

*In The Shadows of Birmingham: The 1962-1963
Huntsville Civil Rights Movement*

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We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of “separate but equal” has no place

-Brown vs. Board of Education
May 17, 1954

I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever

-Governor George C. Wallace
January 14, 1963

The Civil Rights Movement; to most Americans those four words conjure up mental images of violence, white supremacists, African American leadership, and triumph. Naturally, the two states most associated with the struggle for civil rights are Mississippi and Alabama. It is debatable to conclude that one state was worse or more important than the other. When analyzing Alabama’s role in the overall movement opinions are predominantly based on the key events of three cities: Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham. Montgomery claimed national attention after the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, which made Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. household names. The capital of Alabama obtained further notoriety on May 20, 1961 when Freedom Riders, such as John Lewis, Jim Zwerg, and John Siegenthaler, a representative of the United States government, were badly beaten at the Greyhound bus terminal. Selma will always be etched in the conscience of America. A nation watched on “Bloody Sunday” March 7, 1965 as Alabama state troopers pummeled a peaceful crowd marching as they attempted to cross the Alabama River over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Then there is Birmingham.

Birmingham, undeniably, was the most violent and most racist city in the United States. “Bombingham”, as the most populated city in Alabama was referred, witnessed 8 bombings alone in 1963, all “unsolved”, including the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, which killed four young girls¹. Birmingham was also a prime example of a police state. The leader of the Birmingham Police Department was the infamous Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene “Bull” Conner. According to Bull Conner, the violent use of “police dogs and fire hoses was just standard police procedure for crowd control”². The White House and the country were disgusted as they watched on their black and white television sets, the Birmingham Fire Department ripped the flesh off of children, some as young as 8, with high pressure fire hoses. The Children’s Crusade in the spring of 1963 also saw the arrest of thousands of Birmingham children who were put in the stockyard at the Birmingham Fair Grounds. While Birmingham was receiving warranted national media attention and pressure from the highest levels of government, another major Alabama city had already made significant and historic strides in arena of the Civil Rights Movement. That city is Huntsville, Alabama, a name that rarely comes into the discussion on the topic of civil rights in Alabama. Yet, Huntsville was a pioneer in the area and is home to many historic firsts, such as the first integrated city in the state of Alabama the first integrated public school in the “Heart of Dixie”. This significant feat was accomplished by using many of the same tactics seen in Birmingham, but others were unique, as well. Without the exposure of the national media, accompanied with government worker transplants, and through the use of complete non violent strategies,

¹ George McMillan, “America Spelled Backward” *Life Magazine*, October 11, 1963, 39.

² Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 22.

the movement for equality and social justice in Huntsville cleared a path for the rest of the state and other areas of the Deep South to follow.

When investigating the historiography of the movement in Huntsville, it is determined there are enormous holes. Because the Huntsville Movement for over fifty years has been overshadowed by events in Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham, accurate and authentic information is limited. Currently there are two works on the subject matter. However, neither is dedicated solely to the topic. The two works are *The Agitator's Daughter* (2008) and *Beside the Trouble Waters* (2011). In his autobiography, *Beside the Trouble Waters*, Dr. Sonnie Hereford III, a leader of the Huntsville Movement, with great detail, chronicles some of the key events of the movement. However, this book is a personal history. The same can be said of Sheryll Cashin, the daughter of a movement leader, who authored *The Agitator's Daughter*. To date, there has not been one published extended work dedicated the Huntsville Civil Movement alone. The purpose of this essay is to fill the current gap in historiography, for the subject matter is too historically significant to be continually overlooked and overshadowed.

Located in the Highland Rim region of the southern United States, Huntsville is the county seat of Madison County, Alabama. The Highland Rim is, “the southernmost section of the Interior Low Plateaus province in the Appalachian Highlands Region and is the smallest and northernmost physiographic section in Alabama”³. Because of its rolling hills geography there is a prevarication that the area did not have the number of slaves nor the violence experienced in central and southern Alabama. One noted conflict to that notion was a horrendous occurrence reported by the *Baltimore American* on July 24,

³ Horace Williams and Christine Garrett, eds., *The Alabama Guide: Our People, Resources, and Government* (Montgomery: Alabama Department of Archives and History, 2009), 8.

