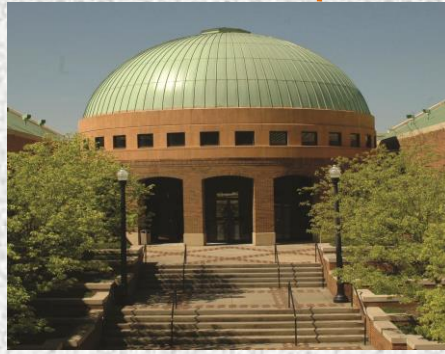


BCRI History



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Nestled in a valley at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, Birmingham, Alabama owes its origin to abundant deposits of iron ore, coal and limestone, the essential ingredients for iron and steel making. Ambitious industrialists and land speculators began developing natural resources immediately after the Civil War, or as many southerners called it the War Between the States. A labor force of native white and Black Alabamians, white immigrants from Europe, and prison convicts mined the minerals for capital-intensive corporations.

Birmingham was described by social workers of the era as the city hardest hit by the Great Depression, which dealt its heaviest blow to the Black population. The social disorder of the 1930's resulted in increased unionization, and with the shift to wartime production the city began its bounce back as civic leaders diversified the economic base. Yet, despite the returning prosperity, Blacks who then stood at forty percent of the total population, received unequal opportunity, and substandard municipal services. Having fought for freedom abroad, returning Black veterans grew incensed at the dismal living standards in the Black community.

The owners and managers of Birmingham's businesses showed indifference to entreaties from the Black community, while elected officials responded with hostility and repression to Black demands for municipal services. The civic and economic elite tended to reside outside Birmingham's city limit. Postwar prosperity allowed some workers to move to newly developed suburbs.

After the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, many white families with school aged children left the city. Racial hostility and discrimination in Birmingham accelerated following the *Brown* decision. The local governing City Commission and its head of public safety, T. Eugene "Bull" Connor, an unrelenting racist fomented more violence than he contained. During his reign Birmingham earned the designation "Bombingham," which referred to the scores of unsolved bombings of houses in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

Despite the determined and harsh defense of white supremacy by city officials and white vigilantism, new leadership emerged in the Black community. In 1956 when the state of Alabama forbade the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to operate in Alabama, Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth organized the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). The new organization pledged to "press forward for freedom and Democracy and the removal from our society of any forms of Second Class Citizenship.

On April 12, 1960, Harrison Salisbury wrote about Birmingham in the *New York Times* observing that, "Every channel of communication, every medium of mutual interest, every reasoned approach, every inch of middle ground has been fragmented by the emotional dynamite of racism, reinforced by the whip, the razor, the gun, the bomb, the torch, the club, the knife, the mob, the police, and many branches of the state's apparatus.[ii]

In 1962 Rev. Shuttlesworth invited Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to join forces with the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) in their challenge to the city's segregation ordinances. The citizen's revolt, highlighted by the 1963 children's marches, subsequently struck the final blow to de jure racial segregation in Alabama, and prompted the federal government to pass legislation prohibiting discrimination. Historian John Hope Franklin described the resulting 1964 Civil Rights Act as "the most far reaching and comprehensive law in support of racial equality ever enacted by Congress."^[iii]

Race has always been a fault line in the social environment of Birmingham. It is a weak spot easily aggravated by outsiders' criticism, and by the tension between 'race rebels' and civic boosters. The Birmingham that provoked non-violent resistance was a place whose citizens were intimidated by a lawless element. So absolute was fear that moderate Whites, downtown retailers and many Blacks were intimidated into silent acquiescence to the system which they knew was morally corrupt.

How to portray this past in a healing and non-divisive manner, while portraying the harsh truth, was a challenge to the founders of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. The idea that the city should build a museum-like facility to memorialize its civil rights history originated with David Vann in 1978 during his term as Mayor. A political liberal, David Vann was a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black when the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* was handed down.

Returning to Birmingham to practice law, he became a leader in the effort to defeat Birmingham's racist city officials by changing the form of government from that of a Commission to a Mayor Council form. Years later on a trip to Israel, he was impressed by the museums of the Holocaust and Jewish Diaspora. His visit convinced him that respectful remembrance of horror could be therapeutic for a community. Perhaps, he reasoned, Birmingham could heal itself through recalling its civil rights struggle and celebrating the changes it produced. Vann suffered defeat in his bid for re-election.

