

“There IS a Balm in Gilead: Healing From The Events Of 1963” Conference
Presented by: The Historic Bethel Baptist Church Community Restoration Fund

The ***“There IS a Balm in Gilead: Healing From The Events Of 1963,” National Healing Conference*** offers a unique opportunity for educators to participate in an in-depth, interactive field study and conference focused on the Modern Civil Rights Movement and the pivotal role that Birmingham, Alabama played in making the promises of the U. S. Constitution a greater reality for more Americans. Teachers will trace the role of protest in American history as a tool used to obtain civil liberties and civil rights by examining events in Birmingham, Alabama that impacted not only our state and nation but the world. There will be over thirty breakout sessions presented by teachers, scholars, community leaders, National Park Rangers, as well as nationally and internationally acclaimed speakers. The conference experience includes visits to key sites of memory in Birmingham that are so deeply intertwined with the Modern Civil Rights Movement that they can never be separated.

“But for Birmingham, we would not be here today.” This statement, made by President John F. Kennedy at a meeting in the White House with Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, the architect of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other movement leaders emphasize the significance of Birmingham and its role in the Modern Civil Rights Movement.

The struggles for freedom and equality that played out in the streets of Birmingham greeted citizens in the United States and people around the world every day and night by way of television news reports and newspaper headlines. Once children took the lead in the freedom struggle, there was no turning back. With images of school children facing policemen in riot gear, firemen with high-powered fire hoses, Eugene “Bull” Connor - the police commissioner in a white tank, and German shepherd police dogs biting bystanders, the attention of the world was focused on Birmingham in 1963. Linked arm in arm with a resolve that they wouldn’t let anyone turn them around, these young foot soldiers marched into the annals of American history and set free a city once dubbed as the most segregated city in America. It is most fitting that 60 years later we still look to Birmingham to find solace and healing.

In 2023, as the nation remembers the events that took place in Birmingham, Alabama during the 1960s, it is important that schoolteachers come here to study the events of that era and

examine how events here changed the world. To fully understand the background and accomplishments of the “Modern Civil Rights Movement” we will examine the economic, social, political, cultural, and judicial institutions that crafted Jim Crow and set the nation on a course with destiny that erupted on a bus in Montgomery, climaxed in the streets of Birmingham, and set a course for the Alabama State Capitol via a bridge in Selma for the right to vote.

Historic Bethel Baptist Church, where Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth served as pastor from 1953-1961, will serve as a venue for teacher workshops. Visiting Bethel will help educators gain a deeper insight and understanding of how the efforts of movement leaders, working-class people, and the courage of children in Birmingham broke the back of segregation in “*America’s Johannesburg.*”

The State of Alabama is synonymous with Civil Rights. Landmark cities like Birmingham have left an indelible mark in the minds of people around the world. Looking back over the last 60 years of American history, the United States has made monumental progress as it relates to the cause of civil liberties and civil rights. Separate drinking fountains and restrooms, "colored balconies" in movie theaters, and seats in the back of the bus are memories of the United States that are incomprehensible to students today.

The Modern Civil Rights Movement forced the nation to re-think, re-examine, and re-structure how it dealt with issues of race, justice, and citizenship. Using a combination of lectures, stimulating presentations, documentary films, first-hand accounts from history makers, travel, and primary and secondary source documents, teachers will examine how the political, social, economic, and cultural institutions of the United States of America were changed as a result of the events that took place in Birmingham, Alabama.

Master teachers from the 2022, “*Stony the Road We Trod . . .*” *Exploring Alabama’s Civil Rights Legacy Institute* cohort, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities will model and present several immersive and interactive sessions designed to help teachers make curricular connections and explore instructional strategies designed to keep students interested, involved, and motivated.

It is generally hot in Alabama during September. Morning and afternoon showers are common. Be sure to bring an umbrella, comfortable shoes, sunscreen, sunglasses, a hat, a jacket or sweater for when we are inside buildings, and a laptop or tablet.

