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THE EXPLOSIVE HISTORY OF BIRMINGHAM: HOW THE CITY'S PAST FORGED THE FUTURE OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Kendra Bell

Many know the city of Birmingham for its industrial footprint in the scope of American history, its unique conglomerate of natural resources, and the role it played in the advancement of the Civil Rights Movement. Racial disparities within the historic city have existed since its conception. This principle led to the understanding of Birmingham by many people, including Martin Luther King Jr., as “the most segregated city in America.”¹ As society roots issues of race much deeper than simply the color of one’s skin, the effects of racist sentiments understandably transcend further than the popular notion of segregation. This research aims to dissect these effects and discover other hidden manifestations of racial inequalities in Birmingham by examining the history of natural resource industries alongside the intentional racial redistricting of the working class and the housing market. The administration that was developed to cultivate the coal and steel industries is linked to societal restrictions that propelled Jim Crow policies, in all facets of society, and resulted in violent hate crimes. Politics, economy, and society are surveyed from the beginning of Birmingham’s influence to the 1960s, when the events on Dynamite Hill spurred Birmingham to take action within the Civil Rights Movement.

The location, at first, did not attract the attention of settlers. In fact, they described it as resembling a swamp with cornfields.² However, beneath the surface of the area lay the materials that made Birmingham a prime location for economic potential. The region houses a unique combination of various natural resources such as bituminous coal, iron deposits, limestone, and a diverse ecosystem within the Cahaba River. Settlers eventually took advantage of these resources following the development of mining and iron-producing facilities, which began during the time of the Civil War.³ Later, President Johnson sent farmers to occupy the valley during Reconstruction, long before the establishment of the city. John Milner, a leader in the mining industry, also

surveyed the land and, realizing its potential, called it Birmingham in hopes it would mimic the manufacturing hub of Europe that shared its namesake.⁴ Those that came after intended to mold the ‘City of Perpetual Promise’ in a way that would curate a national industrial powerhouse.⁵ To clarify, industrialists’ motivation to establish a separate regional identity, rather than extend the influence of nearby Elyton, centered on capital gain. The belief was that the formation of a new town would act as a clean slate for economic possibilities. With no previous economic or political limitations in public policy, emerging industry leaders could dictate the future of their enterprises and careers without restrictions.⁶ Another leader in the iron industry, Abram A. Hewitt, projected that only one year after Birmingham’s establishment, “...Alabama is to be the manufacturing center of the habitable globe.”⁷ As early as the formation of the city, the propulsion of the manufacturing industry was intertwined in the city’s legacy.

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The need for a dependable labor force persisted within those industrial blueprints, while the post-civil war era in the American South confronted the issues of a labor shortage. Reconstruction instituted many policies to alleviate this stress on Southern business owners. These policies, riddled in racist idealism, accounted for the growth which earned Birmingham the nickname, the Magic City. For example, the implementation of convict labor perpetuated racial profiling alongside many other social issues that become apparent as the city develops. For the sake of a well-rounded understanding of the

subject, the population itself is evaluated to perceive how Birmingham's economic and cultural structure affected its inhabitants.

The largest component of the labor force that drove the coal and steel industries were leased convicts. Convict labor allowed for industrial growth through the state's ability to rent the labor of convicts to areas like the mining communities in and around Birmingham, resulting in the development of mining towns, sometimes separated by race. The use of labor leasing led to an industrial reliance on the systematic exploitation of predominantly African-American Alabamians. Since convict labor offered a potential solution to the labor shortage, the state needed a surplus of convicts. One way this was achieved was the implementation of vagrancy laws in Alabama. Constructed after the end of the Civil War, these laws allowed law enforcement to target, arrest, and sell African-Americans as convict laborers for trivial offenses such as appearing to be without work, gambling, or homelessness.⁸ Their sentences were often comprised of contracts which sold their labor for months at a time with no option for appeal and, in many cases, the court system was willing to waive the prospect of hard labor for whites, leaving the convict labor population disproportionately African-American.⁹ Because of this law, the ability to racially target and sell people for work was codified and backed by the state administration and accepted by southern industrialists. By extension, the development of social stigmas and racist ideologies against the African-American community were perpetuated by the utilization of the convict labor system and vagrancy laws, allowing for these perceptions to disseminate into political practices within the city.