1900, “Huntsville, Ala., July 23 – Elijah Clark, the negro who yesterday was accused of assaulting Susan priest, a thirteen –year-old girl, was taken from the jail in this city this evening and lynched near the spot where his crime was committed. His body was riddled with bullets”.⁴ Injustices inflicted due to supposed attacks by black men on white females were not uncommon in the South. The Scottsboro Boys, who were pulled off a train twenty miles east of Huntsville, is another shameful example of the malfeasances occurring in this region of northern Alabama.

Demographically, according to the 2011 local census, Huntsville's population was 180,105, with a breakdown of 60% white and 30% black⁵. Historically, that has been the ratio since the early 19th century. Huntsville is home to Redstone Arsenal, a federal military installation and NASA. Both of these institutions, and the contract businesses associated with them; provide the area thousands of jobs and an ever increasing economy. In addition, the decision to place these two Cold War and Space Race institutions in Huntsville would be a critical component as to why Huntsville was the first to successfully integrate. With the building of Redstone, a rocket facility, a group of former Nazi scientists arrived, led by Wernher Von Braun. This led many in African American community to question how these former followers of Adolph Hitler were given full equality and not native born black citizens. However, the ingress of the Germans also brought many workers who were not from the South and did not share the Jim Crow psyche.

Huntsville's history is one rooted in both slavery and, contrastingly, integration.

⁴ “Militia Arrives Too Late For Elijah Clark,” *The Baltimore American*, July 24, 1900. www.blacknewsweekly.com/news135.html [accessed March 26, 2014].

⁵ 2012 U.S Census Report. Accessed at the Madison County Courthouse on July 11, 2013.

Huntsville was founded in 1805 by John Hunt and soon after became the state's first incorporated town in 1811, eight years before Alabama was granted statehood. As more migrating whites arrived to the area, with them arrived slaves of African descent. One historian explains that, “By 1820, almost half of Madison County’s population was enslaved”⁶. One slave would go on to become one of the most important figures in black history; Dred Scott. The *Dred Scott v. Sanford (1857)* decision allowed territories to decide for themselves the issue of slavery and proclaimed citizenship for anyone of color an impossibility, thus making the verdict a contributing factor leading to the American Civil War. Before Scott took his case to the Supreme Court in 1846, he was field hand on the land where present day Oakwood University, a historically black college, in Huntsville is located. During his time in north Alabama, Scott was the property of the Blow family who, “settled in Huntsville, where Peter Blow unsuccessfully tried farming”⁷. Slaves in Huntsville were allowed freedoms unseen in other parts of the Deep South. For example, “Huntsville Negroes worked in cotton presses and in factories in Huntsville. A notice in a Huntsville paper, in 1836, wanted ‘Negroes for work in the flour mills’”⁸. In the factories and mills, such as Dallas Mill where Elijah Clark was lynched, slaves worked alongside poor whites. Huntsville, before the Civil War, had begun integrating the workforce. Reconstruction in Huntsville, as in other areas of the South, had a devastating effect on race relations and fueled white anger. With the intervention of

⁶ Daniel S. Dupre, *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama 1800-1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 2.

⁷ Yoriko Ishida, *Modern and Postmodern Narratives of Race, Gender, and Identity* (New York: Peter Long Publishing, 2010), 218.

