

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BETHEL BAPTIST CHURCH, PARSONAGE AND GUARDHOUSE

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Bethel Baptist Church, Parsonage, and Guardhouse

Other Name/Site Number: Revis House (Guardhouse)

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 3233, 3232, and 3236 29th Avenue North

Not for publication:

City/Town: Collegeville

State: AL

County: Jefferson

Code: 073

Zip Code: 35207

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: ___

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

3

3

Noncontributing

___ buildings

___ sites

___ structures

___ objects

___ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: N/A

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: religion, domestic

Sub: religious facility, church-related residence, single dwelling

Current: vacant

Sub:

7. DESCRIPTION**Church:**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Mixed

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Brick

Walls: Striated face brick (northern and eastern elevations) and common brick (western and southern elevations)

Roof: Asphalt shingle

Other:

Parsonage:

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Ranch House

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Concrete

Walls: Brick

Roof: Asphalt shingle

Other:

Guardhouse:

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Bungalow/Craftsman

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Concrete

Walls: Frame

Roof: Asphalt shingle

Other:

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Bethel Baptist Church is located in the African-American working class neighborhood of Collegeville six miles north of the Birmingham city center and just west of the North Birmingham industrial, commercial, and residential districts. The church is located across from the parsonage and guardhouse within a modest residential street established in the late 1920s.

Neighborhood

The neighborhood consists of mainly one-story, wood frame, single and double shotguns, bungalows, cottages, and ranch style houses. The buildings are set on 50' X 115' lots with 10' to 20' setbacks and relatively spacious back yards. The neighborhood first appears on Sanborn maps in 1928. Many of the twenty residences identified along 29th Avenue on this map still remain.

Church

The architect and builder of the church are unknown. Recorded church history states that the red brick building was completed in 1926 and was equipped with a steam plant for heating, elaborate stained glass windows, stone lintels and sills, extensive interior trim, solid walnut pews, and a baptismal. A cornerstone lists church officers at the time of construction. The 1928 Sanborn map shows the church as a two-story brick structure with steam heat and electricity. The first known physical description of the church located in public records appears in a 1939 Property Assessment Report. The report describes interior spaces of the church, including a main auditorium, pastor study, and choir room on the second floor; the basement below ground level with a classroom, boiler and cool room; and the third floor room at the rear was used for classes.

In 1956, a bomb damaged the church and destroyed the adjacent original parsonage. On the night of December 25, twelve sticks of dynamite exploded in the space between the two buildings. Subsequently, the church's front porch/staircase and sanctuary were repaired and a new parsonage was built across the street, incorporating materials salvaged from the bombed dwelling. In 1957, the basement window located on the right, or western side of the north façade was converted into a door to provide access to the new parsonage. The site of the original parsonage now serves as a parking lot.

Another bombing on June 29, 1958, shattered windows and cracked the ceiling plaster. Pockmarks from shrapnel from the bomb are evident in the brick on the eastern, or N. 33rd Street side of the building. Yet another bomb in 1962 shattered the church windows.

Bethel Baptist Church consists of two main masses: the church proper facing 29th Avenue North, and a three-story wing abutting the south end facing 32nd Street North. This massing reflects the interior spatial organization. The main block contains a two-story sanctuary space, lit by large windows. The sanctuary could seat up to 450 worshippers, and occasionally hosted 600, with people standing and sitting in the balcony. The choir stand at the front could accommodate about 35 people. Beneath the sanctuary lies the basement, divided up for Sunday school and fellowship spaces. The 32nd Street, or eastern façade of the wing, is articulated by its projection from the nave and its high gable roof, whose ridge runs at right angles to the ridge of the sanctuary roof. The wing contains mechanical spaces and restrooms on the basement floor, and offices and classrooms on the upper two floors.

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The 29th Avenue North and 32nd Street North façades were intended as the church's public face due to the use of more costly striated face brick. The remaining façades are finished in common brick. Originally, the mortar used to bond the bricks was a reddish-brown iron ore compound. In the 1960s, the bricks were repointed with a grayish mortar compound. The masonry was repointed again in the mid-1990s in white mortar. The western and eastern (street-side) façades retain the buttressing and window patterns. The southern façade displays a very utilitarian character. The exterior walls are laid in American common bond, with a subtle water table marked around the perimeter of the building by soldier bricks at the level of the main floor.

While Bethel Baptist Church is an eclectic blend of several architectural styles, the primary influence is Gothic, due to the proportions of the front elevation, the vertical lines of the buttresses, finials atop the niched corner pilasters flanking the northern entry, and the crenellated parapet of the front porch. The eclecticism of the building is evident in the Romanesque arched windows for the nave, the quasi-Palladian window high in the front façade, and the Victorian-style Roman pediments crowning the windows to either side of the central entryway bay. Brick diapering in the front pediment is reminiscent of nineteenth-century American commercial and industrial structures where such patterning expressed the decorative ingenuity of architects and masons restricted by material costs to a medium of standard-sized brick. Steel frame casement windows were installed in the 1960s throughout the building.

A pre-World War II photo of the church entry façade shows that the building had a stronger Gothic character. This appears chiefly in the choir window over the front porch. Instead of three round arches, the window opening was originally surmounted by a large shallow pointed arch, within which were four smaller pointed-arch windows. These windows consisted of finely leaded glass sash framed in heavy woodwork. Entry to the vestibule was originally through two 15-light wooden French doors flanked on either side by 15-light fixed panels. After the 1956 bombing, the French doors were replaced with aluminum-framed, frosted glass doors.

The church's interior has been remodeled several times over the years, chiefly due to the bombing suffered in 1962. The sanctuary walls were originally finished with plaster and beaded wainscoting. In the sanctuary, they have been sheathed in sheet rock and wallpapered above the wainscoting. Window unit air conditioners were installed on the eastern and western sides of the building, but they have since been removed. In other parts of the building, walls have been covered with masonite paneling. In the 1970s, floors and stairs throughout the building were covered with a burnt orange carpet, and the original ceilings were covered with dropped, acoustical tile ceilings. The dropped ceiling in the sanctuary collapsed in the recent past and current owners intend to restore the ceiling, at least in this area, to its pre-1970s, beaded board appearance. Original pews were dark, varnished pine with gothic ornaments on the ends. Most of these pews survive as classroom and fellowship room seating in the basement, and some have been sold to another church. Current pews and furnishings are blond-finished oak devoid of any gothic themes. Current owners hope to return the original pews to the sanctuary and to remove the 1970s vintage carpet. The Roman arch windows contain opalescent glass set in steel frames; the original stained glass windows were blown out by the bombings. The Gothic theme is reflected in the sanctuary interior only by chandeliers and wall sconces.

Office and classroom spaces in the wing are finished simply with plaster walls and ceilings, though some room walls have been remodeled using finished plywood paneling or drywall. Spaces are trimmed with wooden baseboards, door, and window casings. The basement features plywood panel walls, a painted concrete floor, and an acoustic tile ceiling. No consistent effort at systematic ornamentation is evident.

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A new building for the Bethel Baptist congregation has been constructed a block away at 3200 N. 28th Avenue, and, as a result, the historic Bethel Baptist Church is no longer used for religious purposes. It has become something of a civil rights museum and shrine and is owned, operated, and maintained by the Bethel Baptist Church Historic Community Restoration Fund, a 501(c)(3) corporation.¹

Parsonage

Built in 1957, the former parsonage is a one-story asymmetrical brick building with a low-pitched asphalt shingled roof, wide eaves, and metal casement windows. Metal decorative railing covers the rear and front doors and all windows on the side and rear elevations. The common bond brick wall is laid in six stretcher rows between a row of alternating stretcher and headers.

The three-bay front (south) façade contains a one-car garage bay, a fixed metal picture window with sidelights and transom, and a small inset front entryway enclosed with a metal railing and decorative rail posts. Four steps lead up the porch to the entryway consisting of a paneled door that replaced the original flat stained door on the east wall, and a nine-light window with a three-light transom on the south wall.

The rear (north) façade contains an entry and two windows. The rear doorway entry on the eastern-most side is contained within a small recessed porch supported by a single wood post. The window closest to the porch is identical to the front entry window and the remaining window is a former twelve-light window with transom that now contains an air conditioner.

The east façade features two windows; a six-light window to the garage and a twelve-light window to the kitchen. Windows on the west façade all vary in size including a fifteen-light picture window with five-light transom, nine-light window with three-light transom, six-light window with two-light transom, and a six-light window (no transom).

The interior contains a living area at the front of the house that leads to the kitchen and bedrooms. The kitchen is located behind the garage, and four bedrooms are located at the rear of the house. The parsonage remains under church ownership.

Guardhouse

Situated next to the parsonage is the six-room guardhouse at the corner of 29th Avenue North and 32nd Street North. Built ca. 1929, the bungalow style house is a one-story gable frame building with lap siding and a half-width brick porch. The asphalt-shingled roof features a slope chimney on the west side and exposed rafters on the long sides of the building. Visible in a 1959 tax assessor photo, and no longer existing, was a 2' high and 1' wide stone wall lining the front of the lot that was taken in a street widening project.

The south front façade is characterized by its gable, brick porch, and enclosed room. The gable contains a central louvered opening that replaced two small paired windows. The central paneled front door is a replacement door following a bombing. A picture window to the left of the door is flanked by double-hung

¹ Property description for the church was derived from personal observations made by Frank Miele, Historian, National Park Service during onsite visit, January 16-17, 2002; from the historical summary of Bethel Baptist Church prepared by the Birmingham Historical Society; and from the architectural description prepared by Richard Anderson, Jr., contained in the Historic American Buildings Survey documentation, AL-977. Property descriptions for the parsonage and guardhouse were based on site visits by Susan C. Salvatore, Marjorie White, and Dr. Caroll Van West.

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four horizontal light windows. The dominant feature of the porch is the enclosed room that was built as a guardroom following the 1956 church bombing. This change is supported by photo documentation. A 1950 tax assessor's photo shows that the original full-width front porch contained corner brick posts and a decorative brick railing leading to brick piers next to the central steps. A 1959 photo shows the guardroom on the east side of the porch. A low solid brick wall replaced the decorative brick railing and a full-height brick post replaced one of the brick piers to serve as the corner of the guardroom. A decorative metal post is now located on top of the remaining brick pier and may have been placed there after the 1958 bombing. Nine-pane jalousie windows on the south and east sides, and the half-length sidelights flanking the guardroom doorway that leads directly to the porch, allow an unrestricted view to traffic and the church. Currently the guardhouse door is not extant. Inside the guardhouse is a concrete floor and painted sheet rock walls.

The east side of the main building contains four windows and a chimney. Two double-hung vertical three-over-one sash windows flank the eave wall brick chimney that features a corbel course along the chimney sides. The remaining wall is completed with a central picture window flanked with two-over-two windows, and paired three-over-one windows at the northern-most end. The west side elevation facing the parsonage contains a picture window (identical to the east side) on the southern most end, a central boarded window, and a double-hung four horizontal light window on the northern-most end. The north side (rear) contains two doorways, a small central vertical three-light window, and a small wooden louvered opening in the gable. No longer extant is a two-room addition to the rear of the dwelling that housed a cleaner's where the owner, Mrs. Revis, gathered clothing from the neighborhood and took it to a downtown facility.

Integrity

Overall, the church, parsonage, and guardhouse retain a high degree of integrity relative to their period of significance. Their location and setting in a residential neighborhood remain intact. Important design characteristics, material, and workmanship relate to their period of significance, including changes made after bombings to the church door and windows that remain faithful to their original configuration. Changes to the guardhouse, including the loss of the low stone wall, the guardhouse door, and the rear addition do not detract from the property's significance illustrated by the purposely-built guardroom on the front porch.

As a result the significant spaces of the church, parsonage, and guardhouse retain their feeling and association respectively as headquarters and meeting place of the ACMHR, a dwelling, and a guardhouse.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: __ Locally: __

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A__ B__ C__ D

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A__ B__ C__ D__ E__ F__ G

NHL Criteria: 1, Exceptions 1 and 8

NHL Theme(s): II. Creating Social Institutions and Movement

2. reform movements

IV. Shaping the Political Landscape

1. parties, protests, and movements

Areas of Significance: Ethnic Heritage, Black

Law

Politics/Government

Social History

Period(s) of Significance: 1956-1961

Significant Dates: May 1961

Significant Person(s):

Cultural Affiliation:

Architect/Builder: Unknown

Historic Contexts: Racial Desegregation of Public Accommodations

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**Summary Statement of Significance**

The Bethel Baptist Church, parsonage, and guardhouse are significant in the origins and evolution of the church-led southern civil rights movement of the 1950s that used nonviolent mass technique to bring social change to racial democracy. Headquartered at this church between 1956 and 1961, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), with Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth as its president, pioneered a nonviolent direct action movement to confront multiple racial segregation issues that served as a model for the 1963 protests in Birmingham.² The ACMHR was also pivotal to the success of the 1961 Freedom Ride that compelled the federal intervention needed to desegregate interstate public transportation and facilities.

The properties are being nominated under **NHL Criterion 1** (events) for their association with ACMHR and Reverend Shuttlesworth's role as an aggressive advocate of nonviolent direct action for social change. Using both direct action and judicial intervention, the organization worked toward ending racial discrimination in hiring and to integrate public accommodations, transportation, and schools. The organization was also the chosen contact point for the Alabama portion of the 1961 Freedom Ride. In this capacity, the ACMHR played a crucial role in rescuing stranded and injured Freedom Riders in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, and coordinating the ride between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Kennedy Administration. Shuttlesworth was a founding member of the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition (SCLC - a major organization of the civil rights movement), and "proved to be one of the most tenacious and intrepid figures in the Southern civil rights movement"³ who "personified the spirit of the new direct action era."⁴ Today Reverend Shuttlesworth remains active in civil rights, therefore evaluation of his specific contributions to American history under NHL Criterion 2 (individuals) should be undertaken at the close of his career.

The properties are also being evaluated under **NHL Exception 1**, for religious properties; and **NHL Exception 8**, for achieving significance within the past 50 years. Under **NHL Exception 1**, the church is being nominated for its historical significance in association with its role as headquarters for the ACMHR and as an institutional center for the Birmingham movement. Under **NHL Exception 8**, the properties are being nominated for their extraordinary national importance between 1956 and 1961 when the leadership in civil rights changed from a northern to a massive southern church-led movement. While other movements focused on a single aspect of discrimination, the ACMHR pioneered a broad-based long-term attack on racial inequality. In 1961, the church and parsonage were extraordinary for participating in the Freedom Ride that led to federal enforcement of integrated public transportation and facilities.

Origins of the Modern Civil Rights Movement, 1950s

In the 1950s, leadership in the civil rights movement shifted from individuals and organizations in the North to church-led protest movements in the South. Between the early twentieth century and the mid-1950s, national

² Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 73. Morris states that movement also served as a model for many later movements, 73.

³ Catherine Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow: The Desegregation of Southern Transit* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 127.

⁴ Morris, *Origins*, 71; Andrew W. Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press: 1999), 145. Manis states that Shuttlesworth personified the movement "even more than King or Steele," (reference is to Reverend C. K. Steele of Tallahassee), 145.

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leadership in civil rights came from northern individuals and organizations such as labor leader A. Philip Randolph, scholar W. E. B. DuBois, and the northern-based inter-racial National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Thereafter, in the mid-1950s, leadership of southern blacks in the modern civil rights era emerged through the black churches that became the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement.⁵ According to sociologist Aldon D. Morris, black churches were able to fulfill this role through various aspects:

Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen that were largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle.⁶

Morris goes on to explain that the first decade of the Southern modern civil rights movement, which he dates from a bus boycott in Baton Rouge in 1953, differed from previous protest traditions in two ways:

One it was the first time that large masses of blacks directly confronted and effectively disrupted the normal functioning of groups and institutions thought to be responsible for their oppression. . . . Two, this was the first time in American history that blacks adopted nonviolent tactics as a mass technique for bringing about social change.⁷

As part of the modern civil rights movement “these mass confrontations were widespread and sustained over a long period of time in the face of heavy repression.”⁸ Most confrontations, like the well-known Montgomery bus boycott, focused on a single aspect of civil rights. However, in Birmingham the ACMHR was the first sustained movement to confront issues beyond bus segregation using both direct action and the judicial process to challenge racial inequality.

