

Letter from Birmingham Jail: Birmingham in the 1960's

The following is King's description of Birmingham in 1963. A complimentary primary source document is Birmingham's Racial Segregation Ordinances.

Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Book, 1998)

If you had visited Birmingham before the third of April in the one hundredth-anniversary year of the Negro's emancipation, you might have come to a startling conclusion. You might have concluded that here was a city which had been trapped for decades in a Rip Van Winkle slumber; a city whose fathers had apparently never heard of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, the Bill of Rights, the Preamble to the Constitution, The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, or the 1954 decision of the United States Supreme Court outlawing segregation in the public schools.

If your powers of imagination are great enough to enable you to place yourself in the position of a Negro baby born and brought up to physical maturity in Birmingham, you would picture your life in the following manner:

You would be born in a Jim Crow hospital to parents who probably lived in a ghetto. You would attend a Jim Crow school. You would spend your childhood playing mainly in the streets because the "colored" parks were abysmally inadequate. When a federal court order banned park segregation, you would find that Birmingham closed down its parks and gave up its baseball team rather than integrate them.

If you went shopping with your mother or father, you would trudge along as they purchased at every counter except one, in the large or small stores. If you were hungry or thirsty, you would have to forget about it until you got back to the Negro section of town, for in your city it was a violation of the law to serve food to Negroes at the same counter with whites.

If your family attended church, you would go to a Negro church. If you attended your own Negro church and wanted to play safe, you might select a church that didn't have a pastor with a reputation for speaking out on civil rights. If you wanted to visit a church attended by white people, you would not be welcome. For although your white fellow citizens would insist that they were Christians, they practiced segregation as rigidly in the house of God as they did in the theater.

If you wanted to contribute to and be a part of the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, you would not have been able to join a local branch. In the state of Alabama, segregationist authorities had been successful in enjoining the NAACP from performing its civil rights work by declaring it a "foreign corporation" and rendering its activities illegal.

If you wanted a job in this city—one of the greatest iron- and steel producing centers in the nation—you had better settle on doing menial work as a porter or laborer. If you were fortunate enough to get a job, you could expect that promotions to a better status or more pay would come, not to you, but to a white employee regardless of your comparative talents.

If you believed your history books and thought of America as a country whose governing officials—whether city, state, or nation—are selected by the governed, you would be swiftly disillusioned when you tried to exercise your right to register and vote. Your race, constituting two-fifths of the city's population, would have made up one-eighth of its voting strength.

You would be living in a city where brutality directed against Negroes was an unquestioned and unchallenged reality. One of the city commissioners, a member of the body that ruled municipal affairs, would be Eugene "Bull" Connor, a racist who prided himself on knowing how to handle the Negro and keep him in his "place." As commissioner of public safety, Bull Connor, entrenched for many years in a key position in the

Birmingham power structure, displayed as much contempt for the rights of the Negro as he did defiance for the authority of the federal government.

You would have found a general atmosphere of violence and brutality in Birmingham. Local racists intimidated, mobbed, and even killed Negroes with impunity. One of the more vivid examples of the terror of Birmingham was the castration of a Negro man, whose mutilated body had then been abandoned on a lonely road. No Negro home was protected from bombings and burnings. From the year 1957 through January 1963, while Birmingham was still claiming that its Negroes were "satisfied," seventeen unsolved bombings of Negro churches and homes of civil rights leaders occurred.

In Connor's Birmingham, the silent password was fear. It was a fear not only on the part of the black oppressed, but also in the hearts of the white oppressors. Certainly Birmingham had its white moderates who disapproved of Bull Connor's tactics. Certainly Birmingham had its decent white citizens who privately deplored the maltreatment of Negroes. But they remained publicly silent. It was a silence born of fear-fear of social, political, and economic reprisals. The ultimate tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people.

In Birmingham, you would be living in a community where the white man's long-lived tyranny had cowed your people, led them to abandon hope, and developed in them a false sense of inferiority. You would be living in a city where the representatives of economic and political power refused to even discuss social justice with the leaders of your people.

You would be living in the largest city of a police state, presided over by a governor-George Wallace-whose inauguration vow had been a pledge of "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" You would be living, in fact, in the most segregated city in America.