Vann's successor, Richard Arrington, Jr., Birmingham's first Black mayor, committed his energy and public funds to pursuing Vann's vision. He appointed a Civil Rights Museum Study committee to begin formulating ideas. The group recommended that Birmingham create an official organization with resources to plan a city – sponsored museum. The city acquired property in the area where the 1963 marches and demonstrations originated.

In 1986, more than seven years after Vann's proposition, Arrington appointed a Task Force with explicit instructions to craft a mission statement and thematic plan, and to give guidance to an architectural firm and planning consultants hired by the city. The Task Force represented a broad range of citizens including educators, civil rights activists, city government officials, business and community leaders, and local historians. Task Force members envisioned the facility as an institute rather than a museum to imply an action-oriented establishment. Documenting the past meant hearing the voices of a range of movement participants from the unsung foot soldiers to celebrated leaders. The Task Force meant "history from the bottom up," a phrase researcher Stephan Therstrom applied to the study of everyday people in social movements. Clearly, the overthrow of racial segregation in Birmingham could not have succeeded in the 1960's without the brilliant leadership of the Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth and Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.; nor could it have happened without the fervent following of countless ordinary people. Their eyewitness accounts are essential to a valid recreation and understanding of the past. Their stories and memorabilia document the "stride toward freedom."

Opposition to so prominent a depiction of Birmingham's past emerged well before the ground breaking for the facility. Birmingham's elected officials had tried to forget the past. Many civic leaders recoiled at the thought of summoning up old images of fire hoses and police dogs. "Why open up old wounds?" some asked. "Such an Institute will only alienate whites of good will," said others. "Money could be better spent improving neighborhoods," was another frequently heard objection. A small number of movement foot soldiers fretted that their stories would be left out in deference to the better-known leaders.

Further evidence of opposition to the proposed Institute was the trouncing of two separate bond issues proposed by the Mayor in 1986 and 1988 to finance the project. The bond issues presented to the voters included revenue for schools, recreation and public works, but funding for a civil rights museum received more no votes than any other item. Eventually the city obtained funds through the issuance of general revenue bonds that did not require a referendum. In time, however, civic leaders and foot soldiers of the movement financially supported the Institute.

"The Healing of a City by Design" is the title the Birmingham Business Journal used in a 1992 cover story about the newly revitalized Civil Rights District, regarded as 'sacred ground' by supporters of the Civil Rights Movement. The district is home to the historic Black business district including the old Carver Movie Theatre; the Kelly Ingram Park used as a gathering place for protest marches; the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where four little girls died in a hatred-inspired bombing; and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

As summarized in its Mission Statement, the Institute sets out to "focus on what happened in the past, to portray it realistically and interestingly, and to understand it in relationship to the present and future developments of human relations in Birmingham, the United States and perhaps the world."

From its inception the Institute founders recognized the universality of human conflict. After all, Dr. Martin L. King had been deeply influenced by the religious and ethnic conflicts in India, parts of Africa and Eastern Europe earlier in the twentieth century. In time these and other nations drew positive lessons from the American Civil Rights Movement. Given this broad historical context, the Institute perceived human rights as a universal striving. The events that occurred in Birmingham, Alabama in the mid twentieth century provided a relevant case study of conflict resolution with global application.

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute signifies that Birmingham does not hide from its past. It acknowledges that where once the city housed two people, Black and White, unknown to one another except through the painful thread of segregation, Birmingham now embraces its past, neither forgetting nor dwelling on it, but using it to foster understanding.

The Institute recognizes the redemptive importance of memory. It is both a time capsule, and a modern day think-tank focused on seeking equitable solutions to common problems. In some ways the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute functions as a town square where the community gathers to discuss common concerns. It is a place where yesterday's struggles inspire a brighter tomorrow. It is a meeting ground for the makers of everyday history, and for those who write about the present.

[i] Andrew Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (The University of Alabama Press, 1999), p. 96; [ii] *New York Times*, April 12, 1960, p. 1.[iii] John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery To Freedom – A History of African Americans*, 3rd Edition (New York: Alfred Knopf), p. 635.