

Belated pardon for the Wilmington Ten

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After 40 years of protests, the Wilmington Ten, a group of nine black men and a white woman, were pardoned (four posthumously) as innocent in a civil rights-era case of firebombing a grocery store in Wilmington, North Carolina. The ten, ages 19 to 35 at their arrest, were sentenced in 1972 to a combined 282 years in prison. Three witnesses recanted their testimony in 1976. And notes by the prosecutor revealed that he tried to keep African Americans off the jury. The sentences of the ten were commuted in 1978 by then Gov. Jim Hunt, but he withheld a pardon.

Democratic Gov. Beverly Perdue on December 31 granted a “pardon of innocence” to the group. One of the ten, Benjamin F. Chavis—then a justice worker with the United Church of Christ—said Perdue was first inclined to give a “pardon of forgiveness,” but Chavis refused it and said, “I didn’t do anything to be forgiven,” according to a former UCC official. The pardons were presented January 5 at Wilmington’s Gregory Congregational Church UCC before about 150 people. “This is a joyous day,” said Chavis.