⁸ James Benson Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: the University of Alabama Press, 1950) 199.

federal troops and agents during the first year of Reconstruction, the Huntsville elite were targeted. “It was of common occurrence that prominent citizens, members of the proudest and most unyielding were arrested, placed in chains, in some instances, and dragged before the bureau agent, and there in the presence of their former slaves, humiliated, insulted and abused, all, all for the amusement of the agents, and the damning effect it would have over the negroes”.⁹ A second example of humiliation came on February 1, 1866 as a former slave was attacked by the dog of her former master. In contradiction to what was occurring in other areas, her master Russell J. Kelly was “fined \$50 for the assault, a bond of \$500 placed upon him, and he was ordered to pay the girl \$100 for wages owed”¹⁰. Similar instances occurred throughout and after Reconstruction. With the end of Reconstruction and the passage of black codes coupled with Jim Crow laws, Huntsville was now on par with the rest of the South in terms of race relations. African Americans could perform for crowds, yet not a black face could be found in the audience. One such event was a concert performed at the Huntsville Opera House in 1879 by the black boy pianist named Blind Tim¹¹.

By the end of the 19th Century Huntsville was a fully segregated city. African Americans could not dine in white owned establishments, could not stay or even go through the front door of the hotels. African American schools were built, one surrounded on three sides by the city dump, as black children could not attend school with white children. The mindset of superiority had been cemented in the white community and their

⁹ Edward Chambers Betts, *Early History of Huntsville, Alabama: 1804-1870* (Montgomery: The Brown Printing Company, 1916), 107.

¹⁰ Rane G. Pruitt, ed., *Eden of the South: A Chronology of Huntsville, Alabama 1805-2005*(Huntsville: Huntsville- Madison County Library, 2005), 56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

businesses. According to female patients of Dr. Sonnie Hereford III, when buying shoes for their children, mothers could not take their black children to the shoe store to try on a pair of sneakers or shoes for church before purchasing them. If the shoes did not fit the child, it was thought to taint the product; therefore no white person would buy the item. Instead, black mothers and fathers would have to take a sheet of paper, trace the child's foot, and take the paper to the store in order to properly size the shoe.¹² All of that would change as community members, including some Caucasians, banded together to stop the inequality in Huntsville, Alabama. This was the 1962-1963 Huntsville Civil Rights Movement.

The story of the Huntsville Movement cannot be properly chronicled without including two of its leaders, Dr. Sonnie Hereford III and Dr. John Cashin. Being in the medical field, these two had experienced segregation on levels unwitnessed by most. Both men had to attend medical universities outside of the state, as there were no schools in Alabama where a black man could obtain a medical degree. Furthermore, these men had to attend professional development seminars outside the state and, depending on the offerings, outside the United States. Cashin had been beaten severely by a Fayetteville, Tennessee police officer while commuting to school, fueling his desire for change¹³. For Dr. Hereford, the straw that broke the camel's back was the refusal of the *Huntsville Times* to publish a "Just Married" photograph of his new bride Martha. According to Dr. Hereford the editor told him, to publish the picture would destroy the paper's Society Page, but if the doctor could find one published picture of an African American bride in

¹² Unpublished personal interview with Sonnie Hereford III, July 20, 2013.

¹³ Sheryll Cashin, *The Agitator's Daughter* (New York: Public Affairs Publishing, 2008), 115-116.

any newspaper North or South, he would, in turn, publish hers. Hereford stated, “There is no telling how much money I spent on newspapers, and I could not find one. Not in Alabama, Chicago, or New York”¹⁴. Siding with the two medical professionals, the black community of Huntsville wanted a change. They just did not know where to start. That stalemate was altered in January 1962, “that’s when a young man named Hank Thomas showed up.”¹⁵

Hank Thomas, by 1962, was a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement. Thomas was raised in Georgia and St. Augustine, Florida, so he, unlike many members of northern civil rights organizations, had experienced the demeaning life of a southern black man. As a teen he was confined to the unyielding world of low paying manual labor, backbreaking jobs reserved for blacks and poor whites.¹⁶ By the age of 19, Thomas was attending Howard University, where he became one of the youngest members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Thomas, a replacement for his sick roommate, was part of the first wave of Freedom Riders, who set out in 1961 to challenge segregation across the South. Thomas was on the Greyhound bus that was firebombed by the Klu Klux Klan in Anniston, Alabama. After recovering from injuries inflicted in Anniston, the teenage CORE member travelled to cities throughout the South recruiting for the cause. Thomas, with his booming voice, came to Huntsville on January 3, 1962 and immediately began organizing community members and students. According to Thomas, “Huntsville

¹⁴ Unpublished interview with Dr. Sonnie Hereford III, May 29, 2013.

