’s dead, and there’s a Southerner in the White House. What’s going

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490 Ibid.
to become us now?" Reasons for the mistrust stemmed from Johnson’s Texas roots and personal racism, and his political tenure in Congress where he spent two decades stonewalling civil rights legislation. At a local memorial service in Canterbury Methodist Church in Mountain Brook, Dr. Allen Montgomery shared these words:

John F. Kennedy [was] the symbol of America, just as the Stars and Stripes and the mighty eagle that together express what we mean when we say America. We memorialize a fallen leader...a citizen, a patriot, a father, and a husband. One day history will render a verdict on the 35th president of the United States. And then, perhaps not until then, will the nation truly realize how great a loss on November 22, 1963.492

Civil Rights Act of 1964

As the nation coped with Kennedy’s death, Lyndon B. Johnson worked to establish himself as the new president. The tragic circumstances made for a tricky transition into the Oval Office. Johnson had to mourn his slain political partner while proving himself capable of leading the country through the end of the term and potentially serve as the Democratic nominee for the presidential election later that year. In an effort to re-build a broken country and build consensus among social, political, and economic leaders, Johnson dedicated the remainder of the term to carrying out Kennedy’s civil rights, anti-poverty, and peace agendas. In his first speech to Congress as the new president, Johnson called on the nation to come together during this difficult time. He said, “It is our duty, yours and mine, to do away with uncertainty and delay and doubt and to show that we are capable of decisive action; that from the brutal loss of our leader

491 Condoleezza Rice. A Memoir of My Extraordinary, Ordinary Family and Me, 101-102.
we will derive not weakness but strength that we can still act and act now.” This being an opportunity to maximize on the “emotional intensity of the moment,” Johnson called on Congress to act. “No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill for which he fought so long.”

It took the Johnson administration eight months to acquire enough votes to pass the civil rights legislation. On July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law shortly after approval from the House of Representatives. The passage of the act outlawed discrimination in public accommodations, publicly owned or managed facilities, as well as programs that received federal funds and by employers, employment agencies and labor unions. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a defining moment for the civil rights movement. It provided black Americans federal protection from discriminatory laws and practices, which had not been the case for over a century. In the past, the federal government left racial matters to the states and did little to protect black citizens. “I was overjoyed,” said Deborah Walker, who was 12 at the time. “Watching the President sign the act into law, surrounded by Dr. King and others, was magical. Finally the country and the world had said ENOUGH! The deaths of the children finally made the world say, ENOUGH!” The act represented a shift in the federal government’s view on the racial dilemma plaguing the nation. For children like Walker, the act offered

a sense of security. It gave the feeling the end of Jim Crow had finally arrived, making it possible for black Americans to exercise their equal rights as citizens.

In support of the new civil rights act, black people, children included, began to patronize once segregated businesses and public facilities. Arnetta Streeter Gary and her sister Joan tested the repeal of segregation ordinances by going to the Lyric and Melba Theatres to see a movie. “For whatever reason I was not scared,” remembered Streeter Gary. She and her sister did not stay through the whole movie; they just wanted to test each owner’s compliance with the law.495 Dale Long, too, went with his friends to the Lyric Theater in downtown Birmingham. The James Bond film “Gold Finger” was playing. Being able to enter through the front door of the theater rather than the back alley door was a special moment for him especially because he could recall a time when black people entered segregated theaters from a back entrance and had to sit in the less suitable blacks-only section upstairs. But even with equal access to such public accommodations, black parents advised their children to rediscover Birmingham’s social scene with caution. “My mom dropped us off [but] didn’t pick us up. But she knew exactly what time the movie was over…. [W]e were told to sit in the back and avoid going to the bathroom, and never separate ourselves from each other. And that was months after the Civil Rights Bill was passed.” Long’s parents like many others feared segregationists who may have taken it upon themselves to enforce segregation regardless of new legislation decided to take matters into their own hands. “But we didn’t follow instructions exactly right,” says Long. “We sat maybe two rows from the back, which allowed some fools to sit behind us and talked to us the whole while.”

495 Levinson, We’ve Got a Job, 141.
been a joyful experience only reminded the young black men that not everyone embraced the new racial order. It was a bittersweet moment.  

