

# innocents lost



**ADDIE MAE COLLINS**  
1949-1963  
Killed in bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala.



**DENISE MCNAIR**  
1951-1963  
Killed in bombing, Birmingham, Ala.

ABOVE, RIGHT  
While officials begin investigating the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, an empty stretcher awaits one of the victims.

It was Youth Sunday at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The preacher had prepared a sermon especially for the children. The youth choir would lead the congregation in music, and children would serve as ushers.

For the youngsters, many of whom had marched proudly with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it was another in a series of momentous events that year. That spring, their own church had been the center of a campaign against segregation. The long struggle was won mainly because children were brave enough to march into the overpowering water hoses and vicious dogs of Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor. After television news cameras revealed the brutal force unleashed on the children, city officials were forced to reform their harsh segregation laws.

Now lunch counters were no longer closed to blacks, and a federal court had just ordered white schools in the city to admit black children. The whole world had watched in awe as the children in Birmingham made history. Before this day was over, the whole world would mourn.

## THE SACRIFICE OF CHILDREN

In the basement ladies' lounge of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, four girls were chatting nervously and straightening their fancy white dresses. In a few minutes, the worship service would begin. Addie Mae Collins, 14, and Denise McNair, 11, were in the choir. Carole Rosamond Robertson

and Cynthia Diane Morris Wesley, both 14, had been chosen to serve as ushers.

Only a few feet away, beneath a stone staircase along the outside wall of the church, a dynamite bomb had been planted eight hours earlier. At 10:22 a.m., it exploded. The whole church shook. Plaster and debris fell around the adults in Sunday School upstairs. The four girls in the ladies' lounge were killed instantly.

For a few minutes, there was only screaming and chaos. Then people began to search through the rubble for victims. In the end, more than 20 people were hospitalized with injuries. One of them was Addie Mae Collins' sister Sarah, who was blinded in one eye.

There had been many bombings in Birmingham designed to stop the black struggle for equality. Ministers' homes, a black-owned hotel and other churches had been wrecked. But there had been nothing so evil as the dynamiting of children during Sunday School. The news spread quickly, and it sickened people of all races and all political allegiances throughout the world.

Civil rights leaders tried to channel the grief and rage that spread through the black community, but there was little comfort in their efforts. Gangs of black and white youths battled in the streets, and businesses went up in flames.

Martin Luther King Jr. had delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech to the largest civil rights march in history only 18 days earlier. Now he spoke quietly to a crowd of 8,000 at a joint funeral for three of the bomb victims.



"God still has a way of wringing good out of evil," he told the mourners. "The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city... Indeed, this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience."

## 'WE ALL DID IT'

The FBI immediately investigated the bombing and discovered Klansmen planned it in response to the new school desegregation order. An eyewitness saw four white men plant the bomb. Inexplicably, no one was charged with the crime at that time.

September 15, 1963, was remembered as a day of victory for the Klan. Shortly after the church bombing, white supremacist leader Connie Lynch told a group of Klansmen that those responsible for the bombing deserved "medals." Lynch said the four young girls who died there "weren't



**CAROLE ROBERTSON**

1949-1963  
Killed in bombing,  
Birmingham, Ala.



**CYNTHIA WESLEY**

1949-1963  
Killed in bombing,  
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children. Children are little people, little human beings, and that means white people ... They're just little niggers ... and if there's four less niggers tonight, then I say, 'Good for whoever planted the bomb!'"

Fourteen years later, Alabama Attorney General William Baxley reopened the case. A 73-year-old Klansman named Robert Chambliss was charged with first-degree murder, and the jury found him guilty. Chambliss was sent to prison, where he died.

Two decades passed with

no further action in the case. Then, in the mid-1990s, it was reopened, and U.S. Attorney Doug Jones subsequently successfully prosecuted Thomas Blanton in May 2001 and Bobby Cherry in May 2002. Both were sentenced to life in prison.

The Sixteenth Street bombing, perhaps more than any other event of the period, brought national attention to the evil of racism. The tragedy sparked a surge of support for federal civil rights legislation, and it led to an inten-

sive voting rights campaign in Selma, Ala.

But more importantly, it made whites, who would never experience it themselves, feel the pain of racism. The day after the bombing, a white lawyer named Charles Morgan gave a speech in Birmingham. He asked his audience: "Who did it?" and gave his own anguished answer: "We all did it ... every person in this community who has in any way contributed ... to the popularity of hatred is at least as guilty ... as the demented fool who set that bomb." 🍷

ABOVE

The explosion ripped through the church and damaged nearby automobiles.