

HISTORY TALK THURSDAY

EPISODE 4



BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA • SEPTEMBER 15, 1963

WAS JUSTICE EVER SERVED?

THE 16TH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH BOMBING
AND THE LONG ROAD TO JUSTICE



SIX YOUNG LIVES.

A FIGHT FOR JUSTICE THAT SPANNED DECADES.

HISTORY TALK THURSDAY STUDY GUIDE

EPISODE 4: WAS JUSTICE EVER SERVED?

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA | SEPTEMBER 15, 1963

PRESENTED BY HER AND HISTORY IN BLACK

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



September 15, 1963

On Sunday, September 15, 1963, a bomb exploded at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, an important center of Civil Rights Movement activity.

Four girls were killed: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. More than 20 other people inside the church were injured.

But the violence in Birmingham did not end with the bombing.

Later that day, 16-year-old Johnny Robinson and 13-year-old Virgil Ware were also killed. Six young Black people lost their lives to racial violence in and around Birmingham on September 15, 1963.

Key Facts

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- Date: September 15, 1963
- Location: Birmingham, Alabama
- Four girls killed in the bombing: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley
- Two boys killed later that day: Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware
- Central Issue: Racial violence, accountability and delayed justice

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

The Long Road Toward Justice

September 15, 1963

16th Street Baptist Church is bombed. Four girls are killed. Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware are killed later that day.

1965

FBI investigators identify four principal suspects in the church bombing.

1968

The original investigation ends without bombing indictments.

1971

Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley begins pursuing the case again.

1977

Robert Chambliss is convicted of murder.

1994

Suspect Herman Cash dies without being prosecuted.

1995

The FBI's Birmingham office reopens the investigation.

2001

Thomas Blanton Jr. is convicted.

2002

Bobby Frank Cherry is convicted—39 years after the bombing.

KEY HISTORICAL FIGURES

Addie Mae Collins
14 years old.

Johnny Robinson
16 years old.

Denise McNair
11 years old.

Virgil Ware
13 years old.

People Connected to the Investigation

Carole Robertson
14 years old.

Robert Chambliss — Convicted in 1977.

Thomas Blanton Jr. — Convicted in 2001.

Cynthia Wesley
14 years old.

Bobby Frank Cherry — Convicted in 2002.

Herman Cash — Died without prosecution.

REMEMBER THEIR NAMES.

History often refers to the victims collectively.
This guide encourages us to remember that
each was an individual with a family, a future
and a story.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES & VOCABULARY

Learning Objectives

By the end of this guide, you should be able to:

- Identify the six young people killed on September 15, 1963.
- Explain the historical significance of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing.
- Describe why prosecution of the bombers took decades.
- Examine the difference between legal punishment and broader ideas of justice.
- Explain why historical memory is part of preserving these stories.

Important Terms

- Justice — Fair treatment under the law and accountability for wrongdoing.
- Accountability — Being held responsible for one's actions.
- Cold Case — A criminal investigation that remains unresolved for an extended period.
- Racial Terror — Violence or threats used to intimidate and control people because of race.
- Civil Rights Movement — The organized struggle to end racial segregation and discrimination and secure equal rights under law.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Let's Talk About It

1. Why did prosecution of the church bombers take decades?
2. Is a conviction decades later enough to say justice was served?
3. Why are Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware less widely remembered?
4. What responsibility do institutions have when justice initially fails?
5. How does remembering victims contribute to justice?

Your Turn

After learning what happened to all six young people, do you believe justice was ever served? Why or why not?

HISTORY ON LOCATION

Experience the History

If you visit Birmingham, consider exploring:

16th Street Baptist Church

The church served as an important meeting place during the Birmingham Campaign and was where young demonstrators gathered before marching.

Kelly Ingram Park

Located across from 16th Street Baptist Church, the park contains memorials and sculptures that help tell the story of the Birmingham Campaign.

Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

The museum documents Birmingham's civil rights history and places the city's struggle within the larger Civil Rights Movement.

A.G. Gaston Motel

Civil rights leaders used the motel as a headquarters during the Birmingham Campaign.

Think About It

If you had the opportunity to stand in one of these places, which site would you visit first, and why?

LEARN MORE

Recommended Books

- The Watsons Go to Birmingham —1963 — Christopher Paul Curtis
- A historical novel that introduces younger readers to Birmingham and the church bombing through a family's story.
- While the World Watched — Carolyn Maull McKinstry
- A firsthand account from a survivor of the bombing and Birmingham's Civil Rights Movement.
- Last Chance for Justice — T. K. Thorne
- Examines the investigation and long effort to prosecute those responsible for the church bombing.

Resources

- National Park Service — 16th Street Baptist Church/Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument
- Birmingham Civil Rights Institute
- FBI historical records and BAPBOMB investigation files
- Library of Congress

The National Park Service and FBI archives are particularly useful for comparing how the investigation and delayed prosecutions have been documented with others.

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

Thank you for exploring Was Justice Ever Served? with HERandHIStory in Black.

History doesn't end when the discussion is over. We encourage you to keep asking questions, visiting historic places, and sharing these stories with others.

Our Mission

At HERandHIStory in Black, our mission is to preserve and share the stories, people, and places that shaped Black history and American history through storytelling, education, and historical travel.

Continue Exploring



More study guides are available in the HERandHIStory Resource Library



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Coming Next

History Talk Thursday – Episode 5

History Through Their Own Words

What can we learn when we hear history from the people who lived it?