Washington Booker III also tested integration by ordering dessert at a once segregated restaurant. “I went to Newberry’s,” he said, “and I got some ice cream.” Booker enjoyed eating his ice cream upstairs at a “diner-style, stainless steel bar with stools;” a location once restricted from blacks. It is important to note not all black citizens ventured into desegregated Birmingham. Some chose to wait until enough people tested the segregation ordinances, while others simply could not afford to patronize a restaurant, movie theater, or department store. The new legislation outlawed discrimination in public accommodations but failed to address economic disparities. This prevented poor, working class families from full participation in a desegregated Birmingham; which they helped create through their participation in the ACMHR-SCLC Birmingham campaign. Thus raising concerns on intra and interracial economic disparities in the city and across the country.

While southerners, black and white, navigated newly desegregated spaces, the families of the victims from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing still waited for a break in the case, but one never came. Without strong evidence, key witnesses or leads, FBI agents found themselves approaching a dead end. “When you asked if the killers of the children will ever be punished – people laugh in your face,” said James Williams, a news reporter for the Baltimore Afro-American who revisited Birmingham months after the bombing. According to one of his sources, “Anybody that thinks the cops will ever

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catch the bombers is crazy. Nobody wants them caught.” With each passing day, the belief the bombers would be brought to justice grew more and more dim. The one-year anniversary of the bombing came and went, and soon it was winter again.

December 1964 proved to be a month of great loss in Birmingham’s black community. On December 23, six children ages from seven months to six years, died in a house fire. The fire started when a pile of clothing situated near the hot water heater set a blaze. The children tried their best to escape the fire but the high flames prevented them from escaping through the back door. Firemen found three of the children in the bathroom, located in the back of the house, with the other three just outside. At the time the fire occurred, both parents had been away at work. Word of their six dead children left them devastated and heartbroken. Then two days later, police found a 14-year-old boy from Woodlawn High School frozen dead after having gone missing for two days. According to autopsy reports, he went unconscious after a fall and his exposure to cold temperatures caused his death. In addition to these tragic deaths, the money collected for the church bombing reward fund had to be returned to donors since no information led to an arrest or conviction of one or more persons connected with the recent racial bombings had been received by the December 31 deadline, which Mayor Boutwell implemented at the time he created the fund. Three months later, on March 15, 1965, the reward committee announced it would return a total of $79,764 in cash and pledges to the respective donors. This decision signaled the beginning of the end in the search for the Sixteenth Street Church bombers. The case would remain open for another three years

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499 Ibid.
but on September 15, 1968, the FBI’s official involvement came to an end. It seemed as though the church bombing would become one of the many unsolved cases of racial violence in Birmingham’s history.

The deaths of six black children rocked Birmingham to its core. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing and the fatal shootings that followed called for a re-evaluation of what it meant to be black in America. In a country that prided itself on democracy and offering its citizens the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, young black citizens feared for their lives. The events of the day underscored the need for federal protection of black citizens in Birmingham and all across the Southland. No longer could the White House deflect these matters to state and local governments, the time had come for the nation’s top leaders to step forward and implement laws that demanded equality and protection for all Americans. None of the six children had been active participants in the local civil rights movement; none of them marched or knelt in front of firemen with high-pressure hoses and K-9 dogs praying for peace and equality. They were simply victims of America’s racist laws and culture. Similar to the murder of Emmett Till, the deaths of Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair, Virgil Ware, and Johnny Robinson proved black children had no way of protecting themselves from the southern black experience. Their deaths also served as the redemptive force for civil rights activists and organizations to continue their pursuit of full citizenship for all people regardless of race.

But for Birmingham’s black youths, the deaths marked a turning point in their lives. “Not many young people can pinpoint the exact date, time, and place they grew up
and became an adult. I can. It was September 15, 1963, 10:22 a.m., at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church,” said Carolyn Maull McKinstry.

Not only did I lose four friends, but I also lost my innocence and naiveté about people and about the world in general. The loving trust I had in the goodness of humanity was gone. I began to see the world as a deadly and hostile place, where no one, not even my father or my brothers or my church could protect me. And for the first time in my life, I felt all alone.  