Background

In the mid-1950s, church-based mass organization began with bus boycotts in New Orleans, Louisiana; Montgomery, Alabama; and Tallahassee, Florida. According to Historian August Meier, these boycotts (and the struggle for voting rights in Tuskegee), were “widely heralded as the emergence of a ‘New Negro’ in the South—militant, no longer fearful of white hoodlums, police and jails, and willing to use his collective economic weight to attain his ends.”⁹ Black leaders in Baton Rouge created the first boycott of the period in 1953 when they petitioned government officials to allow blacks to be seated on buses on a first-come, first-serve basis with blacks filling up the bus from the rear, and whites from the front—with no reserved seats for whites. When this proposal failed, and realizing that the NAACP was incapable of leading a boycott, the local black churches joined five or six community organizations to form the United Defense League. Led by Reverend T. J. Jemison, pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the boycott featured nightly mass meetings and a

⁵ Morris, *Origins*, 4, 13, 46. After a string of early legal victories, the NAACP (founded in 1909) eventually moved South and by the end of 1918, the group had chapters throughout the South. Morris, *Origins*, 14. Morris notes that the last influential leader in the South was Booker T. Washington who died in 1915. Morris, *Origins*, 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xi

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ August Meier, “Negro Protest Movements and Organizations,” *Journal of Negro Education* 32, no. 4 (Autumn 1963), 440. The Tuskegee Civic Association undertook a three-year long boycott of local merchants to protest gerrymandering by the Alabama state legislature in 1957 that excluded most of Tuskegee’s 400 blacks from voting; thus assuring white rule in the city.

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highly organized free ride system that could dispatch drivers across the city “to swing into action when instructed.” After one week in which the bus company lost \$1,600 a day, the city agreed to a less-offensive form of segregated seating for blacks.¹⁰

Other black ministries in the country learned of the Baton Rouge bus boycott through Jemison’s ties to the five-million-member National Baptist Congress. One of these ministries was located in Montgomery, Alabama, where Reverends Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy became involved in leading a bus boycott after the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her bus seat. At first, the Women’s Political Council and activist E. D. Nixon had organized the boycott. Nixon then reached out to the black ministry for support “because they had their hands on the black masses.” Over the next year, the boycott organized under the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) gave rise to King’s status as the civil rights movement’s preeminent leader and resulted in a Supreme Court case in December 1956 requiring integrated buses.¹¹

Five months after the Montgomery boycott began, a bus boycott started in Tallahassee, Florida. This protest started in May 1956 after two Florida A&M students were arrested for refusing to give up their bus seats to white riders. The students then voted to stay off the buses for the remaining two weeks of the semester and encouraged others to do the same. Seeing that the boycott would end at the close of the semester, the larger black community took action. Ministers joined together to form the Inter Civil Council of Tallahassee and voted Reverend C. K. Steele as its president. Steele was the president of the local NAACP chapter and had also visited the Montgomery movement. The boycott continued a few months until the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Montgomery case.¹²

A month after the Tallahassee boycott began, and against tremendous odds, another church-led movement started in Birmingham, Alabama. Unlike the Montgomery and Tallahassee movements that formed after a precipitating bus event, the Birmingham movement started after the Alabama Attorney General banned the NAACP from operating in that state. Serving as membership chairman of the NAACP in Birmingham and pastor of the Bethel Baptist Church since March 1953, Fred Shuttlesworth “decided it was time to form a direct action movement in Birmingham.”¹³ Like Reverend Steele, he too had been present when the MIA formed in December 1955.¹⁴ Such a move in Birmingham was considerable given that the city in 1955 was later described by historian Ralph Luker to be “the urban citadel of racial segregation in the Deep South [in which a] racist white power structure maintained a segregated regimen so thoroughly that opposition was almost unthinkable.”¹⁵ Overall, the sudden emergence of these ministers left white leaders “dumbfounded” and they referred to the ministers as “radicals, Communists, [and] outsiders” who maintained their followers through

¹⁰ Rather than seating on a first-come, first-serve basis, the compromise reserved the two side fronts seats for whites and the long rear seat for blacks. Morris, *Origins*, 19, 24, quote on 19.

¹¹ Jemison was elected national secretary of the National Baptist Congress in 1953. Before then his father had been president of the organization for twelve years. Morris, *Origins*, 25. The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where the Montgomery Improvement Association held its meetings, is a National Historic Landmark. For finding on boycott consultation between Jemison, King and Abernathy, see Morris, *Origins*, 25. For quote on black masses, see Morris, *Origins*, 54.

¹² Morris, *Origins*, 64. Another bus boycott led by Reverend Joseph Lowery, head of the Alabama Civic Affairs Association, took place in Mobile, Alabama. Lowery would become a founding and long time member of the SCLC and its third president in 1977, Mark Grossman, *The ABC-CLIO Companion to the Civil Rights Movement* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1993), 124.

¹³ Morris, *Origins*, 68-69.

¹⁴ Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 14.

¹⁵ Ralph E. Luker, *Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997), 28.

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“duress, demagoguery, and deceit.” But, as historian Adam Fairclough notes, these new leaders had become “forces to be reckoned with.”¹⁶

In June 1956, Shuttlesworth met with several local ministers and community people to discuss their options. As they planned for the meeting, the men expressed their conviction that a new and more active group should replace the NAACP, and both the more conservative Baptist Ministers Conference and the area’s Jefferson County Betterment Association.¹⁷ From this meeting the ACMHR formed with its headquarters at Bethel Baptist Church and Shuttlesworth as its president. The church contributed meeting space, offices, rent and utilities free of charge to ACMHR and functioned as its headquarters until 1961. For over a decade mass meetings were held every Monday night at Bethel or other churches throughout the city.¹⁸

By 1959, ACMHR numbered between 900 and 1,200 members who were mainly working class people, with a majority being women. This was in contrast to the group led by Reverend Ware that consisted of primarily middle class members. Also in comparison, ACMHR’s members were less educated than those of two other Alabama organizations, the Tuskegee Civic Association and the Montgomery Improvement Association, and included “a larger percentage of unskilled or semi-skilled workers.” These statistics “suggest that the organization was a fairly representative cross-section of the African American community of Birmingham.” ACMHR’s original board was comprised of ministers and over the eleven years that Shuttlesworth was president the board included some women. But it was the ministers, and especially Shuttlesworth, who made the decisions. A 1959 analysis of the ACMHR revealed that the organization was “‘essentially a one-man organization,” which was widely known simply as ‘Shuttlesworth’s organization.’”¹⁹

ACMHR, 1956-1959

During the 1950s, the ACMHR used direct action that signaled a clear break with the tactics and strategies of the traditional black leadership class that had focused on petitions and lawsuits. Furthermore, the organization expanded its activities beyond bus segregation targeted by other movements in Montgomery and Tallahassee, to wage an all out attack on discrimination in hiring, segregation in public accommodations and public schools.²⁰ As a result, the ACMHR laid claim to an “across-the-board approach” rather than a “single-focus method” used by other movements.²¹

In its first year, the ACMHR requested that the city hire black policemen to patrol black communities. When the request was denied, the ACMHR legally challenged the Birmingham Personnel Board’s practice of restricting civil service examinations to whites only. In response, the Board lifted its ban. Yet, even though blacks could take the exam, none received a job.²²

¹⁶ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 13.

¹⁷ Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 95. Individuals who took offense to Shuttlesworth’s autocratic style instead joined with Reverend J. L. Ware’s Jefferson County Betterment Association “for more prudent leadership in civil rights.” Ware was also president of the Baptist Ministers’ Conference, Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 26.

¹⁸ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 127; Marjorie White, *A Walk to Freedom: The Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, 1956-1964* (Birmingham, Alabama: Birmingham Historical Society, 1998), 18; White states that by 1958, weekly meetings were also held at 55 other working-class churches in the city, 21.

¹⁹ Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 118-119. The analysis referred to is by Jacquelyne Johnson Clarke, “Goals and Techniques in Three Civil Rights Organizations in Alabama,” Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1960.

²⁰ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 128; Morris, *Origins*, 70.

²¹ Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 164.

²² Morris, *Origins*, 69-70.

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Also in its first year, ACMHR targeted Birmingham's segregated buses, announcing that members would test the system on December 26. In response, whites dynamited the Bethel Church parsonage on December 25. Inside the parsonage, Shuttlesworth was talking with a church deacon and the family was watching television. The blast, which destroyed the parsonage, "shattered windows, caved in the roof of the living room and wrecked furnishings."²³ Among the injured occupants was Shuttlesworth who sustained a minor head injury. Despite the bombing, 250 people gathered on the appointed day to integrate the buses. Twenty-two members were arrested. Afterward, according to the *New York Times*, 400 people gathered and voted to continue the drive to integrate the buses. Thereafter, ACMHR filed suit and ceased testing the buses to await a court decision.²⁴ Following the bombing and the bus ride, the national press started paying attention to Shuttlesworth and Coretta Scott King described him as "a symbol of the southern struggle."²⁵

In a bid to integrate public accommodations, Shuttlesworth and his wife entered the segregated Birmingham train station in March 1957. Even though they were successful in staying in the white waiting room and boarding a train, a white mob that had gathered at the station beat a sympathetic white man who had joined the Shuttlesworths in the waiting room. Later referencing the event at the station, "the city commission reaffirmed segregation as 'necessary for the avoidance of friction, enmity and violence between the races.'" After this desegregation attempt, Shuttlesworth gained notoriety in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* magazine and received "invitations to speak to northern audiences."²⁶

In the fight to integrate public schools, Shuttlesworth and his wife attempted to enroll their children at the all-white Phillips High School in September 1957. Newspeople gathered at the school along with "a negligible police presence and about twenty or so civilian white men."²⁷ In a mob attack, the couple sustained injuries when Reverend Shuttlesworth was struck with chains and Mrs. Shuttlesworth was stabbed in the hip. Following the episode, the ACMHR filed legal charges against the Board of Education.²⁸

Forming the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

In January 1957, the ministers of the church-led movements in Montgomery, Tallahassee, Baton Rouge, and Birmingham were called upon to form a national organization with the purpose of assisting local communities in their respective movements. Following the end of the Montgomery bus boycott, civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who had become an advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr., believed that "the movement needed a sustaining mechanism that could translate what we had learned during the bus boycott into a broad strategy for protest in the South. [It was] vital that we maintain the psychological momentum Montgomery had generated."²⁹ Rustin, along with activists Ella Baker and Stanley Levison, proposed the idea of organizing the

²³ "Bombing in Alabama Injures 5, Wrecks Minister's Home," *New York Times*, December 26, 1956, 1.

²⁴ "21 Negroes in Birmingham Seized for Defying Bus Law," *New York Times*, December 27, 1956, 1, this article contains a photograph of the integrated bus riders. "Negroes Call Off Tests in 2 Cities on Bus Bias Laws," *New York Times*, December 28, 1956, 1. Morris, *Origins*, 70.

²⁵ Manis, *Fire You Can't Put Out*, 119 for Coretta Scott King quote.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 130. Along with the notoriety, some members of the church exhibited "extraordinary patience" with Shuttlesworth's increasing civil rights activity, while others began to grow impatient with his absences and activities that took from the traditional ministerial role, 131. City Commissioner statement from Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 136, as quoted from *Birmingham News*, March 12, 1957.

²⁷ Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2001), 127. Shuttlesworth kept authorities informed of planned protests as mandated under the Gandhian philosophy followed by non-violent believers.

²⁸ Morris, *Origins*, 69-70.

²⁹ Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 226; David G. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Morrow, 1986), 85. The invitations were signed by King, Shuttlesworth, and Steele; see Garrow,

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SCLC and in January 1957, persuaded King, Steele, Shuttlesworth, and Jemison to call a national movement to form the organization. Though these men knew each other from church functions, they had become better acquainted from attending the Montgomery bus boycott meetings.³⁰ In January 1957, sixty leaders from across the South met in Atlanta to found the SCLC in what would become a major organization at the heart of the civil rights movement.

Birmingham, 1958-1961

After the SCLC formed, Shuttlesworth played a role in what author and journalist Diane McWhorter writes as “the greatest theater of the civil rights era, Shuttlesworth versus Bull Connor.”³¹ Connor had been sworn in as Commissioner of Public Safety and in his November 1957 inaugural, he promised to uphold the city’s segregation laws “to the utmost of my ability and by all lawful means.”³² Connor had a long history as a segregationist and while serving as Commissioner in 1938, he threatened to arrest anyone who crossed racial lines at the Southern Conference for Human Welfare meeting. In attendance at the meeting was Eleanor Roosevelt who integrated seating by placing her chair in the center aisle.³³

On October 27, 1958, one incident provided an insight into Connor’s perspective in the fight for racial equality. Three ministers from Montgomery were arrested and held briefly on charges of vagrancy while consulting with Shuttlesworth at the parsonage regarding bus segregation. A *New York Times* article reported that Attorney General William P. Rogers had ordered a Federal grand jury look into the arrests. The same article quotes Connor as saying, “Those three Negroes so dear to Attorney General Rogers’ heart came here to aid in an unlawful boycott . . . If Mr. Rogers thinks he can scare me or the Birmingham Police Department into permitting this city to become a scene of rioting which would follow just to please Negro voters he is mistaken.”³⁴

While Connor’s predecessor had mostly used a defensive approach to ACMHR agitation, Connor took a decidedly offensive approach. Thus, according to Shuttlesworth, 1958 became “a year of harassment” for ACMHR that produced the second bombing of Bethel Baptist Church.³⁵ At about 1:30 a.m., on Sunday, June 29, 1958, Bethel Church guards took a smoking explosive from next to the church and placed it in the street where it detonated, blowing a hole in the street and some church windows, but not causing structural damage to the church.³⁶

The guards were stationed next to the new parsonage in the house of Bethel deacon James Revis that became

Bearing the Cross, 645, note 3.

³⁰ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 25. Other ministers included Joseph E. Lowery of Mobile, Theodore Jemison from Baton Rouge, and C. K. Steele of Tallahassee.

³¹ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 129. McWhorter, a journalist, grew up in Birmingham. McWhorter also refers to Shuttlesworth as having “pioneered the still avant-garde tactics of direct action.” *Time* magazine would refer to Connor as the “big voice in Birmingham” in a December 1958 article entitled, “Integration’s Hottest Crucible.” McWhorter, 141, *Time*, Dec. 15, 1958, 16. A copy of this article can be seen in White, *A Walk to Freedom*, 28.

³² Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 162.

³³ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 163; www.wellesley.edu/Anniversary/durr.html.

³⁴ “Jury Will Study 3 Negroes’ Arrest,” *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1958, 1.

³⁵ Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 162.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 170, 173, The bombing was not solved until 1980 when J. B. Stoner was convicted in *Alabama v. Stoner*. The previous day, Birmingham police proceeded to the home of James Revis, across the street from the church, and retrieved four rifles from the guards stationed on the porch (Manis, 169). Following the Christmas 1956 bombing, ACMHR guards had been guarding the church with their “nonviolent Winchesters.”

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known as the Bethel Church guardhouse in 1957. After the December 1956 bomb destroyed the old parsonage next to the church, ACMHR and Bethel church members volunteered to guard the church and the new parsonage being constructed next to the Revis house. Revis's daughter, Laverne, who had alerted the guards to the second bomb when coming home from work, later recalled how "[m]y parents had a little room that they closed out on the front of the porch just so the guards would be able to watch."³⁷ Laverne's older sister, Robbie Revis Smith, recalled that "they decided that they needed to close in the front porch so they could see better." She added, "with our house sitting on the corner, it gave a very good view several ways that they could see because they had the glass out there and they put a little gas heater out there so they wouldn't be too cold sitting up. They did this year round." The volunteers became known as "Civil Rights Guards," who worked in shifts of 6:00 p.m. to midnight and 12:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.³⁸ Smith believed that the guardhouse afforded local African Americans some sense of security in a place that was obviously targeted by white reactionaries: "So it was kind of a good feeling coming home because you never came home without a person out there watching you, so you didn't have to worry about that."³⁹ Laverne also related how women in the movement took a weekly shift in the guardhouse.⁴⁰ Guards were also stationed in a shack at the rear of the parsonage in order to observe any activity coming up from behind the property.⁴¹

Shuttlesworth and others attempted to integrate busses again in October 1958 after the City Commissioners repealed the segregation bus law. Under fear that it would not withstand litigation, the Commissioners enacted a law giving bus drivers authority to arrange seating. In a test of the new law, that mentioned nothing of race, twenty were arrested including Shuttlesworth.⁴² On October 31, ACMHR joined with the Jefferson County Improvement Association to boycott Birmingham's still segregated buses. The boycott ended within two months due to "divisions within the African American community, police intimidation, and the failure to win press coverage." It would take until December 1959 and a federal court order to officially desegregate Birmingham's buses.⁴³

In the summer of 1959, a series of articles in the *New York Times* addressed "how churches in the south are facing the question of racial segregation." One of the articles assessed Birmingham's racial perspective at the time. "If Atlanta is the most liberal city in the Deep South on the race question, Birmingham is the most conservative. . . . A steel center where 40 percent of the population is Negro, Birmingham has a large group of working-class whites who regard the Negro as an immediate economic threat. Many whites have joined hoodlum elements of the Ku Klux Klan, which operated openly in the city. Intimidation of Negroes and whites who support them is condoned by Eugene (Bull) Connor, the outspokenly racist police commissioner." The article went on to describe Shuttlesworth as "the most harassed and the most fearless Negro leader in Birmingham. Although he is described as erratic and a lone operator, the Negro leadership for integration has fallen to him because no one else will take it up."⁴⁴

³⁷ Laverne Revis Martin, interview by Dr. Horace Huntley of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) on July 17, 1996 at the BCRI.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

³⁹ Robbie Revis Smith interview by Dr. Horace Huntley at Miles College, November 1, 1995. Information on closing in the front porch of the guardhouse was provided by Dr. Carroll Van West, Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation.

⁴⁰ Interview with Laverne Revis Martin, by Marjorie White, April 12, 2004. Such women included Desta Brooks, a florist who was on the Executive Committee for the Movement with James Revis, and Minnie Eaton, a school teacher.

⁴¹ Telephone interview with Laverne Revis Martin, by Susan C. Salvatore, February 9, 2004. On the location of the shack, McWhorter also notes that, "The guards took staggered breaks in a little shack near Shuttlesworth's new house," 134, and Manis describes a makeshift guard station built beside the Revis house, 118. The shack is nonextant.

⁴² "Bus Law Repealed," *New York Times*, October 15, 1958, 27; "Negroes Arrested in Test of Bus Law," *New York Times*, October 21, 1958, 27.

⁴³ Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 27.

⁴⁴ "Birmingham Resists Church Integration," *New York Times*, July 7, 1959, 30.

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In one of its last acts prior to the advent of the student-led sit-in movement, the ACMHR challenged the legality of the city's segregated recreational facilities in October, 1959. These facilities included "sixty-seven parks, thirty-eight playgrounds, eight swimming pools, and four golf courses—together with its zoo, art museum, state fair, municipal auditorium, and Legion Field stadium." Two years later, the U.S. District Court ordered the city to integrate the facilities by January 15, 1962. Rather than integrate, the city commissioners closed the facilities.⁴⁵

An October 1959 article in the *Pittsburgh Courier* (a black weekly newspaper) praised Shuttlesworth, but decried his "controversial nature" that alienated other black leaders in the city:

The only really outstanding Negro leader with a large following is the Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, but he is a controversial figure, and a number of other influential Negro leaders have not felt inclined to operate under the Shuttlesworth banner.

But the Rev. Shuttlesworth, by his dramatic and daring moves, has kept the interest of the masses aroused, as well as that of these leaders.⁴⁶

SCLC, 1959-1960

Soon thereafter, Shuttlesworth turned to the SCLC in a push to make the group more active. Prior to 1960, the SCLC "seemed to lack a coherent or dramatic program or social action,"⁴⁷ during which time the SCLC had conducted two workshops on nonviolent direct action and promoted voter registration.⁴⁸ In a letter to Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1959, he wrote, "When the flowery speeches have been made, we still have the hard job of getting down and helping people." Promoting his well-practiced tactic of direct action, he stated that SCLC "must move now, or else [be] hard put in the not too distant future, to justify our existence." In December 1959, King reflected the desire to move beyond voter registration in a meeting with the SCLC hierarchy in Birmingham. "This is the creative moment for a full scale assault on the system of segregation," he told his colleagues. "We must practice civil disobedience."⁴⁹ But no specific plans came forth.

Thus, the main impetus for the civil rights movement was coming from the protest activities in individual cities. As Fairclough describes: "SCLC's history must be related to the origins and evolution of black protest in Baton Rouge, Montgomery, Tallahassee, Birmingham, and elsewhere. . . . It is often forgotten moreover, that SCLC's principal thrust before 1963 was in the field of voter registration, not direct action. . . . SCLC's dynamism was not being generated by King but by locally based leaders like Steele in Tallahassee, Abernathy in Montgomery, Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, and especially, James Lawson in Nashville."⁵⁰

In 1960, King left Montgomery to be at the SCLC offices in Atlanta. Yet, even with his departure "the SCLC remained largely an Alabama phenomenon, with Abernathy as treasurer, Mobile's Joe Lowery as second vice

⁴⁵ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 179. Reported in *Time*, Dec. 22, 1961.

⁴⁶ "Birmingham's Big Need," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Magazine Section, October 17, 1959. Among the leaders noted in the article were ministers and businessmen such as Reverend J. L. Ware (head of the Baptist Ministers Union), businessman Arthur Gaston, and Attorney Arthur D. Shores.

⁴⁷ Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 243.

⁴⁸ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 33.

⁴⁹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 118 citing from Shuttlesworth to King, April 24, 1959. King quote from Garrow, 124

⁵⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 5, 58. Lawson was a civil rights activist and pastor who Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1957, persuaded to help lead the southern civil rights movement. Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 152-53.

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president, and Shuttlesworth as secretary and SCLC's only functioning mass leader."⁵¹ Shuttlesworth's push to make SCLC more active would come to fruition with the advent of the student-led movement.

Student Sit-in Movement, 1960

On February 1, 1960, four students staged a sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. In rapid fire succession, other students followed across the South. Ten days after the Woolworth sit-in, Shuttlesworth witnessed a student sit-in while filling in for a preacher in High Point, North Carolina. In this protest he saw "well-dressed students step off in good order, like soldiers in the joyous early stages of a popular war" to sit-in at segregated lunch counters. He called Ella Baker at the SCLC office in Atlanta, saying "You must tell Martin [King] that we must get with this," and that the sit-ins could "shake up the world." According to author and journalist, Taylor Branch, Shuttlesworth "was not the first to report to her [Baker] about the sit-ins, but he was the first voice of authority from the inner circle of SCLC preachers."⁵²

Back at his home in Birmingham, Shuttlesworth conferred with students from Miles College interested in boycotting downtown stores to protest segregated store facilities and the non-hiring of black sales clerks. During their sit-in on March 31, 1960, they were arrested for "trespassing after warning" and Shuttlesworth was arrested for "conspiring to violate the city's segregation ordinances." Picking up on the story, the *New York Times* described racial tensions arising from the sit-ins with the headlines "Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham."⁵³ Despite lagging sales, business owners lamented that they could not capitulate without support from the city commission, prompting Martin Luther King, Jr.'s comment that Birmingham was the "most difficult big city in the United States in race relations."⁵⁴

Student leaders of the sit-in movement formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960. The move added a new youthful vanguard dedicated to direct action in the civil rights movement. The practice of "'direct action' had now become a given, and not simply the 'neurotic' compulsion of the SCLC renegade known to his colleagues as the Wild Man from Birmingham."⁵⁵ Shuttlesworth's reputation was espoused a year later in March 1961 when Howard K. Smith, while filming a mass meeting for a national audience, referred to Shuttlesworth as "'the man most feared by Southern racists and the voice of the new militancy among Birmingham Negroes."⁵⁶ Overall, according to historian Glenn T. Eskew, "The formation of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights in 1956 marked a clear departure from traditional black protest in Birmingham and foreshadowed the nonviolent direct action tactics of the student sit-ins and Freedom Rides."⁵⁷

1961 Freedom Ride

On May 4, 1961, thirteen black and white men and women boarded two buses, a Trailways and a Greyhound, for a trip from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans. These passengers were part of the "Freedom Ride" to test segregation in bus travel following the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision banning racial segregation in bus

⁵¹ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 182.

