

# 911 in Black: Exploring Alabama's history of emergency response

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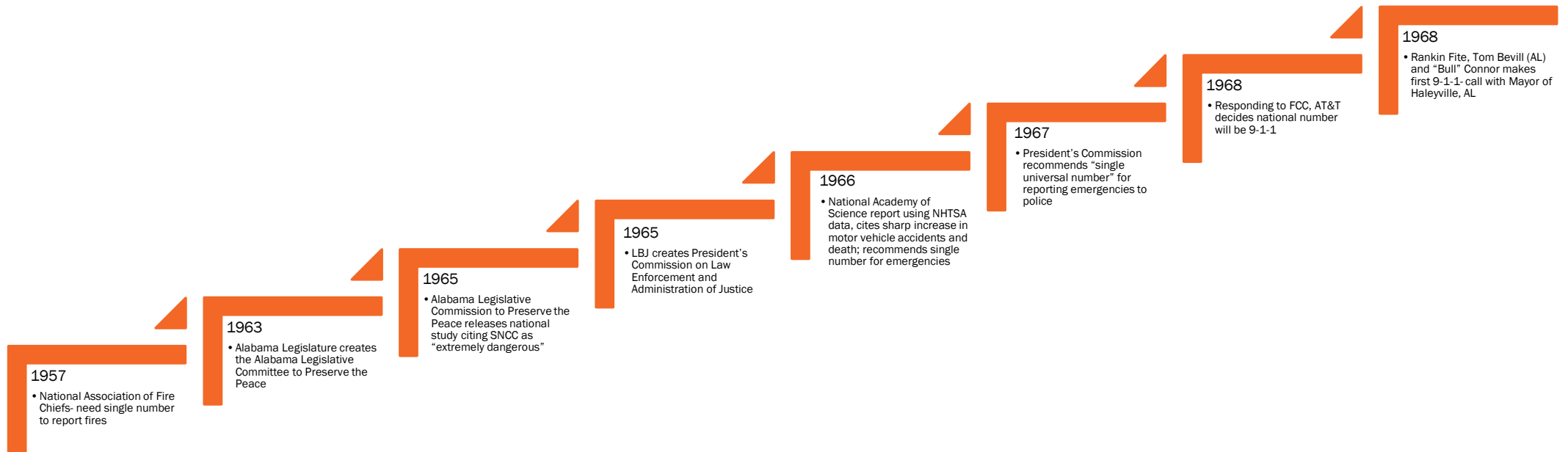
BLACK BELT AFRICAN AMERICAN  
GENEALOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY,  
SELMA, ALABAMA

DR. TARA Y. WHITE, PRESENTER



# History of the 911 System

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- ❖ Call for a “single number” to report fire emergencies nationally as early as 1957 from National Highway Transportation Safety;
- ❖ President Lyndon Johnson creates President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice and committee recommends single number for emergencies in 1965;
- ❖ AT&T selects 9-1-1 as the nationwide emergency number in 1968;
- ❖ Fite and Bevill works with Connor of the PSC and local Alabama Telephone Company to make first emergency 9-1-1 call in Haleyville

# Alabama and 911: The First Call

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- ❖ Alabama is the scene of modern national civil rights protest movement beginning in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott;
- ❖ Alabama Black college students involved in lunch counter sit-ins in 1960: Alabama State College, Miles College, Daniel Payne College;
- ❖ Freedom Rides of 1961 lead to more statewide protests in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery
- ❖ Birmingham Campaign of 1963 places the state back in national spotlight due to Bull Connor's use of brute force, King's arrest and the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four African American girls;
- ❖ State lawmakers in Alabama create a commission "to preserve the peace" in response to civil rights activism and protests across the state in 1963; coordinating with other state and federal law enforcement agencies by 1964
  - ❖ Creators include state Democratic lawmakers John H. Hawkins, Tom Bevill, and Rankin Fite to spy on civil rights groups
  - ❖ Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor elected to state Public Service Commission (PSC) in 1964 after losing mayor's race in 1963
  - ❖ Bevill elected to Congress in 1966
  - ❖ Commission concerned about national fight to contain "anti-communistic" groups, such as SNCC, CORE, SCLC, etc.
- ❖ When 9-1-1 selected by AT&T, Bevill and Fite concerned about eliminating local telephone competition and maintaining control of communications apparatus in Alabama
- ❖ Bevill, Fite and Connor work with mayor of Fite's hometown to place first 9-1-1- call in Haleyville, Alabama



## First 9-1-1 Call in Haleyville, AL

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Picture of U.S. Rep Tom Bevill (D-AL), Eugene "Bull" Connor, and B.W. Gallagher, Alabama Telephone Company

# 911 in Black Alabama: Study

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- ❖ Black Belt African American Genealogical and Historical Society (BBAAGHS) partnered with University of Chicago to conduct focus groups among Black Alabamians to inquire about their experiences with 9-1-1
  - ❖ State divided into 7 Congressional districts for efficiency
  - ❖ Conducted 6 focus groups by Zoom
  - ❖ Total number of respondents: approximately sixty

# 911 in Black Alabama: Findings

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- ❖ Rural/urban/suburban dichotomy
  - ❖ Urban areas do not have same response to 9-1-1 calls as rural/suburban areas; slower response
- ❖ Access to emergency services vastly different
  - ❖ Rural areas do not find 9-1-1 as useful
  - ❖ 9-1-1- does not work as well for rural residents
- ❖ Racial history/racial geography
  - ❖ Even in rural areas, history of racial segregation affects access to services; Black areas often lack services
- ❖ Tuskegee area residents' reluctance to participate: history of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment leads to distrust
- ❖ Next steps:
  - ❖ May need to include more conversations
  - ❖ May need a larger national sample