

# Former Klansmen indicted for murder in 1963 bombing of Birmingham, Alabama church

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Two former Ku Klux Klansmen who have long been suspects in the 1963 bombing that killed four black girls in a Birmingham, Alabama church surrendered to authorities Wednesday. They turned themselves in after they were indicted by a state grand jury on four counts each of first-degree and reckless murder.

After nearly 37 years, Thomas Blanton, Jr., 61, of Birmingham, and Bobby Cherry, 69, of Mabank, Texas will stand trial for one of the most horrifying acts by Southern racists during the civil rights era.

The September 15, 1963 blast at the 16th Street Baptist Church killed Denise McNair, 11, and Cynthia Wesley, Carole Rosamond Robertson and Addie Mae Collins, who were 14 years of age. The four children were in the dressing room in the church basement when the bomb, apparently hidden beneath the church steps the night before, detonated at 10:19 a.m., as the children were assembling for closing prayers following Sunday school classes. Some 400 people were in the church at the time, including 80 children attending the church's monthly Youth Fellowship Day services.

A contemporary account said dozens of survivors, their faces dripping blood from the glass that flew out of the church's stained glass windows, staggered around the building in a cloud of white dust raised by the explosion. The blast crushed two nearby cars like toys and blew out windows blocks away. Stunned churchgoers and residents of the neighborhood desperately began digging in the rubble and ashes to search for other survivors.

The bodies of the four little girls, ripped and disfigured by the explosion, were found underneath the rubble. Another 22 adults and children were injured by the blast.

Hundreds of Birmingham police and state troopers, sent into the area by Alabama Governor George Wallace, fired rifles in the air to break up the crowd of thousands of angry blacks residents who came to the scene following the explosion. Wallace also put 500 national guardsmen on alert. That evening a policeman shot 16-year-old Johnny Robinson in the back, killing him, and racist youth murdered Virgil Ware, 13, who was riding his bicycle in a suburb north of the city. Several black-owned businesses were also fire-bombed.

The 16th Street Baptist Church was targeted because it was the center of civil rights activity in Birmingham, a city which Martin Luther King called the "symbol of hardcore resistance to integration." King and local civil rights leader Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth used the church as a staging ground for marches and rallies against segregation, including the Children's Crusade for equality and integration of the city's public schools. The unforgettable scenes of black workers and youth being knocked down by high-pressure water hoses and savagely

attacked by Police Chief Bull Connor's police dogs in May 1963 took place only blocks from the church.

The bombing was the twenty-first in Birmingham in eight years and the third in just 11 days following federal orders to integrate the city's public schools. The city had gained the nickname "Bombingham" on account of its violent KKK chapter, Eastview Klavern 13, which attacked the homes, businesses and churches of blacks without fear of punishment by law enforcement officials. Civil rights leaders estimated that a least a third of the officers in the Birmingham Police Department were either members or sympathizers of the KKK.

The governor of Alabama was George Wallace, who pledged during his inaugural speech, just nine months before the church bombing, that he would defend "Segregation Now, Segregation Tomorrow, and Segregation, Forever!" In June 1963, Wallace defied federal orders and stood in front of the entrance to the University of Alabama to block black students from entering the school.

Little has been reported in media accounts of the current case about a crucial aspect of the Birmingham church bombing: the role of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in tolerating, if not directly aiding, the murderous activities of local Klansmen. As early as 1964, the men who were indicted this week were identified in FBI files as having helped a well-known Birmingham racist, Robert "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss, bomb the 16th Street Baptist Church. A May 13, 1965 memorandum to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover concluded that "the bombing was the handiwork of former Klansmen Robert E. Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, Herman Frank Cash and Thomas E. Blanton, Jr." FBI informants in the KKK said the four men went to the church that night to plant the bomb.

According to a 1980 Justice Department report, however, Hoover blocked prosecution of the Klansmen in 1965, rejecting recommendations from the Birmingham FBI office that testimony identifying the suspects be forwarded to federal prosecutors. In 1968 Hoover shut down the investigation without filing charges.

The FBI director was a fervent opponent of the civil rights movement. From at least 1962 on, FBI agents began closely monitoring Martin Luther King's activities, placing wiretaps on his home and office phones and on the phones of close associates. Hoover called King "the most dangerous black man in America" and sought to destroy his public reputation and political influence. Shortly before King's assassination in 1968, Hoover distributed an internal memo to the FBI calling for the civil rights leader's "removal from the national scene."

The FBI's attitude towards the Ku Klux Klan can be described, at

best, as benign neglect. Given the facts of the FBI's relations with the Birmingham KKK in the early 1960s, it remains an open question whether the federal agency was directly complicit in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church.

Among the FBI informants active in the Birmingham KKK was the late Gary T. Rowe, who said he was urged by an FBI agent to join the Klan in 1960. Rowe would later tell the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that the FBI had known of and condoned his participation in violent attacks against blacks.

Rowe admitted to taking part in, and giving the FBI advanced notice about, the violent assault on Freedom Riders at the Birmingham bus station in 1961. In that atrocity, Birmingham police agreed in advance to give local Klansmen 15 minutes to assault the civil rights activists with impunity. FBI documents, later brought to light under the Freedom of Information Act, showed that bureau agents had regularly supplied intelligence reports on the progress of the Freedom Riders to two members of the Birmingham Police Department known to be leading Klan members.

Rowe, described by Hoover as the best undercover agent "we've ever seen," also admitted that he shot and killed an unidentified black man in a riot in Birmingham in 1963. He said federal authorities subsequently told him to keep quiet about the killing.

Rowe's superior in the Klan was Robert E. Chambliss. For years, charges circulated that Rowe had failed a lie detector test about his involvement in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. If Rowe did not directly participate in the bombing, it is likely that he was aware that a violent attack was about to take place and so informed his FBI handlers, who did nothing to prevent it. Within days of the bombing, the FBI was already questioning Cherry and other participants about their whereabouts the night the bomb was planted.

Rowe was also involved in the March 1965 murder of Viola Liuzzo, the 39-year-old wife of a Detroit Teamsters official and mother of four, who traveled to Alabama to help in the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march. Rowe admitted to being in the car with three other men when they pulled alongside Liuzzo's car and opened fire on the unarmed woman, but he asserted that he only pretended to shoot.

The first trial of the three killers named by Rowe ended in a hung jury; the second in acquittal. The three Klansmen were eventually convicted on charges of violating Liuzzo's civil rights. They were each sentenced to 10 years in prison.

A lawsuit filed by the Liuzzo family forced the FBI to release documents in 1978 exposing attempts by FBI director Hoover to suppress the investigation into the Liuzzo killing. In the aftermath of the murder, the FBI tried to discredit the murdered woman, circulating stories that she was a drug user, had mental problems, was unfaithful to her husband and was "necking" with a black man at the time of her death.

The Justice Department admitted in 1980 that the FBI had known about and covered up Rowe's participation in violent attacks on blacks. However, the department claimed it found no evidence of Rowe's connection to the Birmingham bombing or any other killings.

The FBI also obstructed the efforts of Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley to re-open the case in early 1971. Baxley's investigators reportedly spent years tracking down the wrong people because the FBI did not release its files on the case until late 1975.

Fourteen years after the bombing, Chambliss was finally convicted on state murder charges after the jury heard his niece testify that she saw him with dynamite before the bombing and heard him say, "Wait until Sunday and they'll beg to be segregated." The jury sentenced

Chambliss to life in prison, where he died eight years later in 1985.

The fourth man identified in early FBI case files, Herman Cash, died in 1994, without ever being charged. Until this week, however, there have been no other charges in the case.

In 1996, the FBI officially reopened the investigation. The current case will be tried in state courts because federal officials say jurisdictional and statute of limitations issues would hinder the pursuit of a federal case. Bobby Frank Cherry's lawyers have claimed that the US Attorney in Alabama offered the defendant a light sentence in exchange for a guilty plea on federal charges of interstate transportation of dynamite.

Over the past year, Cherry's granddaughter and ex-wife have appeared before a federal grand jury, and have said publicly that he talked of helping plant the dynamite.

While Cherry has acknowledged his past membership in the Klan, he has maintained that he was home watching wrestling on television the night the bomb was planted. Last July the Jackson, Mississippi-based *Clarion-Ledger* reported records from the *Birmingham News* showing that no wrestling appeared on television on the night of September 14, 1963.

The newspaper also reported that a lie detector test given to Cherry by the FBI concluded that he showed "evidence of deception" when asked if he was present when the bombing was planned and showed reaction to the question, "Did you bomb the 16th Street Baptist Church?"

Blanton, who also claims he is innocent, has written for support to right-wing Congressman Bob Barr, the Georgia Republican who has spoken at meetings of the Council of Conservative Citizens, an organization that views interracial marriage as "white genocide."

The killings of the four girls are among 18 slayings from the South's civil rights era reinvestigated since 1989. So far there have been 11 arrests, six convictions, one acquittal and one mistrial. The prosecutions are the result of testimony from witnesses who have come forward after many years, as changing racial attitudes and demographics have made it easier to impanel jurors willing to convict whites for the murders of blacks.

In 1994, Byron de la Beckwith, who had been tried twice in state trials that ended in hung juries, was convicted of the 1963 assassination of NAACP field organizer Medgar Evers. In August 1998, former KKK imperial wizard Samuel H. Powers, 73, was convicted in the 1966 murder of Mississippi NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer, who was killed when his home was firebombed.

A federal grand jury in Jackson, Mississippi is examining the 1966 killing of Ben Chester White and officials in that state are now reopening the investigation into the 1964 murders of three civil rights workers—Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner.

Commenting on this week's indictments, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, now a pastor in Cincinnati, said charges should have been brought long ago. "The FBI, they knew back then what they know now," he said.



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