

## The Case of the Wilmington 10

After the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation of schools was unconstitutional in 1954, desegregation proceeded slowly. Many Southern white people and politicians resisted the integration of Black and white students.

In 1969, the City of Wilmington, North Carolina ordered its schools to desegregate and closed its lone historically Black high school, simultaneously laying off the Black teachers, administrators, and staff who worked there. When the Black students enrolled at two local white high schools, they were excluded from athletics and extracurricular clubs. Racial tensions led to fights, expulsions, and arrests of Black students. The tensions also led to local Black students and community members organizing demonstrations.

In 1971, Black students organized a school boycott as a protest. By not attending the schools, the schools lost state funding. Benjamin Chavis was a young, well-recognized organizer in the civil rights movement who had worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was an organizer for the United Church of Christ, which sent Chavis to Wilmington to assist the boycotters in negotiations with the school board.

Tensions continued to escalate when the Ku Klux Klan and another white supremacist group, the Rights of White People, attempted to intimidate the white school superintendent and Black citizens. The groups sent armed patrols into the city's Black neighborhoods to intimidate the boycotters. Gun violence from Rights of White People members became more common, and riots erupted. National Guard troops were deployed in several places in the city. On February 6, 1971, the conflict reached its boiling point. That day, several white-owned businesses were burned, including a store named Mike's Grocery. At the time, Chavis and others were barricaded inside a nearby church. When firefighters arrived at Mike's Grocery, snipers shot at them from the roof of the church, injuring one of the firefighters.

Nine Black men, including Chavis, and one white woman — the Wilmington 10 — were arrested and charged with arson for the firebombing of Mike's Grocery and conspiracy to fire upon emergency personnel (the firefighters). At trial, prosecutor James Stroud's case relied on the testimonies of two Black men who claimed to be in the church on February 6. One of the witnesses, a Black teenager named Allen Hall, testified that Chavis directed the other defendants to commit the arson. The jury of ten white people and two Black people found the Wilmington Ten guilty in 1972, and they were sentenced to a combined 282 years in prison.

The defendants appealed their convictions, and in 1977, Hall and two other witnesses admitted to lying on the stand during the trial in order to get guilty verdicts. In that same year, CBS's national news program *60 Minutes* ran a segment questioning the evidence against the Wilmington 10. A *New York Times* article in 1978 reported evidence that the defendants were framed by the prosecution's witnesses. Based on this new evidence, by 1979 the governor of North Carolina commuted (ended) the sentences of all of the Wilmington 10, and they were no longer imprisoned. In 1980 the U.S. 4th Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the convictions of all ten defendants.

In 2012, after a long campaign for pardons, North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt pardoned the Wilmington 10. The six living members of the Wilmington 10 received compensation for the years they spent in prison for a crime they did not commit.