The loss of innocence had become all too common for this generation. In one day, black youths felt their childhood ripped away from them. “They took away the innocence of childhood and it showed us the power of hatred,” said Freeman Hrabowski. Deborah Walker described Birmingham after the killings as a place where “rage and pandemonium reigned.” “I felt like I was walking around in a maze. It was an incredibly scary time. Even the village could not protect us from the insane hate. …I remember thinking, ‘when will the rest of the country and the world be as enraged as we were in Birmingham? When would it all end?’”

Thoughts of what could have been for the lives of the deceased frequented the minds of those still living. “They would have been stars in the world; this I know,” said Mary Bush of the girls who died in the church bombing. “They would have been gifts to this world. America missed out on the opportunity of having their gifts and talents shared with this country. Their families missed out, this country missed about. Because of crazy, radical, hatred.”

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501 Interview with Freeman Hrabowski, telephone interview with author, digital recording, August 4, 2014, Baltimore, Maryland. Recording in the possession of author.
503 Interview with Mary Bush, telephoned interview with author, digital recording, July 24, 2014, Chevy Chase, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
As the children of 1963 grew older, the memories of their fallen friends remained. With each milestone - birthday, graduation, or wedding - people took pause to remember those whose lives were cut short. “Many years later,” said Denise Smith Grych, age 11 in 1963, “me and my husband’s wedding photographer was also the father of one of the victims, Denise McNair.” While Smith Grych celebrated her union in marriage, she could not help but wonder what it must have meant for Mr. McNair to never see his daughter walk down the aisle. “I was still touched by the horror.” Dale Long came to accept the tragedies as an opportunity to discover his purpose for living. Long’s grandmother believed both he and his younger brother Kenny both had their lives spared on the day of the church bombing for a reason and a purpose. “Those who experienced that kind of tragedy survived because of a greater purpose.” In the days, months and years that followed, Long committed himself to purposeful living. He noted, “I gave my life to service in honor of [the deceased] because they didn’t have a chance.” To have lived through and survived Birmingham’s darkest days meant something to Long. For him, it represented courage, determination, and second chances. Out of great sadness rose a generation of men and women who persevered despite experiencing tragedy so early in life.

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505 Dale Long currently lives in Garland, Texas where he is the Community Outreach Coordinator and Public Information Officer for the City of Dallas Public Works Department. He also is the founding member of the Garland Branch NAACP, a Life Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and volunteer mentor with Big Brothers and Big Sisters (BBBS) Lone Star. He has received numerous awards for his diligence in working with BBBS and has been featured in Forbes Magazine, Essence Magazine and listed in the 2011 Grio’s 100 Class by NBC News; Interview with Dale Long., telephone interview with author, digital recording, July 14, 2014, Dallas, Texas. Recording in possession of author.
Chapter 5

Epilogue

On January 1, 1964, *The Birmingham News* published a front-page editorial titled “1964 Challenges Birmingham and Alabama, The Trials and Blessings of 1963 Point the Way…” This article was particularly unique as it was written to future generation Birminghamians. In it, the newspaper raised these important questions: “Did the older folks make the tough but right decisions in 1963-did they carry them out in year after year that followed? Did we serve you youngsters - our children - by putting you ahead of our own personal wishes or prejudices or desires? Did we pay the price for your future?”

More than fifty years have passed since the article was published and there has been significant change in the city of Birmingham. In 1979, Richard Arrington Jr. became the city’s first African American mayor. Since his elections, blacks have served back-to-back terms as mayor. There have also been three black police chiefs, the first Johnnie Johnson in 1992, and seven black superintendents of the Birmingham Public School system.

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Though there have been fundamental transitions in the area of city leadership, there remain many social, political, and economic challenges. One in three resident lives in poverty, the city ranks near the top of nationwide crime rankings, and there is a history of “governmental inefficiency and public corruption.” Racial tensions also linger.

“Prejudice and social injustice still exist in this city,” said Lee Shores, daughter of civil rights lawyer Arthur Shores, “and they play a role in terms of the opportunities people enjoy today.” “Jim Crow laws may not exist anymore, but the spirit of Jim Crow is alive and well, primarily due to institutional racism, which often makes it more difficult for us to recognize it and root it out.”

Despite Birmingham’s current challenges, there is much to celebrate about the legacy of the children of Birmingham 1963.

