

## Wilmington Ten

This is the story of 10 civil rights activists who were falsely convicted and incarcerated following a 1971 riot in Wilmington, NC, over school desegregation. Wrongfully convicted of arson and conspiracy, the Wilmington Ten—eight African American high-school students, an African American minister, and a white female social worker—were victims of the racial and political turmoil of the civil rights era.

In January 1971 hundreds of African American students boycotted Wilmington's segregated schools. The white pastor of Gregory Congregational United Church of Christ, Eugene Templeton, offered his integrated church as a gathering place and school alternative. The United Church of Christ's Commission on Racial Justice sent the young Reverend Benjamin Chavis to Wilmington to organize and provide structure for the students. Chavis delivered fiery speeches denouncing segregation and demanding social justice. Images of Chavis speaking to crowds of African Americans with raised fists dominated local news.

Soon members of a Ku Klux Klan affiliate called The Rights of White People arrived. Heavily armed, the white supremacists held meetings in a public park, ratcheting up tension. African American protesters marched repeatedly to City Hall, requesting a citywide curfew to stop the gunfire that night riders aimed at Gregory Congregational Church.

On February 6, 1971, Mike's Grocery, a convenience store a few hundred yards from Gregory Congregational, was firebombed. Responding police and firefighters were met with sniper fire, which they returned, killing an African American teenager. The next day a white man with a pistol was killed in his truck parked near the church. Rumors of guns, dynamite, and bomb-making in Gregory Congregational began to circulate.

Police had compiled a list of people suspected of having participated in the firebombing and shooting. Ultimately 10 were arrested and quickly convicted of arson and conspiracy to assault emergency personnel, based on dubious testimony. The Wilmington Ten—nine African American men (including Ben Chavis) and one white women, a social worker named Anne Turner, were sentenced in 1971. All of them were high-school students except Chavis and Turner. No white supremacists were arrested.

Their story gained international attention. Amnesty International protested their status as political prisoners. Writer James Baldwin, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young, and many others condemned their convictions and long sentences. The UCC raised millions of dollars to pay legal fees for the Wilmington 10. In 1978, thousands of protesters marched in Washington, D.C., demanding their release.

Not long after, all ten were set free. Two years later, the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals voided the convictions on the basis of prosecutorial misconduct by the District Attorney, who it turned out, had coached and bribed the witnesses.

And then, 32 years later, on December 31, 2012, North Carolina Governor Beverly Perdue officially pardoned the Wilmington Ten, saying that their sentences were "tainted by naked racism."

The Rev Dr Ben Chavis went on to become president of the NAACP and later, chief organizer of the Million Man March in 1995.