¹⁵ Sonnie Hereford and Jack Ellis, *Beside the Troubled Waters* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 89.

¹⁶ Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and The Struggle for Racial Justice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 68.

was unlike any other city in Alabama”¹⁷. Thomas was not welcomed with open arms. The president of Alabama A & M threatened Thomas with jail if he tried recruiting on campus.¹⁸ Thomas received a similar reception from the administration at Oakwood College. It was not long before word spread of an outside influence stirring up trouble amongst the “blacks” and Thomas was targeted. Less than a week after the Freedom Rider arrived, members of Huntsville KKK poured mustard oil irritant in the seat of Thomas’s vehicle sending him to the hospital. The hospital in Huntsville was segregated which meant white doctors were forbidden to offer assistance. Thomas had to wait in agony until the black doctor, Sonnie Hereford, arrived.¹⁹ This did not deter Thomas and students began exercising sit-ins at local eating establishments. As the sit- ins commenced, the older members of the black community formed the Community Service Committee headed by Cashin, Hereford, and Reverend Ezekial (Zeke) Bell, who was chairman of the committee. As opposed to Birmingham, students were peacefully arrested. According to former police officer Jack Gold, “No handcuffs were used”.²⁰ And Hank Thomas remembered, “The police officers treated us with respect even referring to me as Mr. Thomas. That was the first time in my life I had been referred to as mister by a police officer”.²¹ As many were arrested, some numerous times, the community was being stricken financially, having to post bond to remove the students from the jail. Another strategy had to be implemented. Huntsville did not have the

¹⁷ Unpublished interview with Hank Thomas, August 6, 2013.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Unpublished interview with Jack Gold, July 21, 2013.

²¹ Hank Thomas interview.

resources to ‘fill the jails’ a successful maneuver used in Mississippi during the Freedom Rides. The CSC formed a psychological warfare unit. This unit implemented devastating, yet peaceful strategies. The committee called in Randolph Blackwell for help. Blackwell helped organize the first successful sit-ins in North Carolina, which sparked the national sit-in movement. Blackwell suggested picketing. Blackwell knew no labor union in the United States would stand idly by as people, black or white, were arrested for picketing, the foundation of labor union strikes. Pickets began in Huntsville. Picketers had to be committed to nonviolence. “The only items they could carry were flags, bibles, and signs, not even a fingernail file was allowed”²². Another strategy used, comically, was to use an African American female teacher who had the ability to impersonate vocally. She would call local merchants posing as a white woman. The impersonator would ask the stores their stance on the hiring of black workers and black patrons, as well. This gave the psychological warfare unit an invaluable assessment on which stores to picket. Another tactic involved going to the movies, being turned down for a ticket, and then simply going to the back of the line.²³ This disrupted the flow of paying customers and angered white movie goers. However, by Spring 1962 it was becoming apparent the movement needed a shot in the arm. People had picketed and been arrested without much success or publicity. What the movement needed was motivation.