Host City – Birmingham

The meteoric rise of Birmingham from the place where two railroad lines intersected to a place that forever changed the social, cultural, political, economic, and judicial landscape of the United



Figure 1: The Magic City sign was erected in 1926 and stood outside of the Terminal Train Station.

States of America, and inspired freedom struggles around the world is nothing short of phenomenal.

In 1871 the city of Birmingham rose out of the center of a corn field in Jones Valley to become the industrial capital of the State of Alabama. The mild weather, the valleys and mountains of potential wealth waiting to be harvested, the flora and fauna, broad avenues, and the “bee-hives” of cultural

and social activities of this “New South,” city welcomed migrants from across the nation, immigrants from Northern and Southern Europe, farmers, as well as newly freed enslaved people from across the “Deep South.”

The surrounding red ore fields and the mountains of black coal attracted them all. They all saw an opportunity to make a living in Birmingham and improve their overall quality of life. As the iron and steel industries continued to catapult forward, so did the amazing growth of Birmingham. The young city sprang up, thrived, and grew so quickly that many observers said it happened “just like magic.” Soon the nickname “The Magic City” was applied to Birmingham.

Rapid growth brought with it a plethora of social, economic, cultural, and political baggage that would shape and define Birmingham’s role in U.S. history for the next one hundred-plus years.

Birmingham was built by land barons at a time when railroads literally ran the country. Named after England’s industrial giant, the new town became a commercial hub, with railroads crisscrossing throughout the city.

Nearly wiped out by cholera and then by an economic depression in the late 1870s, the little boomtown found its resurgence in a natural abundance of coal, iron ore, and limestone, all the ingredients necessary to make steel. Then, the steel-making industry took off in a big way and so did Birmingham!

Throughout the Great Depression, Birmingham used “Yankee” capital and an infusion of labor from European immigrants, planting the beginnings of the city’s strongly diverse ethnic character.



Figure 2: The "Big Three:" Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rev. Ralph Abernathy

The Civil Rights Years

After a shaky post-World War II recovery, Birmingham entered the decade of the 1950s with pots of frustrations brewing and boiling over in communities all over the city.

Returning veterans who had fought for freedom in Europe sought those same freedoms for themselves and their families. Denied equal access and justice

in the courts, they sought it in the streets in organized protest marches, sit-ins, pray-ins, and by applying economic pressure in the form of selective buying campaigns. Leaders in the African American community, like Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth and the pastors of the sixty churches that supported him, followed the example of other frustrated people across the state of Alabama and around the United States and launched new strategies in an ever-growing effort to obtain “First Class” citizenship.



Figure 3: Rev. Shuttlesworth inside Historic Bethel Baptist Church with previous "Stony . . ." Institute participants.

“It Began at Bethel”

The recognized leaders of the Modern Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham were Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, the congregation of the Historic Bethel Baptist Church, and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights.

During the height of the “Movement,” the Bethel parsonage and church survived three bombings. Most cities had freedom struggles

that focused on one area of injustice, the bus. What was different in Birmingham was the fact that Rev. Shuttlesworth attacked segregation at all levels. He sought justice in all of its forms including access to public schools, public libraries, job opportunities, the right to vote, the right to seek public office, drink from water fountains, access to public restrooms, the right to be served meals in restaurants, the right to be treated fairly and justly in the courts, as well as the right to sit in any open seat on city buses.

The 1960s brought events that would forever change the “magic” of the city. This was the historic era of police dogs and fire hoses turned on civil rights demonstrators and the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where four young girls were killed and another severely injured as they prepared to participate in Youth Day services. The city’s national reputation was near ruins. Nonetheless, it was the occurrences in Birmingham that played a pivotal role in the success of America’s Modern Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, Rev. Shuttlesworth finally convinced Rev. Dr. Martin L. King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to come to Birmingham and join him in the freedom struggles in Birmingham.