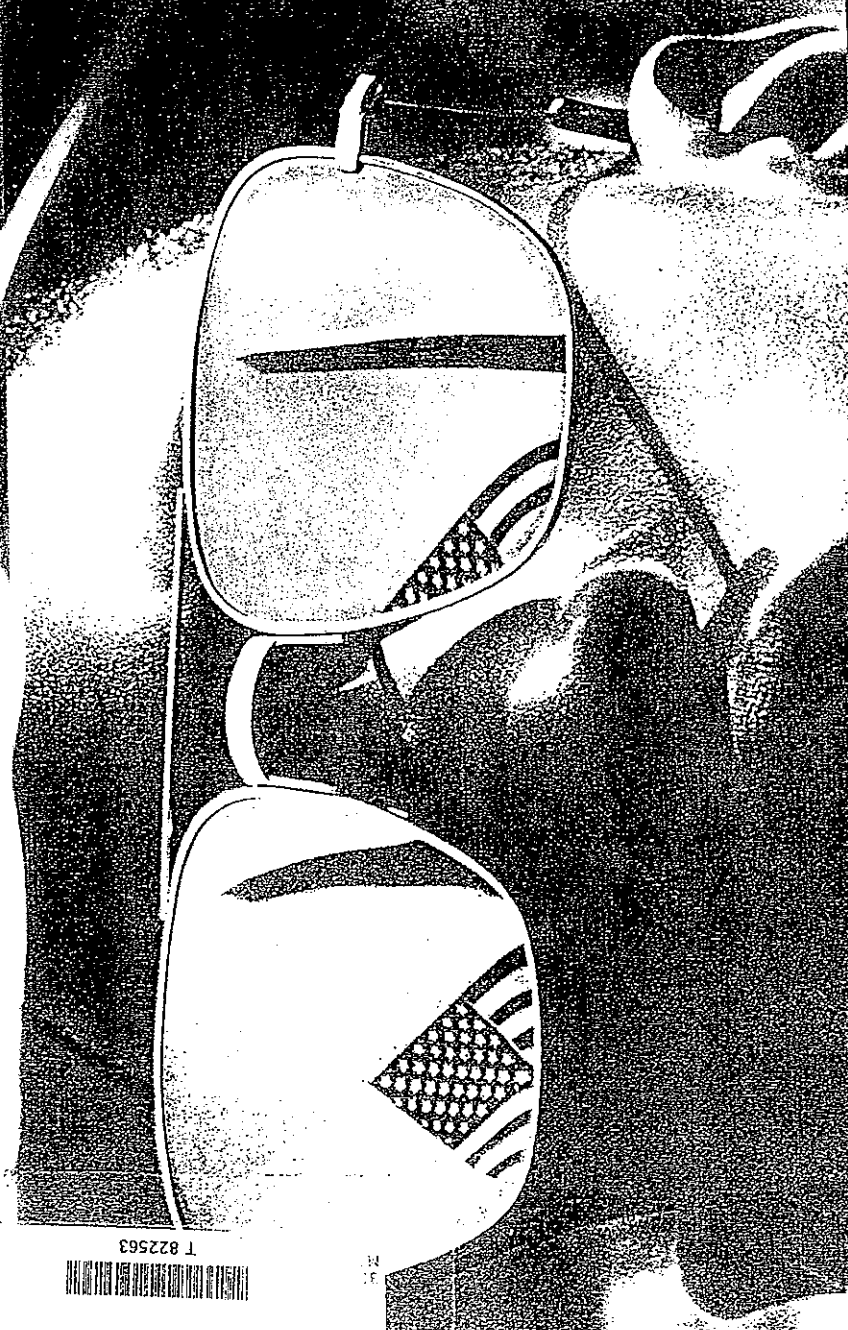


THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT FROM 1954 TO 1968

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT FROM 1954 TO 1968



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DIANE MCWHORTER

PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *CARRY ME HOME* • FOREWORD BY REVEREND FRED SHUTTLESWORTH

To my daughters, Lay and Isabella - M.M.