On March 19, 1962 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Huntsville and spoke at two locations. Dr. King was not as famous in 1962 as he would become, with the help of the events in Birmingham. Needless to say Dr. King's arrival set off a buzz among the African American and Caucasian communities. That night Dr. King delivered a version of

²² Sonnie Hereford III interview

²³ Unpublished interview with Bobby Hayden, August 17, 2013.

his “I Have a Dream” speech at Oakwood University, infusing the movement with much needed life. King also met with CSC leaders and asked if the local paper, *The Huntsville Times*, had been carrying stories of the arrests. At this time neither the Associated Press, nor the United Press International would not carry a story unless published locally. King suggested a story the local paper would have to carry. John Cashin came up with a plan to send his wife and four month old daughter, along with Francis Sims and Martha Hereford, who was seven months pregnant, into a lunch counter for the purpose of getting arrested. Sims had already been a part of the lunch counter movement and had been arrested several times. The three ladies proceeded and were in turn arrested. The story was front page news in the *Huntsville Times* reading, “Pregnant Woman Sentenced to Jail”²⁴, and soon was picked up by the A.P., U.P.I, and *Jet* magazine. After the arrests, the Huntsville Movement, “started picking up some publicity outside the South.”²⁵. It was now time for the Easter Boycott, also known as “Blue Jeans Sunday”. It has been a fact throughout history from English sugar to Montgomery buses, boycotting is one of the most effective nonviolent methods of establishing change. The CSC wanted to hurt the Huntsville merchants where it would be most felt, in the wallet. It was decided, upon the recommendation of Sonnie Hereford, to boycott all suits and dresses in anticipation of the upcoming Easter weekend. In protest, members of the African community would wear blue jeans and denim skirts to church on the holiday. In Huntsville it was illegal to ask anyone to boycott, so inconspicuous business cards were handed out asking. “Are

²⁴ *The Huntsville Times*, April 11, 1962. Archives accessed July 9, 2013.

²⁵ *Beside the Troubled Waters*, 104.

you shopping for segregation, or are you buying freedom?”²⁶ Easter was the holiday when merchants sold the most suits and dresses, and blue jeans had yet to become the fashion it is today. It has been estimated, by Historian Jack Ellis, the city merchants lost close to one million dollars that Easter weekend²⁷. After the Easter Boycott on April 21, 1962, the mayor of Huntsville established an unprecedented Biracial Committee, to include members of both the African American and Caucasian communities. The problem was getting whites to serve on the committee. The first call for members drew zero white participants. It would take another bold move to change this. In May 1962, Dr. Cashin’s mother-in-law, who lived in Philadelphia, made the decision to take the protests to another level and area. She led a small group to New York where they picketed the New York Stock Exchange. The group handed fliers demanding “Don’t Buy in Huntsville”. These handouts outlined the inequality occurring in the “Rocket City”. Upon hearing the news of reactions in New York members of the CSC decided to travel to Chicago and do the same at the Midwest Stock Exchange. This was a scary situation to the leaders and politicians in Huntsville, who did not want to lose the federal contracts supplied by Redstone Arsenal and NASA. The second call for participation on the Biracial Committee, after the protests in the North, yielded success. Merchants were represented, as well as the African American community. With the loss of revenues, coupled with the dreadful idea of Redstone Arsenal pulling out of Huntsville, the city merchants agreed to finally end segregation in public establishments. This historic move is what was called a “quiet victory”, meaning the momentous change was not published in papers, nor

²⁶ Sonnie Hereford III interview.

²⁷ *Beside the Troubled Waters*, 106.

broadcast on the news. Merchants did not take down white only signs, yet, they simply ignored the existence of them. The decision was made to have “trial integrations” on July 9, 10, and 11. Restaurants and public areas were integrated without any arrests or violence. Consequently, in July of 1962, the city of Huntsville became the first fully integrated city in the state of Alabama.