**Audrey Faye Hendricks**

Audrey Hendricks, one of the youngest participants in the Children’s March, continued to challenge racial discrimination through her adult years. After she graduated Center Street Elementary School, she chose to be a part of the first class to integrate Ramsey High School. “For the first two weeks, we all sat in the auditorium,” said Hendricks, “because [the administrators] didn’t quite know what to do with us. I wasn’t Audrey I was part of the ‘Nigra’ children group… It took a while for whites and blacks to work together. But it was what we fought for.”

Hendricks was not the only one in her family to break racial barriers. Her mother, Lola Hendricks, was one of the first African Americans to be hired for a federal government position in Birmingham. “I think my

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509 Wright, 1963, 91.

510 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 151-152.
biggest accomplishments that came out of the movement in the beginning were better jobs for adults,” said Audrey Hendricks. After graduating from Ramsey, Hendricks left Birmingham to attend Bishop College in Dallas, Texas. She would spend close to ten years living in Dallas before returning to Birmingham, where she dedicated more than twenty-five years working with children from low-income families. When she was not working, Hendricks visited schools around the country to talk about growing up in Birmingham and her involvement in the Children’s March. On March 1, 2009 Audrey Faye Hendricks died at the age of 55.

**Freeman A. Hrabowski III**

Since growing up in Birmingham, Freeman A. Hrabowski III has become a prominent leader in American education. After graduating from Ullman High School, Hrabowski attended Hampton Institute where he earned a degree in mathematics. He then went to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he graduated with a Master’s degree and Ph.D. Since 1992, he has served as president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. In 2012, Hrabowski was appointed by President Barack Obama, the nation’s first African American president, to Chair of President’s Advisory Committee on Excellence for African Americans. That same year, Time magazine named him one of The Top 100 Most Influential People in the World. “There is no doubt that the 1963 marches and the attention they brought to Birmingham, coupled with the tragedy of the four girls that September, led to more light shining on the segregated world in which we lived and the problems with segregation,” said Hrabowski. “I learned that even

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511 Huntley and McKerley, *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, 211.
512 Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 152; Huntley and McKerley, *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, 210-211.
children really could make a difference in their own lives. That march empowered us to understand that we could do something that would have the country thinking about how children should be treated.” The events of 1963, the efforts and activities led to major concessions in Birmingham. “And for the first time, the message was that America did not have to be as it had been.” Hrabowski learned “just because things were one way didn’t mean they had to always be that way…. The message from Dr. King and others was that we could be the best in the country. ‘Not the best Negro children, but the best.’ And the march was symbolic of that.”

**Arnetta Streeter Gary**

Arnetta Streeter-Gary, another Ullman High School alum, has also dedicated her life to education. After high school she attended Miles College and then went on to earn a master’s degree in education from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. For several years Streeter-Gary taught mathematics at predominantly white elementary schools. After sometime she transferred to a predominantly black school. “I wanted to work with my own children,” she said. Streeter-Gary retired from the Birmingham Public School system after teaching thirty-two years. “I feel like being an educator is a blessing the Lord gives you.” Still interested in teaching, she went on to teach mathematics at Miles College before retiring in 2011. Occasionally she facilitates after school programs at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute located across the street from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. She also participates in discussion panels on the Children’s March at

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local public schools and nearby colleges. Today, she still lives in Birmingham with her husband Walter Gary.\footnote{Cynthia Levinson. \textit{We’ve Got a Job}, 155.}

\textbf{Washington Booker}

For Washington Booker III his days of mischief continued after 1963. He was kicked out of school shortly before graduation. With no diploma in hand, Booker joined the Marine Corps in 1968 and served as a combat soldier in Vietnam. “When I got back to Birmingham [in 1969], I had a new attitude and new knowledge.” Upon his return Booker was disappointed to discover that not much had changed since he joined the Marines. “[I] thought that America had become fair and a more just place and that black people now shared equally in the American dream.”\footnote{Huntley and McKerley, \textit{Foot Soldiers for Democracy}, 196}