An example of this is the election that ultimately authorized Birmingham as the county seat, rather than an extension of the nearby town of Elyton. Robert Henley, a resident of Elyton, was elected as the first mayor of Birmingham. His behaviors regarding the electoral process represents how these exploitations become systematic and are visible within the local political machine. To some degree, the practice of inhibiting full political participation of African-Americans in this context was developed to deter populism and undermine advancements made by the local Bourbons, or the more conservative members of

the Democratic Party in the South. To ensure a majority vote in his favor, Henley transported a number of African-Americans on trains the day of the election and attempted to influence them to vote for his views.¹⁰ Many were unaware that the result of this election and Henley's political plans was going to affect the role of African-Americans in both the labor force and in Birmingham. In fact, after this election, the labor force fueling the furnaces was described as, "...almost entirely negro," as African-American workers were restricted to 'unskilled' labor that was utilized in nearly all Birmingham-area furnaces in 1889¹¹ The attitudes held by white employers and employees alike, were paralleled with the racist sentiments held by many in the years following the Civil War. Though they were dependent on the convicts and black working population for capital gain and economic stability, they maintain the perception of African-Americans as unintelligent with behavioral qualities aligning with barbarism.¹² Those living in Birmingham held these sentiments deeply and they are reflected in the social stratification of residency.

Arguably one of the most problematic practices within Birmingham's administrative history is that of redlining. Redlining occurs when certain demographics or groups of people within a particular region are withheld from receiving benefits or aid in various ways.¹³ Originally, this practice in Birmingham was not an indication of racial segregation. Rather, the implementation of redlining acted as a tool for people within the community to remain considerably moral by keeping brothels and saloons under regulation.¹⁴ During daylight hours, known sex-workers and the like were treated with disregard in a public setting, as well as the local architectural ordinances did not allow for these businesses to be near major areas in the city. Essentially, lawmakers kept sex-workers from occupying living spaces in the vicinity of devout Baptists that occupied much of Birmingham. Not long after, the target of redlining changed populations dramatically to focus heavily on the African-American community. At this point, redlining practices in the Jim Crow South disengaged desegregation efforts, limiting both the economic and nuclear mobility of African-Americans. Numerous instances of banks refusing substantial loans to African-

Americans, even if they possessed adequate collateral, constitutes one of Birmingham's most significant administrative actions against the black community.¹⁵ Resources for fundamental economic and architectural development were intentionally denied in many of the neighborhoods deemed unsuitable to mortgage lenders which reflected areas disproportionately occupied by African-Americans.

Local governments and financial bodies denied the black community acceptable working wages and refused the opportunity for infrastructure development. Without the ability to increase property values, there were no real means to advance in society as most houses were unsellable due to a lack of quality construction and materials. This was an intentional measure to decrease the likelihood of people of color engaging with other parts of Birmingham where whites resided. During and after World War II, the influx of African-Americans returning to the U.S. increased the labor supply, resulting in two possibilities of life after return: with a stroke of luck, find work and relatively thrive within the increase of the middle-class, or confront even more economic hardship without a stable income. Even those that could make a living were still not making enough to compare to many whites within Birmingham, but because they were making more money than before, they no longer qualified for public housing projects.¹⁶ George Leighton, a historian that had offered history through prose, once wrote about the economic setbacks within Birmingham's administration. He stated, "the Southern people, black and white, are poor and every influence has been to keep them so. The concomitants of this poverty have been illiteracy and bigotry, inheritances from the slave system, consolidated by the Civil war," which describes the nature of institutionalized policies.¹⁷ These factors may have contributed to the rise of the homeless population in the city that continues to exist.

