

PREFACE

When I was growing up in South Texas, I learned about democracy. Ancient Greece sketched it. The Magna Carta imagined it. Then Thomas Jefferson enacted it when he inscribed the glorious words of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

My teachers added that the grandeur of this sentence was affirmed by George Washington at Yorktown and reaffirmed by Davy Crockett at the Alamo. The wondrous words were further elevated by Abraham Lincoln who, at Gettysburg, recognized that the nation was “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” And their meaning was permanently secured when General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox. My college professors confirmed my earlier lessons about Yorktown, the Alamo, Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Appomattox.

Somehow none of my teachers noticed that, instead of promoting life, liberty and happiness for all, Washington and Jefferson owned slaves. None of my instructors ever said that Jefferson fathered children by his captive mistress. None of them observed that the defenders of the Alamo also held people in shackles. None of them alerted us that the rights of life, liberty, and happiness were violated routinely when mobs wantonly lynched innocent people over many decades. Nor did they relate that, for a weed-choked century after Lee’s surrender, liberty disappeared as slavery re-emerged under a new name--sharecropping.

They also forgot Birmingham.

You ask, “What was Birmingham?” If you are looking for a moment when the world jumped away from tyranny toward democracy, gaze at Birmingham. *Stare* at Birmingham. Place it under the highest-powered microscope you can find. *Keep staring*.

Birmingham withstands scrutiny. Martin Luther King’s close friend claims that Birmingham saved King from being finished as a national leader. It also served as the climax for the entire civil rights movement. Bloodbaths accompanied victories at Yorktown, the Alamo, Vicksburg, and Gettysburg. By contrast, Christian nonviolence triumphed at Birmingham. For that reason, Birmingham still serves as a wellspring for future, positive social change. That’s why we all need to understand Birmingham.

King is honored by a national holiday and by a huge marble statue on the edge of the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Officials in Birmingham honored another figure of the Birmingham campaign, Fred Shuttlesworth, by naming the city’s airport after him and by placing his statue in a prominent park.

But, as you will learn in this book, King did not venture to Birmingham because of Shuttlesworth; nor did the two of them generate the victory there. Instead, many people followed *numerous* leaders in the Birmingham mass movement. Now largely forgotten, one of them, Charles Billups, collaborated closely with Shuttlesworth at practically every point. This book illuminates that close cooperation. It also establishes--for the first time--Billups' participation in key meetings of King's inner circle at the Gaston Motel. In addition, it provides the most detailed and most accurate account of Billups' leadership of a march that King saluted as a peak moment in the history of nonviolence. Saved by Birmingham, King valued Billups so much that he chose Billups--and no one else from Birmingham--to help him campaign in Chicago.

But a tragedy prevented Billups from telling his own story. And, for decades, the trauma suffered by his family blocked them from speaking about it. The children of King, Malcolm X, and other racial pioneers often experienced trauma. Unlike their parents, they did not knowingly agree to assume the hazards of the movement; yet those hazards found them anyway. Very few of those children have spoken candidly and at length about their pain and loss.

In this book, Rene Billups Baker breaks the silence. She testifies to the sacrifice and costs incurred on route to the triumph of Birmingham. She also provides her original and thoroughly credible memories of King, whom she knew as a girl, memories that appear in no other book. And she informs us about her marriage to her husband, Winston Baker, as they together spent decades helping each other overcome trauma.

Most importantly, she candidly shares her closeness with her father. Like no one else, she reveals the courage that led him to pray his way out of a lynching. She also illuminates the march in which he directly confronted the notorious Bull Connor and shut down Connor's water cannons. As King recognized, at that moment Charles Billups walked hundreds of people out of slavery and helped shove Birmingham into history. This book helps us understand how that happened.

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