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**Sacrilege of Slaying in Church Stuns Black Atlanta**

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ATLANTA, July 1 — Churches have always been something extra special in the lives of black Americans, and nowhere more so than in the South.

It is more than mere coincidence that the skyline of Auburn Avenue, Atlanta's most famous black thoroughfare, is dominated by a church steeple and a neon message that reads "Jesus Saves," whereas the skyline of Peachtree Street, Atlanta's most famous white thoroughfare, is dominated by commercial high-rises and a revolving bar.

So black Atlanta tended today to see especial sacrilege in the tragedy that occurred yesterday morning at the eastern end of mile-long "Sweet Auburn" when a black youth gurned down Mrs. Martin Luther King Sr. in the church where her father, her husband and her martyred son had so often preached.

That she should have been sitting at the organ playing the Lord's Prayer, that the gunman should have attacked from the soulful "amen corner," that he should have been wrestled to the ground on the very spot where the King family hopes to establish a center for the study of nonviolent social change—these were "things incomprehensible," to use the words of one of the avenue's most famous clergymen, the Rev. William H. Borders.

**'The Worst Thing'**

Pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church for 37 years (Auburn Avenue once was known as Wheat Street), Mr. Borders called the tragedy "the worst thing to happen here in my entire life, even worse than Martin's assassination." He explained, almost preached, his voice rising and falling rhythmically:

"Dr. King's sweetness came from her. She was sweet to the point of innocence, as choice as any woman who ever lived.

"Mama King was the soul, the backbone of the King family. Maybe the world didn't know that, but folks on Auburn did."

To be "sweet" on Auburn Avenue is to be special.

Half a century ago, when the avenue was the center of black business activity in a much smaller Atlanta, commerce was so brisk and lucrative there that someone dubbed the street "Sweet Auburn." Its merchants, bankers and insurance men somehow became more adept at making money than blacks elsewhere in the country, thus laying the foundation for a black middle class that is today the largest in America.

**Churches Flourished**

The churches grew with the avenue — Big Bethel A.M.E., its steeple soaring above the barbershops, the savings and loans, the barbecue places, the lawyers, doctors, addicts and prosti-



The New York Times/July 2, 1974

tutes; Wheat Street, hulking over a surrounding collection of row tenements and Victorian frame houses, and, finally, Ebenezer Baptist, founded by the father of the woman slain yesterday, with twin steeples of red brick, oak pews as hard as any sinner's heart and an amen corner as sweet as any in town.

In Ebenezer, the amen corner is to the right front of the congregation. As in most churches, anyone moved to chant an occasional, spontaneous "Amen" or "Say it, Brother," may sit there.

It is, as Mr. Borders says, "a spiritual sounding board that the pastor bounces his message against, an uncoordinated section filled with the spirit of the upper room, a whip-it-up place."

It is one of the last places on earth one would expect to find a gunman.

There was a widespread

feeling here today that, shocking as the killing was, matters could have been worse.

"If that gunman had been white instead of black, this town would have come apart," Warren Cochrane, an Auburn Avenue businessman, said this afternoon. He noted that the shooting came at a time when racial tension in Atlanta was already high because of black efforts to get rid of a white police chief who some blacks contend is a racist.

But those efforts have included protest marches down the center of Auburn Avenue — from the grave of Dr. King, next to Ebenezer Church, all the way to Peachtree Street, a mile to the west.

During the marches, it was like old times on Auburn.

Business has not been very good on the street in recent years. A number of the bankers and lawyers have pulled out and moved elsewhere, some across town to Hunter Street, now the healthiest black thoroughfare in Atlanta.

**Effect of Success**

At the same time, Auburn has ceased to be the fount of civil rights activity in the South, mainly because of the success of the movement that Dr. King helped lead.

The Auburn Avenue headquarters of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, founded by Dr. King, has been in decline along with the avenue. The president of the conference, the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, has frequently bickered with the King family over fund-raising drives.

But the antipolice demonstrations have tended to bring life back to the avenue,

especially to the S.C.L.C., which suddenly seems to have a "cause." Most of the protests have been planned by the organization's workers.

Only the churches have escaped the malaise that has hit Sweet Auburn in recent years. Though many of their parishioners have moved away from the street, the sanctuaries continue to be filled on Sundays, particularly the Ebenezer one, so popular with tourists.

Some members of the Wheat Street congregation live 85 miles away. But they show up faithfully every Sunday, living witness to the deep importance of religion to many blacks.

So, except for the churches, there is not much sweetness left on Sweet Auburn these days. And now, with the violent death of Mama King, even that final measure of sweetness seems to have soured.

But a new day may be coming.

Several business and historical groups, along with the widow of Dr. King, have plans to rejuvenate Auburn.

The businessmen are trying to get new office construction underway.

The historians want to preserve some of the old buildings and landmarks.

And Mrs. King wants to establish a \$10-million "center for social change," a center that will specialize in the prevention of the sort of violence that took the life of Martin Luther King Jr. and his mother.

SCHOOL OF DANCE