Neighborhoods in most cities tend to bleed into one another with few wealth variances within a range of fewer than 5 miles. Birmingham, on the other hand, is known by many for the opposite. If one were to visit the winding roads of Mountain Brook, perhaps designed to intimidate and discourage people of color from traveling through, one would notice the obvious wealth. Yet, if one were to

venture down the hole-ridden streets of Pratt City, they could note the higher concentration of people living in seemingly negligent conditions. These are clear indications of the effects of redlining which conclude the reality that city residents are still struggling to break free from the restrictions that redlining has enacted.

Redlining was not just a facet of Birmingham culture, but a national phenomenon. In 1943, the U.S. government established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) to supplement the increasing number of foreclosures that resulted from the Great Depression.¹⁸ It was during this time that the FHA began surveying and collecting empirical data that could determine which neighborhoods were more likely to cause a loss of investments. These areas are subjected to redlining in places all over the United States including Chicago, North Carolina, and Los Angeles.¹⁹ This practice continued to directly affect the black communities of Birmingham until the 1960s when the FHA dismantled and discontinued the process of selective mortgage programs. However, a theory exists that the highway system of Birmingham was designed in part to perpetuate segregation within and of neighborhoods and aligns with the boundaries of the 1926 racial zoning law of the city.²⁰

It is not just housing that people are struggling with, though. The nationwide economic decline that occurred in 1907 is one of the key moments in which the struggles of the working class of Birmingham are observable. Alongside an inability to acquire sufficient loans, there was also the matter of pay. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, industrial facilities compensated white workers who employed between two and three black workers well. Typically earning \$150.00 per month, white workers earnings equate to a monthly salary of \$4,190.14 in today's standards. African-Americans typically made less than 80% of the salary of their white counterparts, which equals less than \$3,352.11 a month today.²¹ From a historical perspective, for this information to resonate most efficiently, it must be set in the appropriate context. This wage inequality was common across America and still exists without total resolution. However, in the context of Birmingham, this principle is important in the foundation of economic racial disparities: African-Americans having less opportunity to accumulate wealth and better living

“ the dispersal of African-Americans within Birmingham into low-valued estates without the opportunity to receive substantial wage, was the fuse to what would become an incendiary moment in local history.

conditions due to insufficient wages.

From this point onward, the issues surrounding welfare in Birmingham become more prominent. The topic is one that is popular in political discussions with the division between the left and right sides of the political spectrum. That is, whether the responsibility of providing aid for people that have less economic stability belongs to the federal government or from the state, or to neither. Regardless of political opinion, there is an undeniable fact that a large portion of Birmingham's population is in need of aid and that lawmakers established this need early in the city's history. In the beginnings of the 1900s, one of the city's most prominent employers provided most of the social welfare services. The Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company (TCIRC) actually built a medical center to provide care at a low-cost to employees and their respective families. However, to some degree, it is evident that this fact is not representative of humanitarian concern for the public's health, but rather, an investment.

To clarify, shortly before TCIRC established the hospital, the company conducted an investigation and found that there were two main culprits to an increase of a 400% turnover rate in 1912: discontent with the company and employees succumbing to illnesses.²² That same year in Birmingham, reporters estimated six thousand cases of malaria possibly due to lack of sewage and water regulations in the area. To increase the number of employees and decrease the turnover rate, the company felt it necessary to provide some sort of aid.²³ It is important to note that the driving force for the institution of a company hospital was not stemmed from the rise in illness rates of employees, but rather the dramatic

increase and difficulties that accompany a high turnover rate. In 1940, the Housing Authority of the Birmingham district investigated the social and economic qualities of citizens, revealing that roughly 40% of non-white families in the Birmingham-metropolitan area were experiencing economic difficulty and 43.7% experiencing health issues.²⁴ The study conducted consisted of 42,615 families, though the numbers reported do not include families experiencing multiple problems but instead, a singular reported problem per family.²⁵ In reality, the percentages of people of color facing issues and in need of assistance in a variety of areas were most likely much higher. It is becoming clear how the administrative bodies of Birmingham have affected people of color and particularly African-Americans both socially and economically, and how those effects have survived generations.

