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Church Burnings

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On 15 September 1963 a bomb exploded in the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. The ensuing fire and death of four little girls

placed the violence of white supremacy on the front pages of the nation's newspapers. It also entered the 16th Street Church into a long history of attacks against houses of worship in the American South. Though churches burn for any number of reasons, including accident and insurance fraud, church arson in southern culture has frequently been associated with a symbolic assault on a community's core institution.

Because of the South's particular history of racial conflict, burning a predominately black or multiracial church has held even greater significance. In 1822 an African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, S.C., was burned as retribution for allegedly hosting a planning meeting for a slave insurrection. The attack presaged a key method of intimidating and controlling black southerners after emancipation. Barred from participation in most civic institutions in the South for a century after Reconstruction, black southerners turned churches into spiritual homes, community centers, and organizational clearinghouses.

Black church burnings have seemed to increase in moments of black assertion, such as the Reconstruction years, the hopeful days following World War I, and especially the civil rights activism of the 1960s. Reconstruction saw political assertiveness by African Americans trying to exercise their citizenship rights and develop cultural institutions, with black churches separate from whites emerging as a key focus for a variety of activities. Black churches became political organizing sites, often allied with the Union League. Whites burned black churches to intimidate black aspirations. In the 20th century, some southern whites expelled all blacks in their communities, burning churches to prevent their use as sanctuaries. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, 92 black churches were attacked between 1963 and 1966. In the first two years of the period, more than 50 black churches were burned in Mississippi alone. These tragedies fit into a general pattern of white violence against black liberation.

In the mid-1990s, a spike in church burnings ignited a debate among Americans about the persistence of racism in American society. Though arson is the leading cause of church fires around the country, from the 1980s through 1994 the statistical trend had been downward. Suddenly, in 1995 it seemed that churches were being lit up everywhere. And black churches were frequent targets. Though more white churches burned, the share of black churches being burned was significantly out of proportion with the black population in the United States, especially in the South. In the worst year, 1996, 117 black churches were attacked, 88 of which were in the South.

Though civil rights leaders like Jesse Jackson, Joseph Lowery, and Myrlie

Evers-Williams insisted that a pattern was developing that strongly suggested conspiracy, Assistant Attorney General Deval Patrick asserted that no evidence existed for an organized effort by a specific hate group. Patrick added, however, that the absence of a conspiracy did not mean that the attacks were not racially motivated. The successful prosecution of a Ku Klux Klan organization for an arson attack on a black church in 1995 in Bloomville, S.C., seemed to confirm Patrick's point. Some conservative politicians and commentators declared that civil rights activists had falsely created the media hype around black church burnings. Nonetheless, between 1995 and 1997, African American churches were four times as likely to be burned as white churches.

In June 1996 Congress unanimously passed the Church Arson Prevention Act. The new law made it easier to prosecute arson attacks against houses of worship, increased the maximum sentence to 20 years, and created a $10 million federal loan program for rebuilding. Private efforts, such as those coordinated by the multiracial National Council of Churches, yielded millions more dollars as well as thousands of volunteers who traveled to burn sites to help with reconstruction. By 2000 the rate of arsons had decreased. Yet, the deliberate burning of 10 Alabama churches—five predominately black, five white—in a single week in 2006 suggested that church burning has not lost its terrible appeal in southern life.

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