⁵² Morris, *Origins*, 201, quoted in Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 118.

⁵³ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 150-151, referring to *New York Times*, April 12, 1960; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 199.

⁵⁴ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 199-200, King quote on 200; Morris, *Origins*, 201.

⁵⁵ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 160.

⁵⁶ Manis, *Fire You Can't Put Out*, 255.

⁵⁷ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 121. Also, by 1958 Shuttlesworth was a national columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier* with a weekly column "A Southerner Speaks," Manis, *Fire You Can't Put Out*, 232; White, *A Walk to Freedom*, 36.

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terminals on interstate travel. In three Alabama cities--Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery--white segregationists brutalized the riders in what became a national spectacle. In Birmingham, the Bethel Baptist Church, its parsonage, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, and the ACMHR played a crucial role in this episode of the student-led movement for racial equality.

Background

Efforts to end racially segregated public transportation had been ongoing for 100 years. First with rail and streetcar travel in the nineteenth century, and then bus travel in the 1940s – 50s. The Supreme Court had first banned segregation on interstate buses and trains in 1946.⁵⁸ In 1947, a group of sixteen black and white riders tested this decision in a bus ride through the Upper South. Known as the Journey of Reconciliation, the trip was undertaken by members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the Workers Defense League. FOR was a Christian pacifist organization from which CORE emerged in Chicago in 1942 with principles based on “the methods of Gandhian nonviolent direct action for racial justice and social change.”⁵⁹ The ride traveled through the Upper South testing the Supreme Court’s ruling. Outside the bus station in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, four of the freedom riders were arrested and sentenced to serve thirty days on a North Carolina road gang. The ride generated little attention and segregated travel remained the rule.⁶⁰

The next legal precedence in segregated travel came following the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1955 (*Brown II*). Purposely waiting until after that ruling, the Interstate Commerce Commission (the federal agency in charge of regulating interstate travel) forbade the segregation of interstate bus travelers. Further action by the Supreme Court in 1956 voided southern segregation codes for local passengers on interstate carriers and in 1960 extended that decision in *Boynton v. Virginia* to terminal station facilities. Following the *Boynton* decision, CORE began plans to initiate the 1961 Freedom Ride based on the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation. It would be a move that “for the first time brought student protesters into conflict with the Kennedy administration.”⁶¹ According to historian, Clayborne Carson, the administration “feared the potential for large-scale racial violence, which would require forceful federal intervention.”⁶² CORE director James Farmer confirmed that the Freedom Ride was planned specifically to create a crisis:

We were counting on the bigots in the South to do our work for us. We figured that the government would have to respond if we created a situation that was headline news all over the world, and affected the nation’s image abroad. An international crisis, that was our strategy.⁶³

⁵⁸ *Morgan v. Virginia*, 328 U.S. 373 (1946). In this case Irene Morgan, an African-American woman, refused to move to the rear of the bus so that white passengers could be seated. The Supreme Court found that Virginia’s segregation law could not apply to interstate passengers.

⁵⁹ Quote from Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 91.

⁶⁰ Three of the four riders served twenty-two days of their sentences,

Ibid., 141-142; Mark Grossman, *The ABC-CLIO Companion to the Civil Rights Movement* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1993), 75. CORE became a major organization of the civil rights movement founded on the principles of “nonviolent direct action to achieve social change and racial justice.” Early members of CORE have been described as “pioneers in nonviolent direct action...” who “took part in both the first sit-in movement in Chicago in 1942 and the first Freedom Ride,” Luker, *Historical Dictionary*, 60.

⁶¹ *Keys v. Carolina Coach Company*, 64 ICC 769 (1955), *Browder v. Gayle*, 325 U.S. 903 (1956); *Boynton v. Virginia*, 364 U.S. 454 (1960). Catherine Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow: The Desegregation of Southern Transit* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 157; first time quote from Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 31.

⁶² Carson, *In Struggle*, 35.

⁶³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 156.

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CORE began preparing for the trip. First, potential riders were screened for those who could withstand character attacks that could otherwise harm the movement. From these candidates, CORE chose thirteen white and black riders, ranging from college age to their sixties, to undergo one week of training. CORE also alerted the federal government and others, in keeping with the Gandhian principle of being “open and above board.” James Farmer sent letters to President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, the Interstate Commerce Commissioner chairman, and the respective presidents of the Greyhound and Trailways corporations. CORE received no responses from these letters.⁶⁴

The journey began on May 4, 1961, and saw three arrests and one attack between Virginia and Georgia. No incidents occurred in Georgia. In Atlanta the riders met with SCLC President Martin Luther King, Jr. and Wyatt Tee Walker, Executive Director. Walker gave them Reverend Shuttlesworth’s name as a contact in Birmingham.⁶⁵ Freedom Rider James Peck (a veteran of the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation) contacted Shuttlesworth to advise him that the riders were on their way to Birmingham, whereupon Peck learned of a reception being planned for the riders by the Ku Klux Klan. Peck sent a telegram to Bull Connor requesting adequate police protection for the civil rights activists at the bus stations.⁶⁶ Unbeknownst to the riders or Shuttlesworth was that Connor had worked out an agreement, known by the FBI, to allow time for members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American States’ Rights Party to beat the riders when they disembarked in Birmingham.⁶⁷

Mother’s Day, Sunday, May 14: Anniston and Birmingham

On May 14 the FBI office wired Birmingham from Atlanta, “that the Greyhound freedom bus had left and would arrive in Birmingham at 3:30; a second group, with ten Freedom Riders, would arrive via Trailways at 4:05.”⁶⁸ On the way to Birmingham, the first outbreak of violence occurred in Anniston, Alabama when a mob of over one hundred people greeted the Greyhound bus. For about fifteen minutes the mob attacked the bus at the terminal “with iron bars and clubs, denting the sides, breaking windows, and puncturing the tires.” Only the presence of a plainclothesman from the Alabama Public Safety Department kept the mob from boarding the bus. Arriving police cleared a route for the bus to leave the station.⁶⁹ A fifty-car convoy pursued the bus, “with a Ford truck in front of the bus to keep it from picking up too much speed.” Five miles out of town, a tire went flat on the bus, and once again the mob, numbering 200, attacked the bus. Violence intensified when an incendiary bomb was thrown onto the bus filling it with smoke. The plainclothes investigator on the bus, Eli Cowling, brandished his gun in the doorway and forced the mob away from the bus.⁷⁰ The injured were taken to a local hospital that refused treatment to all except one white female.⁷¹

Meanwhile the Trailways bus had arrived in Anniston, whereupon eight hoodlums boarded the bus and at that point the riders learned the fate of the Greyhound bus. The driver then refused to continue unless the black

⁶⁴ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1995), 75-76, interview with James Farmer. This book “is an outgrowth of the ‘Eyes on the Prize’ project centered around a television history of America’s civil rights years,” xii.

⁶⁵ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 156.

⁶⁶ Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 263.

⁶⁷ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 157.

⁶⁸ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 202.

⁶⁹ Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow*, 159-160.

⁷⁰ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 203. Cowling had been “planted on the bus by Floyd Mann, the Alabama Director of Public Safety,” David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 263.

⁷¹ Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 115.

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passengers seated up front went to the formerly segregated rear seats. When they refused, the intruders beat and dragged them to the rear of the bus. Two objecting white riders suffered the same fate. Four police cars escorted the bus on its way to Birmingham.⁷²

Two hours after leaving Anniston, the Trailways bus arrived in Birmingham and the riders immediately saw a hateful crowd close to the loading platform. The eight white segregationists who had boarded in Anniston, exited into a crowd carrying broken Coke bottles and lead pipes. The prearranged violence ensued. Peck and his black partner, Charles Person, were the first to disembark. Peck was beaten unconscious. Others beaten by the mob were reporters whose cameras and film were damaged to destroy visual images of the melee. Amid local reporters was CBS Washington Bureau Chief, Howard K. Smith who had been on assignment in Birmingham to work on a documentary when he received a tip to be at the bus station “to see action.” Smith ended up driving “three bloody Negroes” (two bystanders and one rider) to his motel. “Their interviews would provide CBS’ only footage of the first public mass assault in modern civil rights history.”⁷³

Freedom Riders, including Jim Peck, took a cab to Bethel Baptist Church where an afternoon service was in progress. Shuttlesworth then learned of both the Birmingham and Anniston events, whereupon he dispatched ACMHR volunteers in about fifteen cars to Anniston to pick up the stranded riders. Despite instructions from Shuttlesworth to the contrary, the rescuers armed themselves and, according to rescued Freedom Rider Hank Thomas, “. . . every one of those cars had a shotgun in it.”⁷⁴ Birmingham police arrived at Shuttlesworth’s home and threatened to arrest the Freedom Riders “for breaking residential segregation laws,” but Shuttlesworth fended them off. Later Connor also called, threatening to arrest the riders. Shuttlesworth fired back that Connor could provide a hotel, otherwise he intended to administer to the riders.⁷⁵

Church and ACMHR members gathered at Bethel that night for a small mass meeting. CORE riders sat at the front of the sanctuary to tell their story. Shuttlesworth and the riders then convened to the parsonage for a meal and to discuss the next day’s plan for the ride. While riders slept on the floor, Shuttlesworth and a driver went to retrieve Peck from the hospital who had sustained fifty-three stitches for his head wounds.⁷⁶

Monday, May 16: Halting the Freedom Ride

The image of the “smoke-spewing Greyhound bus at Anniston” in his morning paper greeted Robert Kennedy who “would say that the first he knew of the Freedom Ride was when he saw” this photograph. Other pictures obtained from a camera retrieved by a reporter at the Trailways station made front page news across the country and in the international press. President Kennedy’s “immediate worry was that the ‘adverse publicity,’ on top of the botched Bay of Pigs invasion, would embarrass him at his imminent Vienna summit meeting with Khrushchev.” Broaching the administration’s first civil rights crisis, President Kennedy ordered his brother to “Stop them.”⁷⁷

⁷² Description of event in James Peck, *Freedom Ride* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1962), 126; police escort in McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 204.

⁷³ Observation on Birmingham crowd from Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 127; McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, quotes on 207, tip “to see action” on 199.

⁷⁴ McWhorter, 208-210; Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 263. Hank Thomas quote from Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 115.

⁷⁵ Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 266.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 266-67.

⁷⁷ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 215. Statement on first civil rights crisis in Carson, *In Struggle*, 35. The bus station photo appeared on the first page of a Tokyo newspaper where Syd Smyer, President of Birmingham’s Chamber of Commerce, was attending a convention for the International Rotary Club, McWhorter, 218.

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Meanwhile, in Birmingham, the white *Birmingham Post-Herald* editorial was critical of Connor's lack of action. The editorial called for police to arrest the hoodlums and questioned whether the police had advance notice of the event. While acknowledging that the riders were looking for trouble, they still should have been protected from harm and placed in jail. Alabama's governor begged off responsibility for protecting the riders citing that the riders were there "for the avowed purposes of stirring up trouble." In reply to the delayed police response, Connor reported that officers were spending Mother's Day with their families.⁷⁸

At the parsonage that morning the riders decided to continue the Freedom Ride onto Montgomery. From his home, Shuttlesworth conferred with Kennedy in Washington who was in touch with Burke Marshall "his chief civil rights man," and the FBI.⁷⁹ Kennedy also argued with Connor for a bus escort to the city line, but given what had happened between Anniston and Birmingham, Shuttlesworth argued for protection to the state line. Kennedy called Shuttlesworth to advise that the governor was ready.⁸⁰

The riders and Shuttlesworth proceeded to the Greyhound station to catch a 3:00 bus to Montgomery. However, the bus driver's union would not provide a driver to continue the trip. In addition, the governor was renegeing on providing state police protection to Montgomery. As a white mob gathered at the station, the police protected the riders. Attorney General Kennedy continued working with Shuttlesworth, Governor Patterson, and the Greyhound Bus Company; failing to get either a bus or a promise from the governor for safe passage. In a recorded phone conversation between Kennedy and the Greyhound superintendent regarding the question of who could drive the bus, Kennedy stated, ". . . somebody better give us an answer to this question," and added, "I am—the Government—is going to be very much upset if this group does not get to continue their trip. . . . Somebody better get in the damn bus and get it going and get these people on their way."⁸¹

Absent a bus, and believing that national publicity had met their purpose, the riders decided to fly to New Orleans for a planned rally in recognition of the anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision. Shuttlesworth and ACMHR members took the riders to the airport and then Shuttlesworth departed to attend the Monday night mass meeting at Kingston Baptist Church. After a long evening at the airport that included a hostile mob, bomb threats, and two canceled flights, the Freedom Riders finally got off the ground with the help of John Seigenthaler, who had been summoned to Birmingham by Kennedy as his specialist in the South, thus ending the first phase of the Freedom Ride.⁸²

⁷⁸ White, *A Walk to Freedom*, 35, based on "Where Were the Police," editorial reprinted from the *Birmingham Post-Herald*, May 15, 1961, 12; and Governor's quote from Howard K. Smith, CBS, *Who Speaks for Birmingham?*, 1961.

⁷⁹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 426. Commenting on the role of the FBI in a later interview, Burke Marshall recognized that the agency had advance information on the pending violence in the city. He noted that the Bureau did not pass along the information to anyone in the Justice Department. He based this action on three possible reasons: 1) "They did not understand what was going on in the country," 2) "It may have been in part a bureaucratic FBI reaction to the protection of informants," and 3) "Mr. Hoover personally was totally out of sympathy with the civil rights movement and especially the degree to which it focused on demonstrations and direct action." Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 79-80.

⁸⁰ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 215.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 215-217, Kennedy quote from transcript "From the Office of the Atty. General of Ala. MacDonald Gallion," May 15, 1961, Birmingham, Burke Marshall Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston.

⁸² McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 216-17; Seigenthaler was a former reporter for the *Nashville Tennessean*. Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 157-158. Seigenthaler took charge by ordering that the airline people remove the harassers, load a plane with passengers and the riders, and then announce the plane and not answer the phone to avoid getting a bomb threat. Halberstam, *The Children*, 285; Manis, *Fire You Can't Put Out*, 269.

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New Life for the Freedom Ride

Hearing of the end of CORE's Freedom Ride, members of the Nashville movement, who had helped found SNCC, quickly gathered. In a pivotal and crucial move that would secure the success of the Freedom Ride, Diane Nash of SNCC called Shuttlesworth to say that they were going to continue the ride. Explaining her stance in a later interview, Nash said she "strongly felt that the future of the movement was going to be cut short if the Freedom Ride had been stopped as a result of violence. The impression would have been that whenever a movement starts, all you have to do is attack it with massive violence and the blacks will stop. I thought that was a very dangerous thing to happen. So, under those circumstances, it was really important that the ride continue." She noted that some students who had agreed to continue the ride, had given her sealed letters to be mailed in the event of their deaths.⁸³

Wednesday and Thursday, May 18-19

Shuttlesworth advised Bull Connor of the pending arrival of new Freedom Riders. Both Shuttlesworth and the police met riders at the bus station. Both Shuttlesworth and the riders were arrested. While Shuttlesworth bailed out, the riders remained in jail. SCLC's Executive Director, Wyatt Tee Walker, met with Shuttlesworth at the parsonage to "formulate a position on the Freedom Rides." While Shuttlesworth reported the students' hopes to continue the ride, Bull Connor was working otherwise. To bring the situation to an end, Connor moved the riders from the jail to the Tennessee line. After Nash received word from the displaced riders, she dispersed a driver to return them to Shuttlesworth's house, with eleven more riders arriving by train to continue the bus ride to Montgomery. At the Greyhound station, "a mob of thousands" gathered and the bus to Montgomery was canceled.⁸⁴

Friday and Saturday, May 20-21

On Friday, Shuttlesworth was arrested for his part in meeting the riders on Wednesday on counts of conspiracy and disturbing the peace. He posted bond and joined riders at a "high spirited slumber party" waiting at the bus station. A bus driver arrived only to proclaim, "I understand there is a big convoy down the road and I don't have but one life to give and I don't intend to give it to CORE or the NAACP, and that's all I have to say." Finally on Saturday morning, Kennedy made progress on getting the riders on to Montgomery. Once more Shuttlesworth, announced he was riding the bus, and was again arrested for "refusing to move." The bus left the station under a motorcycle escort, to be met at the city limits by "sixteen state police cars and a highway patrol airplane."⁸⁵

Police protection vanished at the Montgomery city limits and the Freedom Riders again met violence at the Greyhound station. At a mass meeting the next evening, attendees along with Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Fred Shuttlesworth were held hostage by a mob outside the building. Following communication between King, Kennedy, and Governor Patterson, martial law was declared and the churchgoers were released under armed guard. After several days of tense negotiations with state and local officials, Attorney General Robert Kennedy worked out a compromise with Alabama officials that would guarantee the Freedom Riders safe passage out of Alabama.⁸⁶

⁸³ Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 82.

