

Things to Think About

- After signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Johnson said "I think we just gave the South to the Republicans." What did he mean by that? How did the civil rights era cause a realignment in American politics? How is that change still being felt today?
- In 1959, 86 percent of U.S. households had televisions, which meant that a large number of people were now getting their news from television broadcasts. How did this fact affect the civil rights movement? In what way does television continue to influence the shape of politics today?
- The involvement of Schwerner and Goodman in the civil rights movement was part of growing student activism in schools nationwide that involved not only the civil rights movement but also opposition to the war in Vietnam. How did student movements affect the events of the 1960s and 1970s? How can students today voice their feelings about political and social issues? What are some of the issues that interest students today?
- The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church became a target for bombers because it served as a focus for civil rights activities. What can you learn about the role of African American churches in the civil rights struggles and in African American life in general?

Internet Resources

- <http://www.useekufind.com/peace/index.htm> – Entitled "In Memory of Four Little Girls," a useful site on the church bombing with newspaper articles of the time.
- <http://www16thstreet.org/> – The home page of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.
- http://www.industrycentral.net/director_interviews/SL01.HTM – An interview with director Spike Lee on the making of his documentary, "Four Little Girls."
- <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/price&bowers/price&bowers.htm> – From the "Famous American Trials" Web site of the law school of the University of Missouri at Kansas City, a rich site on the "Mississippi Burning" trial of the killers of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, with biographies of the victims as well as the defendants, along with transcripts and other information.

Other Resources

For students:

- Bullard, Sara.** *Free at Last: A History of the Civil Rights Movement and Those Who Died in the Struggle.* Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Curtis, Christophe Paul.** *The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963.* Yearling, 1997.
- Rochelle, Belinda.** *Witness to Freedom: Young People Who Fought for Civil Rights.* Puffin Books, 1997.
- Taylor, Mildred D.** *Mississippi Bridge.* Bantam 1992.

For adults:

- Belfrage, Sally and Moses, Robert P.** *Freedom Summer.* University Press of Virginia, 1990.
- Cobbs, Elizabeth H. and Smith, Petric J.** *Long Time Coming: An Insider's Story of the Birmingham Church Bombing That Rocked the World.* Crane Hill, 1994.
- Cotman, John Walton.** *Birmingham, JFK, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964: Implications for Elite Theory (American University Studies. Series X, Political Science, Vol. 17).* P. Lang, 1989.
- Dittmer John.** *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (Blacks in the New World).* University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Eskew, Glenn T.** *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle.* University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Mans, Florence.** *Witness in Philadelphia* Louisiana State University Press, 1977
- Payne, Charles M.** *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle.* University of California Press, 1995.
- Sikora, Frank.** *Until Justice Rolls Down: The Birmingham Church Bombing Case.* University of Alabama Press, 1991.

The documentary film Four Little Girls, directed and produced by Spike Lee, tells the story of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The movie Mississippi Burning (1988), starring Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe, is a fictionalized account of the FBI investigation of the murders of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney. The FBI code name for the case was MIBURN (Mississippi Burning). Many participants in the civil rights movement are highly critical of Mississippi Burning for its extremely sympathetic portrayal of the FBI.

FREE AT LAST: CIVIL RIGHTS HEROES

Part II THE BIRMINGHAM FOUR FREEDOM SUMMER

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FREE AT LAST : CIVIL RIGHTS HEROES

The civil rights movement in the United States is usually considered in terms of its leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., or of its dramatic events, such as the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. But often the catalysts for progress were people who fought from within a larger group or performed individual, and seemingly small, acts of heroism. Some were victims who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time but whose fate stirred the nation. These are some of those stories.

Part II

THE BIRMINGHAM FOUR FREEDOM SUMMER

On September 15, 1963, during Sunday school classes at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, a bomb exploded, killing four girls: Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Addie Mae Collins. News coverage of the girls' killing and their funerals shocked the nation.

In the early 1960s many college students came to the South from around the country to help the civil rights movement. In the "Freedom Summer" of 1964, three students, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman (two white and one black) were murdered shortly after being released from a jail in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The subsequent federal trial eventually became one of the first to bring convictions for crimes against civil rights activists. Outrage over these killings helped spur passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.



A Nation Pays Attention

In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., along with Fred Shuttlesworth, began organizing massive street demonstrations in the South. The protestors demanded an end to racial discrimination in employment and in the use of public facilities. Many of these demonstrations resulted in violent clashes with local police, and the scenes of protestors being clubbed, drenched with fire hoses, and attacked by dogs were widely broadcast on television. Such scenes heightened public awareness throughout the United States that passions were reaching a high pitch in the South. Many white observers, while sympathetic to the protestors, harbored fears that their movement was proceeding recklessly and too fast and could escalate into race warfare.

And then the circle of violence widened, and people who were unsure of where they stood realized that the marchers were indeed facing a desperate resistance that had the power of the state behind it. In the first instance, a bomb went off at a black Birmingham church, killing four young girls. That such innocent and promising individuals could be murdered so coldly was a deep shock. In the second instance, two white civil rights workers from the North, along with an African American colleague, were murdered in cold blood. Suddenly, the civil rights movement was no longer a southern issue, and it was not only African Americans who were at risk. A growing number of northern whites were obviously becoming committed to the ideals of the demonstrators, and some parents realized that if their children, as students, wished to play a more active role in the civil rights movement, those young people could be putting their lives in jeopardy.

The Impact of the Events

- In *Four Little Girls*, Spike Lee's documentary on the Birmingham church bombing (see the "Other Resources" section), the well-known journalist Walter Cronkite recalls that the episode "awakened liberal America to the true depth of the hatred and resistance to integration." Before the bombing, many Americans were able to assume that change in the South would come peacefully and gradually. That tragedy, however, made them see things in a different light.
- In June 1964, even before the discovery of the bodies of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, the FBI began arresting white suspects in Mississippi. This marked a major shift in law enforcement because white perpetrators of racial crimes in the South could no longer count on immunity from conviction.
- After the disappearance of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, the White House felt enormous pressure on several fronts. First, they needed to solve the case quickly. Second, they needed to ensure that no further murders were committed. Finally, they had to prevent the racial tension in the South from escalating into violence – on both sides. It

August 1963 – Federal courts order desegregation of the schools in Birmingham and three other cities in Alabama.

August 28, 1963 – During the civil rights march on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his "I have a dream" speech.

September 15, 1963 – A bomb explodes at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four girls.

June 7, 1964 – The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church reopens.

June 1964 – While a student at Queens College in New York, Andrew Goodman is recruited by a civil rights worker.

June 14, 1964 – Andrew Goodman arrives in Oxford, Ohio, for training. Schwerner and Chaney are already there.

June 20, 1964 – Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney drive from Ohio to the CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) office in Meridian, Mississippi.

June 21, 1964 – Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney are murdered after being released from jail.

June 25, 1964 – In the wake of the disappearance of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, CBS-TV broadcasts a special report on the situation in Mississippi. It lifts the spirits of the civil rights workers and informs the entire nation about the events.

July 2, 1964 – President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

July 10, 1964 – J. Edgar Hoover arrives in Jackson to open a Mississippi office of the FBI.

July 27, 1964 – Racial violence erupts in Rochester, New York, and the National Guard is called out. This is the first serious race riot in the North; many more will follow.

August 4, 1964 – The bodies of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney are found.

August 20, 1964 – President Johnson signs a \$947.5-million antipoverty bill.

November 18, 1964 – J. Edgar Hoover calls Martin Luther King, Jr., "the most notorious liar in the country."

December 10, 1964 – Martin Luther King, Jr., is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

August 6, 1965 – Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act, which ensures voting rights to African Americans.

January 16, 1967 – Eighteen people are arrested in connection with the murders of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney.

October 20, 1967 – Seven members of the Ku Klux Klan, including Sam Bowers and Cecil Price, are convicted of civil rights violations in the deaths of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney.

1976 – Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley reopens the church bombing case.

November 18, 1977 – Robert Chambliss is convicted of the church bombing and is given a life sentence. He dies in jail in 1985.

July 10, 1997 – The FBI announces that it is reopening the case of the Birmingham church bombing in the hopes of finding Chambliss's accomplices.

November 1999 – A grand jury begins investigating the possible role of former Klansman Bobby Cherry in the church bombing.

May 17, 2000 – Cherry and Thomas E. Blanton, Jr., turn themselves in to police after being indicted for the Sixteenth Street bombing. Both are said to deny the charges; if convicted, both would face life in prison.

helped the civil rights movement greatly that federal law enforcement was now coming to their aid.

Important People

- Baxley, Bill** – Alabama Attorney General who reopened the Birmingham church bombing case.
- Bender, Rita** – Widow of Michael Schwerner.
- Bowers, Sam** – The Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi.
- Chambliss, Robert ("Dynamite Bob")** – Perpetrator of the Birmingham church bombing.
- Cobbs, Elizabeth H.** – Niece of Bob Chambliss, she testifies against him when the case is reopened.
- Collins, Addie Mae** – One of the four girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing.
- Hoover, J. Edgar** – The Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation from 1924 until 1972. He has an intense animosity toward Martin Luther King, Jr., whom he suspects of being a dupe of the Communists, if not a Communist himself. He also has animosity toward the civil rights movement in general. The FBI's investigations of the murders of civil rights workers are widely criticized as halfhearted.
- Lewis, John** – Head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He visits Philadelphia, Mississippi, after the disappearance of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney.
- McKinstry, Carolyn** – Church secretary of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church at the time of the bombing.
- McNair, Denise** – One of the four girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing.
- Price, Cecil** – Neshoba County deputy sheriff who turns Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney over to the Ku Klux Klan.
- Rainey, Lawrence** – Neshoba County sheriff.
- Robertson, Carole** – One of the four girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing.
- Wesley, Cynthia** – One of the four girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing.

Vocabulary

"Freedom Summer" – In the summer of 1964, a coalition of civil rights organizations known as the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), along with SNCC, organized a movement to register blacks to vote. Its activities included recruiting sympathizers from the North to aid in the effort.

Ku Klux Klan – An organization founded in 1865 to perpetuate white supremacy in the South. It virtually disappeared in the 1870s and then revived in the 1920s only to dwindle again. It reappeared in the late 1940s in response to the civil rights movement. During the 1960s its membership was estimated at nearly 17,000. Its violent tactics during that period had a backlash effect and helped gain public support for the passage of civil rights legislation.