Center Street, one of the residential tourniquets for the black community in Birmingham, proved to be one of the most significant areas in the city. To explain, it was one of the racially dividing lines within the residential communities in which whites set themselves apart from African-Americans in the area. As aforementioned, the local government established housing developments to construct deep-rooted segregation. The considerable lack of political representation, the maintaining of low wages, and the dispersal of African-Americans within Birmingham into low-valued estates without the opportunity to receive substantial wage, was the fuse to what would become an incendiary moment in local history. Industry leaders rigged elections for their own benefit and set wages low for people of color. Convict labor more or less replaced the practice of slavery in the Southern town. White civilians congregated in pockets of the city to dismantle attempted desegregation, to raise themselves on a social pedestal, and ensure that neighborhoods dominated by people of color were lower in value with little developmental potential. When African-Americans grew tired of the forced conditions of their lives, some decided to cross Center street and move onto the west side, which was the “white side” of the neighborhood. Dramatic responses to neighborhood inclusion and desegregation act is if the utopian-post-industrial suburb is threatened by racial inclusion. One could even argue that those that held the

greatest opposition were in fear. Fear of the possibility that African-Americans, oppressed so intensely for so long, would do more than just move residences across the dividing line of races. Local historian Horace Huntley explains the events of this seemingly harmless relocation as a result of a challenge to white supremacy. The administration and police force supported supremacy in order to discourage upcoming Civil Rights activists.²⁶ Though, their efforts proved ultimately unattainable. Jeff Davis, a member of the community describes the social attitudes prior to the events to Nation Public Radio's (NPR) Debbie Elliot in an interview project revisiting the history of 'Bombingham'. He remembers how the white supremacists of Birmingham contested the arrival of African-Americans in their community, acting on their feelings by bombing Center Street, giving it the nickname, 'Dynamite Hill.' He describes the awareness of danger when decommissioned police cruisers burned rubber up and down the street. "They'd throw that bomb, and we used to marvel at how fast those guys could drive..."²⁷ A series of over forty bombings took place in the area, most of which remain unsolved to this day. Families living in the area had to take special precautions to survive, such as erecting brick walls for protection from bullets and instructing children on safety procedures to remove themselves as much as possible when confronted with the rain of bullets shooting through the windows of their homes.²⁸ Many of those affected would never be able to shake the feelings and images associated with living in Birmingham as a black person. To those of us not subjected to the experiences, it is difficult to comprehend the bravery it took to remain in a city that profited from destroying a person's humanity.

These acts of racial terror continued until an incident which stopped not just the city, but the nation on a dime. In 1963, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church, killing four young girls, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson.²⁹ This moment would spark intense protests to the systems that have been the main topic of discussion on a national

scale. Though events such as this have not stopped and innocent lives of children and young people of color are taken frequently, their murderers supported by the administration, there exists a determination for justice in moments such as this. This determination fuels fighters for true freedom. The legacy of these girls continues to inspire people to participate in the dismantling of social restrictions within the city of Birmingham, the United States of America, and the world at large today.

The Magic City is characterized by its possession of a unique combination of natural resources that allowed the respective industries of coal, steel, and even the railroads to thrive and mark Birmingham as a developing industrial power full of opportunity. However, the underlying policies, practices, and attitudes molded into the economic and societal culture of Birmingham established and maintained a racially exclusive social and political hierarchy. The extensive use of convict labor, exploitation of African-Americans in the workforce, the intentional lack of political representation for the black community in policymaking, the herding of people of color into low-income neighborhoods, the refusal to provide equal opportunity for fiscal advancements through redlining, and the strict social contracts of segregation built the road that would lead to inevitable protest from the oppressed community. The protest was met with immeasurable violence and yet the African-American residents of Birmingham display true resilience in their ability to reside in a city that caused so much cultural, social, and individual destruction. The battle is yet to be won, but that does not mean the progress made is unimportant. Rather, people should evaluate and remember this progress. The true intensity of struggles and observing how deep the oppression is, these are the components of history that supplement revolutionary principles and encourage modern activists to pick up the torch left by those before and to continue the journey to freedom and equality.

ENDNOTES

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