

THIS WEEK IN HISTORY

The Birmingham church bombing brought home the realities of racism.



GENERAL

In late August, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. gave one of the most famous American speeches in history in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. **What repeated phrase has given this speech its informal name?** (*"I Have a Dream."*) The speech was a high point in the civil rights movement in this country. **What was the civil rights movement about?** (*The struggle to gain equal rights for African Americans.*) But just 18 days after this stirring speech, a tragic bombing showed how desperate some people were to keep change from happening.

The 16th Street Baptist Church is located in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. It was the first church in Birmingham that African Americans could call their own, designed and built by black people in the period after the Civil War. This church had long been a meeting place for civil rights groups trying to end segregation in Birmingham businesses and schools. **What is segregation?** (*In this case, keeping black and white people separate and forcing black people to go to separate schools, live in separate neighborhoods, even have separate drinking fountains.*) Up until the 1960s, segregation was legal in many parts of the south. **Can you imagine living under that kind of system?** In May of 1963, high school students had gathered at the church to protest against segregation, and Birmingham Sheriff Eugene "Bull" Connor ordered his police to use high-pressure water hoses and dogs on the protesters. Many people saw news reports about this protest and were horrified. **Have you ever seen footage of these protests?**

But worse was yet to come. At 10:22 a.m. on September 15th, 1963, a bomb exploded outside the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church. The blast was caused by 122 sticks of dynamite con-

nected to a timer; as you can see in the picture here, it caused massive damage to the church. **Are you surprised the damage wasn't worse?** This bomb went off just as 26 young people were walking into the basement to hear a religious talk. Four children, all girls, were killed, and another two dozen were injured. The girls are shown here; clockwise from top right, they were Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins. McNair was 11 years old, and the other three were 14.

For years, investigators had a hard time learning who was behind this horrible bombing. **Do you think Sheriff Connor's office tried its hardest to find the bombers' identities?** In 1977, a man named Robert Chambliss was sentenced to life imprisonment for his part in it. Two other suspects, Thomas Blanton Jr. and Bobby Cherry, were sentenced in 2001 and 2002, respectively. Another suspect died in 1994 without ever being charged.

This terrible tragedy was a turning point in the civil rights movement. It drew attention to the injustice of segregation and the hate and violence that kept segregation going. The bombing sparked a series of marches on the theme of "No More Birmingham," and won sympathy for the cause of civil rights across the country. **Why do you think so many Americans ignored the problem of segregation for so long?** END