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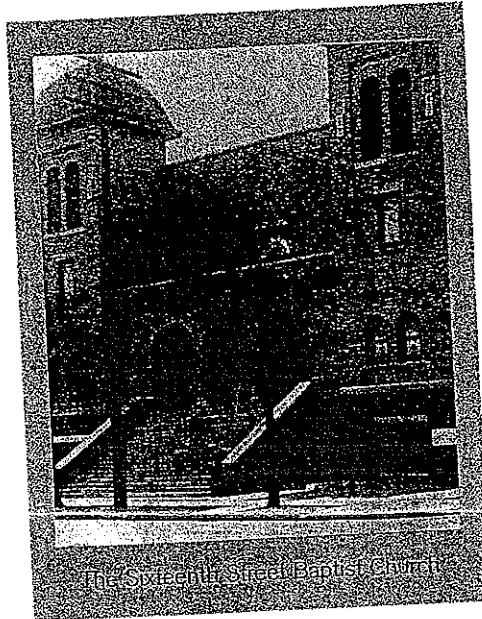
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- Page 6: Magnum Page 6; Diana M. Walker Page 7; Diane M. Walker Page 7; Diane M. Walker Page 7
- Page 12: Library of Congress Page 14; AP/Wide World Photos Page 16; Library of Congress Page 19; Library of Congress Page 20; Library of Congress Page 21; Associated Press Page 22; Library of Congress Page 23; Library of Congress Page 24; Library of Congress Page 26; Library of Congress Page 27; Library of Congress Page 29; Library of Congress Page 27; AP/Wide World Photos Page 28; AP/Wide World Photos Page 28; National Archives Page 29; Library of Congress Page 30; Associated Press Page 31; Magnum Page 32; Getty Images Page 33; Associated Press Page 34; AP/Wide World Photos Page 36; AP/Wide World Photos Page 37; Library of Congress Page 38; Corbis Page 39; Corbis Page 39; Corbis Page 40; Corbis Page 42; AP/Wide World Photos Page 44; Fine Line Page 45; Corbis Page 46; AP/Wide World Photos Page 47; AP/Wide World Photos Page 49; Corbis Page 50; AP/Wide World Photos Page 52; Corbis Page 53; Corbis Page 56; Corbis Page 57; Corbis Page 58; Corbis Page 59; Magnum Page 61; Corbis Page 63; Birmingham Post-Herald Page 64; Corbis Page 65; AP/Wide World Photos Page 66; Corbis Page 67; Magnum Page 68; AP/Wide World Photos Page 69; AP/Wide World Photos Page 70; Corbis Page 70; Corbis Page 71; Corbis Page 75; Library of Congress Page 76; Birmingham Public Library Archives Page 78; Birmingham Public Library Archives Page 79; Birmingham Public Library Archives Page 82; Birmingham Public Library Archives Page 83; AP/Wide World Photos Page 84; AP/Wide World Photos Page 85; Corbis Page 87; Corbis Page 88; Corbis Page 89; Corbis Page 90; AP/Wide World Photos Page 91; National Archives Page 92; Library of Congress Page 93; National Archives Page 94; Library of Congress Page 95; Library of Congress Page 96; Birmingham Public Library Archives Page 97; Birmingham Public Library Archives Page 99; former U.S. Attorney Doug Jones Page 100; AP/Wide World Photos Page 101; AP/Wide World Photos Page 102; The Corner Journal Page 103; AP/Wide World Photos Page 105; Corbis Page 104; Magnum Page 105; Corbis Page 106; Corbis Page 107; National Archives Page 108; Corbis Page 109; AP/Wide World Photos Page 110; Corbis Page 111; AP/Wide World Photos Page 113; Corbis Page 114; AP/Wide World Photos Page 116; Corbis Page 117; Corbis Page 118; AP/Wide World Photos Page 120; AP/Wide World Photos Page 121; AP/Wide World Photos Page 123; Corbis Page 125; AP/Wide World Photos Page 126; Library of Congress Page 127; Corbis Page 128; AP/Wide World Photos Page 129; AP/Wide World Photos Page 130; AP/Wide World Photos Page 130; Corbis Page 131; AP/Wide World Photos Page 133; Corbis Page 134; AP/Wide World Photos Page 136; AP/Wide World Photos Page 138; Corbis Page 139; AP/Wide World Photos Page 140; Corbis Page 142; Library of Congress Page 143; Corbis Page 144; AP/Wide World Photos Page 146; AP/Wide World Photos Page 147; Corbis Page 149; Corbis Page 150; Fine Line Page 161; Corbis Page 153; Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

THE BIRMINGHAM CHURCH BOMBING

"Dear God, why?"

—Martin Luther King Jr., September 15, 1963



Five girls slipped out of their Sunday-school lesson on "The Love That Forgives" to go to the women's lounge in the basement of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. They needed to primp for the youth service coming up that morning, September 15, 1963. Carole Robertson, 14, was trying out her first pair of heels. From near the door, Sarah Collins watched

her big sister Addie, 14, tie the sash of 11-year-old Denise McNair's plaid dress. Before the mirror, Cynthia Wesley, 14, gave her hair a little push.

At 10:22 A.M., a deafening blast ripped through the wall of the lounge and shot a streak of fire

above the church. A stale-smelling white fog filled the building. Brick, glass, and stone pelted the surrounding neighborhood. As the blizzard of debris settled, Sarah Collins lay in darkness, blinded by the blast. She called to her big sister, "Addie, Addie, Addie."

Addie, Denise, Cynthia, and Carole had been murdered in church by Klansmen's dynamite

on a Sunday morning.