With momentum on the side of the Huntsville African American community, the decision was made to challenge Governor George Wallace's stance on public education. In the Fall of 1962 thirty- five families petitioned the Huntsville City School Board to allow their black students to attend white schools. The motion was denied and after threats from racists and employers, the number of families dwindled to four. The remaining four families took their case to federal court in Birmingham. The families were represented by the late Julius Chambers, who spent a week in Huntsville preparing the case. Chambers would later go on to be the top attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, and was instrumental in winning *Swann v. Charlotte -Mecklenburg Board of Education (1971)*, which mandated public schools provide busing for students to promote the further integration of public schools. No federal court could deny the motion to integrate since it was federal law. According to *Brown vs. Board of Education (1954)*, schools could not remain segregated. On August 14, 1963 a federal judge, without deliberation, ordered “the four students admitted to schools immediately during the first week of September”²⁸. Not only did the judge order the Huntsville school system to integrate; he included all schools in Madison County in his ruling. To no one’s surprise this did not sit well with defiant Alabama Governor

²⁸ Personal papers of Dr. Sonnie Hereford III, accessed July 2013.

George Wallace, who made national headlines by standing in the door of the Admissions Office at the University of Alabama in attempt to block the desegregation of the university. Wallace, one year prior and in typical Wallace fashion, sent state troopers to Huntsville and other school systems. The State Superintendent of Education Austin R. Meadows under the direction of Governor Wallace ordered all school systems trying to integrate closed on Friday September 6, 1963. The schools were closed to all, whites, blacks, teachers, and staff. This outraged the communities, black and white, and, in turn, made Wallace very unpopular with the voting inhabitants of Huntsville. The verbose Wallace could not afford to lose the population base of voters in Huntsville. Historian Dan T. Carter writes, “When the governor had blocked the integration of Huntsville schools, he was at the bottom of the totem pole in popularity”.²⁹ The following Monday the state troopers left the schools in Huntsville allowing them to reopen. On September 9, 1963 Sonnie Hereford III walked his son to school. This stroll in Alabama humidity was different, in that at 8:30 a.m. Sonnie Hereford IV, who went on to graduate from the University of Notre Dame, would become the first black student to attend an integrated school in Alabama. This historic event did not receive any national media attention and little was said in the local newspaper. Alabama was one of the most entrenched areas when it came to segregation, yet when a major wall had been busted through a whisper was heard when a shout would have been deemed appropriate.

The story of the “Rocket City” and the Huntsville Civil Rights Movement is one that should be told. Huntsville has a long history of plight and success involving the African American community. Huntsville is home to Alabama’s first integrated city. And

²⁹ Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 200.

most notably Huntsville is home to the first integrated public school in the history of Alabama, the state that resisted desegregation more than any other in the union Yet, this successful movement remains placed in the shadows of Birmingham. Huntsville did not have the extreme violence. Huntsville did not have Bull Conner. Huntsville did not have the national media exposure. Although the history of Huntsville includes names such as Dred Scott, Hank Thomas, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the success of Huntsville has never been truly included in the overall historiography of the Civil Rights Movement, the state of Alabama or the South. It is the hopes of this writer this work is, not a first step, but a continuation on the path to change this historical oversight. To change; that simply is the Huntsville way.

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This historical study examines the Huntsville Civil Rights Movement and what made the movement both unique and an overwhelming success. The work analyzes the impact Project Paperclip, the relocation of Nazi scientists, had on the Huntsville area and the movement toward civil rights and social justice for African Americans living in the "Rocket City". The book details why this historical study examines the Huntsville Civil Rights Movement and what made the movement both unique and an overwhelming success. The work analyzes the impact Project Paperclip, the relocation of Nazi scientists, had on The Birmingham campaign, also known as the Birmingham movement or Birmingham confrontation, was a movement organized in early 1963 by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to bring attention to the integration efforts of African Americans in Birmingham, Alabama. Led by Martin Luther King Jr., James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth and others, the campaign of nonviolent direct action culminated in widely publicized confrontations between young black students and white civic authorities, and But the civil rights movement had made important progress, and change was on the way. Progress and Protests: 1954-1960. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in Brown v. Board of Education that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. In 1962, James H. Meredith Jr., an African American Air Force veteran, was denied admission to the University of Mississippi, known as "Ole Miss." Meredith attempted to register four times without success. In June 1963, he upheld his promise to "stand in the schoolhouse door" to prevent two black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama. To protect the students and secure their admission, President Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard.