

# Birmingham Civil Rights

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Birmingham Civil Rights  
National Monument



Civil rights leaders, A.G. Gaston Motel  
Birmingham Public Library Archives

Birmingham, Alabama was the backdrop for pivotal events involving a series of strategically planned, non-violent boycotts, marches, and sit-ins. The terrifying, sometimes deadly attacks inflicted in retaliation produced shocking images of violence broadcast around the world. Civil rights were elevated from a Southern issue to a pressing national issue, and public outrage over events in Birmingham produced political pressure that helped ensure passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

## Why Birmingham?

Birmingham was a stronghold of segregation, enforced by law, custom, and violence. The city required the separation of races at parks, pools, playgrounds, hotels, restaurants, theaters, on buses, in taxicabs and elsewhere. Zoning ordinances determined where African Americans could purchase property, and a line of demarcation created a virtual wall around the Fourth Avenue

business district that served the African American community.

Violence was frequently used to intimidate those who dared to challenge segregation. From 1945 to 1962, Birmingham witnessed 50 racially motivated bombings of African American homes, businesses, and churches, earning the city the nickname “Bombingham”.

## Civil Rights Leaders Unite

By 1963 civil rights activism was well-established in Birmingham.

Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth had formed the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) in 1956 and established its headquarters at his church, Bethel Baptist.

The courageous minister continued to lead despite suffering a severe beating at the hands of a mob and the bombing of his home. He and the ACMHR spearheaded a church-led civil rights movement, and developed a reputation as a serious force in the civil rights movement.

Shuttlesworth encouraged Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reverend Ralph David Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to come to Birmingham. King and his colleagues decided that the combination of the strength of the local civil rights movement and the unyielding nature of Birmingham’s segregationist power structure created the necessary tension for a campaign that could capture the nation’s -- and the Kennedy Administration’s - attention, and pressure city leaders to desegregate.

In the words of King, “As Birmingham goes, so goes the South.”

## A.G. Gaston Motel

The A.G. Gaston Motel served as the headquarters for a civil rights campaign in the spring of 1963. The Gaston Motel was itself the product of segregation; in this era, African Americans faced inconveniences, indignities and personal risk in their travels. Arthur George Gaston, a successful African American businessman, addressed the needs of his segregated community by opening the motel in 1954.

Despite opposing the more confrontational tactics of Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR, Gaston provided space to civil rights leaders for planning civil rights demonstrations.

King and Abernathy occupied the motel’s main suite, Room 30, located on the second floor above the office and lobby. They and their colleagues held most of their strategy sessions in the suite’s sitting room.

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## St. Paul United Methodist Church

St. Paul United Methodist Church was established in 1869 to allow newly freed African American slaves an opportunity to gather and worship. St. Paul's significance to the human rights and civil rights trajectory of American history is well documented as one of the earliest churches to host mass meetings, including the massive Palm Sunday, 1963 march. It also has served as the site for ongoing nonviolent civil disobedience training led by Reverend C.T. Vivian and others throughout the Movement.

In 1964, Reverend Joseph Lowery, a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957

became the new minister of the church. Early in his tenure, Lowery served as a leader and assisted with the planning efforts for the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March that brought voting rights protections throughout the South.

The downtown location of the church has afforded community organizations a gathering place and meeting space for charitable events. St. Paul continues to welcome and host organizations recognizing the connection between faith and justice ranging from Christian Churches Together to the United Steelworkers National Civil and Human Rights Conference.

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## Bethel Baptist Church

Bethel Baptist Church located in the Collegeville neighborhood was at the forefront of the church-led Southern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's that used nonviolent mass techniques to bring social change to racial democracy.

Headquartered at this church between 1956 and 1961, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights pioneered a direct action movement to confront multiple racial segregation issues.

The congregation was also pivotal to the success of the 1961 Freedom Rides that compelled the Federal intervention needed to desegregate interstate public transportation and facilities.

The red brick church was completed in 1926, and the facing Guard House and 1957 Parsonage received National Historic Landmark status on April 5, 2005. The church is also included within the National Monument boundaries designated by President Barack Obama, January 12, 2017.

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## Fred L. Shuttlesworth

Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth was a bold, charismatic minister who pioneered confrontations over segregated accommodations, transportation, schools and employment discrimination.

Born in Mount Meigs, AL in 1922, Shuttlesworth served as pastor of Bethel Baptist Church from 1953 to 1961 and used his pulpit to forcefully protest Jim Crow segregation despite three dynamite attacks on the church.

Shuttlesworth survived a bombing of the adjacent parsonage on Christmas night in 1956. He emerged from the rubble and told policeman, "You go back and tell your Klan brethren if God could keep me through this then I'm here for the duration".