The death of the four Sunday-school girls was a horrible echo of the Birmingham "children's miracle" of the spring. Though thousands of schoolchildren had taken part in those epic

1963 • THE BIRMINGHAM CHURCH BOMBING

showdowns with Bull Connor's dogs and fire hoses, the victims' parents had not let them march. Sixteenth Street Baptist was the wealthiest and snobbiest black church in Birmingham. Like much of the local black middle class, its members had not appreciated Martin Luther King Jr.'s arrival and had not liked their centrally located church being used as the gathering spot for demonstrators. But Sixteenth Street Baptist became one of the unforgettable landmarks of the civil rights movement, as the site of the era's most monstrous crime.

Preaching at the joint funeral of three of the girls, King returned to a theme he had touched upon only 18 days earlier at the March on Washington: the Christian notion that "unmerited suffering is redemptive." That is, if one suffered without having done anything to

deserve it, then that sacrifice could change things for the better. King said at the girls' funeral, "They did not die in vain."

He was right. In death, Addie, Denise, Carole, and Cynthia would live on for decades as heartrending reminders that America had not fulfilled its promise to its

black citizens. The girls' killers remained at large in the community for many years.

More immediately, the four girls' deaths shamed the critics of President John F. Kennedy's civil rights bill. The assassination of Kennedy only two months later virtually guaranteed passage of his bold legislation.

"No memorial or eulo-

gy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory . . .," said his vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy and pushed the bill through Congress.



The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church after the bombing. In the background, the Liberty Center was still standing, said one witness' name.

THE CHURCH BOMBERS

The fatal bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church capped 16 years of nonfatal Klan dynamite attacks on black homes and churches in "Bombingham." The Ku Klux Klan had enjoyed the "friendship" of the Birmingham police, elected officials such as Bull Connor and Governor John Patterson, and the city's ruling industrialists. But as civil rights disturbances began to hurt the local economy, the Klan lost its powerful supporters. Days before the church bombing, five black children entered three previously white Birmingham schools under heavy police protection. The Klansmen struck back in lethal desperation over the end of "Our Way of Life."

The FBI identified five chief bombing suspects within weeks. All were veterans of Birmingham's violent Eastview 13 Klan, which had planned the beating of the Freedom Riders as well as at least one assassination attempt against civil rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth. The FBI's director, J. Edgar Hoover, refused to let the suspects stand trial at the time. He

claimed that a southern jury would never convict on the available evidence (and was probably right).

The first Birmingham bombing suspect, Robert Chambliss, was prosecuted in 1977. Tommy Blanton and Bobby Cherry were convicted in 2001 and 2002. Two more suspects died without being charged.

ROBERT "DYNAMITE BOB" CHAMBLISS

A 59-year-old truck driver, Chambliss was the veteran Klansman behind the bombings of the late 1940s against black home buyers in a previously white neighborhood that became known as



Robert Chambliss

Dynamite Hill. He was considered city commissioner Bull Connor's "errand boy" within the Klan—which helps explain why Chambliss did not get caught. On the day before the church bombing, he boasted to his niece, "You just wait till after Sunday

morning. They will beg us to let them segregate.” Thanks in part to that niece’s testimony, Chambliss was successfully prosecuted for first-degree murder in 1977 by Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley. He died in prison in 1985.

THOMAS E. BLANTON JR.

The youngest of the church bombers at 25, Tommy Blanton was the son of a vicious and colorful Klan veteran known as “Pop.” A Klan associate thought Blanton was not intelligent enough to make a bomb, but dumb enough to place it. His blue-and-white Chevrolet was spotted behind the Sixteenth Street Church at 2 A.M. on the morning of the bombing, the time that investigators believed that the bomb was planted. Blanton was convicted in 2001, after the discovery of an FBI tape recording of him in 1964 discussing the bombing with his wife.



Tommy Blanton

BOBBY FRANK “CHERRY BOMB” CHERRY

Cherry was a truck driver (and, like Chambliss, a wife beater and suspected child molester) who had been a member of the mob that attacked Fred Shuttlesworth in front of a local white high school in 1957. In



Bobby Cherry

the years after the bombing, Cherry told co-workers and relatives that he had helped “blow up a bunch of niggers back in Birmingham.” Finally charged with the crime at age 69 in 2000, Cherry nearly escaped going to trial by pretending he had lost his mind. After psychiatrists ruled he was faking, Cherry was convicted of murder and imprisoned in 2002.

CHILDREN OF BIRMINGHAM

I was only a year younger than Denise McNair was at the time of the church bombing, yet the murder of the four girls had no impact on me. The color line had deprived me of the capacity to empathize with black children.

The general attitude of the white people in Birmingham toward the church bombing was that it had been done by "redneck" lunatics who

were probably not even from our city. No one really drew a connection between our "nonviolent" bigotry and the Klan's dynamite. We saw the church bombing as a terrible thing that had befallen an otherwise upstanding, law-abiding community. Two months later, when President Kennedy was assassinated, white schoolchildren all over Birmingham cheered.



Denise McNair, 11



Carole Robertson, 14



Addie Mae Collins, 14



Cynthia Wesley, 14