Instead, Booker came home to increased police brutality and economic inequality between blacks and whites. He was also disappointed by the lack of unity among African Americans. In response, Booker partnered with local Vietnam veterans and helped found the Alabama Black Liberation Front, an organization affiliated with the Black Panther Party. “We started a breakfast for kids program,” said Booker. Despite social transformations, the annual incomes for Birmingham blacks remained less than whites. “We went to the merchant in the neighborhood and said, ‘You make your money off of these people, but their kids go to school hungry in the morning,’” he said.\footnote{Ibid} The Alabama Black Liberation Front also sponsored political education classes for the black community in an effort to increase black voting power in local, state, and national elections. Later, Booker entered a Graduate Equivalency Degree program and earned a
high school diploma. From there he joined the Birmingham Fire Department as one of the first black firemen. He continues to remain active in the Birmingham community by consulting on local political campaigns, as he did in 1979 when he campaigned for the city’s first black mayor, Richard Arrington, and working to register eligible voters.\(^{517}\)

About growing up in Birmingham and the future of black Americans, Booker said,

Growing up in a tough town like Birmingham was what made people. Black folk who came out of here were tough people, and I think that toughness has pushed this city forward. Their toughness has caused this city to continue to grow and build and move in spite of what anybody may say or what may happen… I think that self-determination, the right to decide your own destiny as people, is something. [It] is a right that belongs to every group of people, race and ethnic group on the earth. I think we as black folk have to realize that it is right and just for us to want to determine our own destiny.\(^{518}\)

**James Stewart**

James Stewart attended Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio following graduation from Ullman High. “I wanted to get as far away from Birmingham as I possibly could,” he said. At Case, Stewart cofounded the university’s Black Student Union Association. After graduation Stewart moved to Detroit, Michigan to attend graduate school but was drafted. Stewart spent two years in the army before returning to Birmingham to work at Head Start’s Health Services as a director. In this position he cofounded the Sickle Cell Anemia Project, a statewide initiative for children with the disease. He went on to work at the University of Alabama at Birmingham where he

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\(^{517}\) Levinson, *We’ve Got a Job*, 152-53.

\(^{518}\) Huntley and Mc Kerley, *Foot Soldiers for Democracy*, 199.
recruited and counseled college-age black students. He currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia with his wife. They have four children.

The Birmingham civil rights movement changed the lives of Audrey Faye Hendricks, Freeman A. Hrabowski, Arnetta Streeter Gary, Washington Booker III and James Stewart, as well as those who also lived through 1963 and whose stories remain untold. Ellen Levine, author of *Freedom’s Children*, posits that, “There are thousands of southern black children who were young and involved in the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 60s, but with few exceptions they aren’t famous.” However their participation and personal sacrifice forced a nation to address its racist history and systemic mistreatment of its black citizens. Like many grassroots activists, these young demonstrators have not yet received credit for their deeds, but perhaps that is because they were never looking for the recognition.

Those whom I contacted for the dissertation were both honored and humbled by my request to interview them. They recognized the importance of telling their personal stories of coming of age in such a turbulent time and their involvement in the local movement. However, when asked the question, “Why is it important for people to learn more about the intersections of the Birmingham civil rights movement and black childhood?” they said collectively that they wanted people to know how the trials and blessings of 1963 transformed their lives and for their memories and stories to “empower children anywhere when they see injustice to [respond].” No one was looking for personal recognition; instead, the focus was on educating and empowering others to fight

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520 Interview with Mary Bush, telephone interview with author, digital recording, July 24, 2014, Chevy Chase, Maryland. Recording in possession of author.
the injustices facing African Americans today, particularly around the safety and value of black lives. If the participation of black youth - both as political actors and symbols - influenced both local and national civil rights movements in 1963, then what is to prevent today’s generation from advocating on behalf of black lives in the twenty-first century? The Children’s March of 1963 is a testament to the power of youth activism and mobilization. By discussing matters of racial discrimination in a way that was easy for school children to comprehend, movement organizers were able to transform the Birmingham campaign into one of the most successful demonstrations in the modern civil rights movement. Perhaps similar methods of engagement could encourage future generations of black youth to mobilize around issues that are pertinent to them and their communities.

In 1963, Birmingham’s black youth helped bring the civil rights movement to the forefront of the nation’s political and social consciousness. Placing these school-aged children at the center of the history of the Birmingham civil rights movement I hope will spark new interest in the study of southern black childhood during the modern civil rights era. Also, I anticipate this research will inspire other scholars to explore the history of black childhood across space and time, thus offering a deeper understanding of the black experience in America.
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