In 2008 the Birmingham municipal airport was named the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport in honor of his contributions in Birmingham.



Bethel Baptist Church and Parsonage bombed in 1956  
*National Park Service*

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## Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) is a cultural and educational research center that promotes a comprehensive understanding and appreciation for the significance of civil development in Birmingham with an increasing emphasis on the international struggle for universal human rights. BCRI is a living institution" that views the lessons of American History as crucial to the understanding of African American culture. Since opening its doors in 1992, BCRI has been visited by more than 2 million people from around the world. Visitors include adults, youth, families, researchers and scholars.

Annually, BCRI reaches more than 140,000 individuals through developed curriculum based education programs,

group tours, outreach programs, award winning after school and public programs, exhibitions and extensive archival collections. BCRI encourages visitors to examine basic issues of morality, law, justice and responsible citizenship. It also teaches that silence and indifference to the suffering of others can perpetuate social problems and divisions.

BCRI is committed to:

- Preserving and interpreting the City of Birmingham's history.
- Serving as a good steward of archival and financial resources.
- Creating and developing programs that encourage cultural awareness.
- Championing civil and human rights by facilitating an atmosphere of dialogue and understanding.

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## Project "C"

Civil rights leaders created and implemented a direct action campaign - known as "Project C" for confrontation - designed to challenge unfair laws that limited the freedoms of African Americans and ensured racial inequality. During the Good Friday march on April 12, King, Abernathy and others were arrested. King was placed in solitary confinement, drawing the attention of

the Kennedy Administration, which began to monitor developments in Birmingham. While King was in jail, the campaign lost momentum. Upon King's release, SCLC staff member James Bevel proposed a highly controversial strategy aimed at capturing the nation's attention. It became known as the "Children's Crusade."

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## Kelly Ingram Park

On May 2, 1963, over 1000 African American teenagers prepared to march from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to City Hall. Police began arresting the young protestors at Kelly Ingram Park.

On May 3, Commissioner of Public Safety T. Eugene "Bull" Connor readied his forces for another mass march by stationing police, canine units, and firemen at Kelly Ingram Park. When protestors entered the park and refused to evacuate, firemen directed their water cannons on them. The high-pressure jets of water knocked the protestors to the ground and tore at their clothing. Police directed six German shepherds towards the crowd and

commanded them to attack.

The next day the country was confronted with dramatic scenes of brutal police aggression against civil rights protesters. These vivid examples of segregation and racial injustice shocked the conscience of the nation and the world.

Fearing civil unrest the Birmingham business community and local leaders agreed to release the protestors, integrate lunch counters and begin to hire African Americans. Despite these signs of progress African Americans continued to face hostile resistance to integration in Birmingham.

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## Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

Governor Wallace, in violation of a Federal court order, directed the National Guard to prevent desegregation of Alabama public schools. President John F. Kennedy federalized and withdrew National Guard troops, thereby allowing desegregation.

In response, white supremacists planted a bomb at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, all of whom were 14, and Denise McNair, 11, were killed.

This shocking act of domestic terrorism created public outrage over the events in Birmingham. It produced political pressure that helped ensure passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964.

Although some people continued to resist integration, the passage and enforcement of the Civil Rights Act eliminated the official segregation of public accommodations.



Bombed exterior of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church  
*Birmingham Public Library Archives*

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## The Fourth Avenue District

Segregation created an environment in which African Americans faced restrictions on where they could engage in recreational and business opportunities. Jim Crow laws forced the growing African American business community into an area along Third, Fourth, and Fifth Avenue North. Here African Americans could patronize barber and beauty shops, restaurants, theaters and motels without discrimination.

This area served as the business, social and cultural center for blacks with activities similar to those in the predominately white districts.

Today, the Gaston Motel, the Birmingham Civil Rights Historic District in which the motel is located, the Bethel Baptist Church and other associated resources all stand as a testament to the heroism of those who worked so hard to advance the cause of freedom.

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## Visiting Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument

Established on January 12, 2017, Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument is part of the National Park System. The national monument will continue to take shape in the coming years. Please visit the following park partner site for visitor information.

Birmingham Civil Rights Institute  
520 16th Street N.  
Birmingham, AL 35203  
[www.bcri.org](http://www.bcri.org)

When visiting the national monument, please be aware that the Gaston Motel is currently closed to the public.

Stay informed of future developments by visiting the park's website and social media accounts.

Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument  
[www.nps.gov/bicr](http://www.nps.gov/bicr)

 [www.facebook.com/BirminghamNPS](https://www.facebook.com/BirminghamNPS)  
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