⁸⁴ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 220-21, 225-26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 227-28, bus driver quote from *Birmingham News*, May 20, 1961.

⁸⁶ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 227-28.

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In Jackson, Mississippi, riders were quickly arrested and jailed. Thereafter, rides continuing throughout the summer kept pressure on Washington to end segregated travel. Six months later, the situation concluded after Robert Kennedy required the Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce its restriction on segregated interstate transportation. In her reflections as a student leader of the Freedom Ride, Diane Nash stated, "Fred was practically a legend. I think it was important—for me definitely, and for a city of people who were carrying on a movement—for there to be somebody that really represented strength, and that's certainly what Fred did. He would not back down, and you could count on it. He would not sell out, [and] you could count on that."⁸⁷

Shortly after the Freedom Rides, at ACMHR's fifth anniversary celebration in June 1961, Shuttlesworth announced his acceptance of the pulpit at Revelation Baptist in Cincinnati, Ohio. In August 1961, Shuttlesworth left for Cincinnati, but remained president of ACMHR.⁸⁸

Birmingham, 1962-1963

Despite ongoing demonstrations and pressure from the ACMHR, only limited gains had been achieved through 1962. The movement had succeeded in integrating the buses and the train and bus terminals, but schools and public accommodations remained segregated, the city had hired no black police officers, and there had been no elevation of black employment. In late December 1962, Shuttlesworth, met with King and encouraged him, as well as the leaders of the nationally based SCLC of the value of joining forces with the ACMHR to force Birmingham to desegregate public accommodations and to end racial preferences in hiring.⁸⁹

Five days later bombers struck Bethel Baptist Church a third time damaging its windows along with the porch supports and roof of the parsonage and the guardhouse. Children in the church basement received minor cuts on their faces.⁹⁰ After the bombing, the *Birmingham News* noted that Bethel Baptist was renowned as Shuttlesworth's church, the place of refuge for the battered Freedom Riders in May of 1961. They were unclear as to why it was bombed almost a year after Shuttlesworth had left because the new pastor had not permitted any civil rights meetings in the church. In a wire to President Kennedy, King said "Once more we have been shocked by the bombing of Bethel Baptist Church." Asking for help, King described Birmingham as "by far the worst big city in race relations in the United States. Much of what has gone on has had the tacit consent of high public officials."⁹¹ With other prominent black leaders, King attended a White House meeting with the president about American-African relations. King then met alone with Kennedy to talk about the church bombing "and the need for a stronger stance on civil rights." All to no avail as Kennedy cited Congressional doom to any proposed civil rights legislation.⁹²

When the SCLC protests began with ACMHR in Birmingham in the spring of 1963, the protests took on six goals that, like the long-time movement in Birmingham, were a broad slated attack on segregation. Among the goals were desegregating stores, providing equal employment opportunity for blacks in city government, and reopening and integrating the closed city recreation facilities.⁹³ Thereafter, in the following summer Meier assessed the movement: "Civil rights organizations now make several demands together in a package, rather than fighting on single issues, as before, and are no longer satisfied with tokenism. The result is that the rate of

⁸⁷ Manis, *Fire You Can't Put Out*, 279, in a telephone interview with Diane Nash, March 4, 1989.

⁸⁸ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 244; Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 194.

⁸⁹ Manis, *Fire You Can't Put Out*, 328

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 328-29.

⁹¹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 683-84, citing correspondence from Dec. 15, 1962.

⁹² Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 225.

⁹³ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 222.

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change is being accelerated, and the Kennedy administration has been brought to seriously commit itself to sponsor major legislative remedies.”⁹⁴ While not reaching all the goals in Birmingham, the protests led to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prohibited segregated public accommodations and expanded the right of black citizens in the U.S.

In September 1963, Shuttlesworth received the Rosa Parks Award with the recognition that “no man better characterizes the enormous power of mass direct action, relentlessly and continuously applied.”⁹⁵ In 2001, President Clinton awarded a Presidential Citizens Medal to Reverend Shuttlesworth “in recognition of U.S. citizens who have performed exemplary deeds of service for our nation.” The citation read: “As Founder of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and Co-Founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth endured imprisonment, assault, and the bombing of his home to integrate Birmingham’s public facilities. A hero of the civil rights movement and a freedom fighter motivated by his faith in God, he taught all Americans that freedom and justice are worth any price.”⁹⁶ As of this date, Reverend Shuttlesworth remains active in civil rights as interim president of SCLC.

Overall, the church-led movement of the 1950s and the 1961 Freedom Ride were defining events in American civil rights history. Within an air of massive resistance to the U.S. Supreme Court’s rulings in *Brown v. Board of Education* and discriminating transportation cases, new factors took hold to alter history. Nonviolent direct action in the South, attention from the federal government in light of international aspects, and a change in some white public opinion produced a new air of confidence for blacks. Meier cites blacks as unwilling “to accept the humiliations of second-class citizenship, and consequently these humiliations . . . appeared to be more intolerable than ever. This increasing impatience—and disillusionment—of Negroes accounted for the rising tempo of nonviolent direct action in the later 1950s which culminated in the student sit-ins and the Freedom Ride of 1960-1961.”⁹⁷ It was, as Meier states, a “revolution in expectations.”

Comparison of Properties

In regard to the church-led early civil rights movement, the Bethel Baptist Church, parsonage and guardhouse are specifically associated with the ACMHR. Although mass meetings were held in other churches besides Bethel, it was Bethel that served as the organization’s headquarters.

In regard to the Freedom Ride, the 2003 draft “Racial Desegregation of Public Accommodations” National Historic Landmarks theme study recommends other extant properties for further consideration. These include the Greyhound and Trailways bus stations in Anniston, the Greyhound bus station in Birmingham, and the Greyhound bus station and First Baptist Church in Montgomery. Each of these properties represents the unfolding and interrelated aspect of the Freedom Ride. The Anniston sites for the beginning of the violence that met CORE’s goals of attracting federal attention. The Birmingham sites for the second round of violence and as the coordination and turning point for continuation of the Freedom Ride. The station in Montgomery for the third and final round of violence prompting federal marshals, and the church for the stand-off between church-goers and segregationist. In combination, these sites reflect the essence of the Freedom Ride and segregation in the South.

These two property types, bus stations and churches, represent two distinct aspects of the Freedom Rides. One

⁹⁴ Meier, “Negro Protest Movements and Organizations,” 447-48.

⁹⁵ Manis, *Fire You Can’t Put Out*, 408, quoted in *New York Times*.

⁹⁶ The White House, “President Clinton Awards the Presidential Citizens Medals,” www.clinton5/nara.gov/WH/new/html/Mon_Jan_8_141714_2001.html.

⁹⁷ Meier, “Negro Protest Movements and Organizations,” 441.

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being the ride's focus to desegregate bus terminals and the second being the value of the black church in supporting the civil rights movement and the Freedom Ride. The Bethel Baptist Church and parsonage were significant as a place of refuge for Freedom Riders in both Anniston and Birmingham. It was the coordination and command center between ACMHR, the Kennedy administration, CORE and SNCC that was paramount to reaching the Freedom Ride's goals.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #AL-977
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: Under 1 acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	16	518240	7112410

Verbal Boundary Description:

For the Guardhouse (Revis House) and the parsonage the boundary include Lots 53 and 51, Block 4 of Eborn's Addition to North Birmingham. For the church the boundary includes Lots 27 and 28 of Block 3 of Whitney, Gayle & Vann Subdivision.

Boundary Justification:

These are the parcels historically associated with the properties. The church property includes its original parcel and the parcel that contained the parsonage destroyed in 1956 and which now contains the church's parking lot.

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DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
April 05, 2005