

MOVE

MOVE is a black liberation group founded in 1972 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania by John Africa (born Vincent Leaphart) and Donald Glassey, a social worker from the University of Pennsylvania. The name is not an acronym. The group lived in a communal setting in West Philadelphia, abiding by philosophies of anarcho-primitivism.^[1] The group combined revolutionary ideology, similar to that of the Black Panthers, with work for animal rights.

The group is particularly known for two major conflicts with the Philadelphia Police Department. In 1978, a standoff resulted in the death of one police officer, injuries to several other people, and life sentences for nine members who were convicted of killing the officer.

In 1985, another confrontation ended when a police helicopter dropped a bomb on the MOVE compound, a row house in the middle of the 6200 block of Osage Avenue.^[2] The resulting fire killed eleven MOVE members, including five children, and destroyed 65 houses in the neighborhood.^[3] The survivors later filed a civil suit against the city and the police department, and were awarded \$1.5 million in a 1996 settlement.^[4]

MOVE	
Leader(s)	John Africa
Foundation	1972
Active region(s)	Philadelphia
Ideology	Anarcho-primitivism Black liberation Animal rights Communalism Environmentalism
Major actions	1978 and 1985 fatal shootouts with police officers
Status	Active

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Origins

The group's name, MOVE, is not an acronym.^[5] Its name was chosen by John Africa to say what they intended to do. Members intend to be active because they say, "Everything that's alive moves. If it didn't, it would be stagnant, dead."^[6] When members greet each other they say "on the MOVE".^[6]

The group was originally called the Christian Movement for Life when it was founded in 1972. Its founder, John Africa, was functionally illiterate.^[7] He had dictated his thoughts to Donald Glassey, a social worker from the University of Pennsylvania, and created what he called "The Guidelines" as the basis of the communal group.^[8] Africa and his contemporary, mostly African-American followers wore their hair in dreadlocks, as popularized by the Caribbean Rastafari movement. MOVE advocated a radical form of green politics and a return to a hunter-gatherer society, while stating their opposition to science, medicine, and technology.^[9]

They identify as deeply religious and advocate for life. MOVE members believe that as all living beings are dependent, their lives should be treated as equally important. They advocate for justice that is not always based within institutions. MOVE members believe that for something to be just, it must be just for all living creatures.^[6] As John Africa had done, his followers changed their surnames to Africa to show reverence to what they regarded as their mother continent.^{[4][10][11]}

In a 2018 article about the group, Ed Pilkington of *The Guardian* describes their political views as "a strange fusion of black power and flower power. The group that formed in the early 1970s melded the revolutionary ideology of the Black Panthers with the nature- and animal-loving communalism of 1960s hippies. You might characterise them as black liberationists-cum-eco warriors."^[12] He noted the group also functioned as an animal rights advocacy organization.

He quoted member Janine Africa, who wrote to him from prison: "We demonstrated against puppy mills, zoos, circuses, any form of enslavement of animals. We demonstrated against Three Mile Island and industrial pollution. We demonstrated against police brutality. And we did so uncompromisingly. Slavery never ended, it was just disguised."^[12]

John Africa and the MOVE members lived in a commune in a house owned by Glassey in the Powelton Village section of West Philadelphia. As activists, they staged bullhorn-amplified, profanity-laced demonstrations against institutions that they opposed, such as zoos, and speakers whose views they opposed. MOVE activities were scrutinized by law enforcement authorities,^{[13][14]} particularly under the administration of Mayor Frank Rizzo, a former police commissioner known for his hard line against activist groups.^[12]

1978 shoot-out

In 1977, the police under Mayor Frank Rizzo obtained a court order requiring MOVE to vacate their Powelton Village house at 311 N 33rd Street. The group had begun to occupy the residence, and it was not long before MOVE's living style exhausted their neighbors' patience. MOVE members made a treaty with the police. They agreed to move out of the premises and surrender their weapons if the police released their members who were held in city jails. The police held up their end of the deal, but MOVE members failed to comply.^[15]

Nearly a year later, police had come to a standoff with members of the community, who had not left.^{[16][17]} When the police attempted to enter the house, shooting erupted. Philadelphia Police Department officer James J. Ramp was killed by a shot to the back of the neck. MOVE representatives claimed that he was facing the house at the time and they denied MOVE's responsibility for his death, insisting that he was killed by fire from fellow police officers.^[18] Prosecutors alleged that MOVE members fired the fatal shot and charged Sims Africa and the other eight with collective responsibility for his death.

According to a 2018 article in *The Guardian*, "Eyewitnesses, however, gave accounts suggesting that the shot may have come from the opposite direction to the basement, raising the possibility that Ramp was accidentally felled by police fire. Move members continue to insist that they had no workable guns in their house at the time of the siege. Several months earlier, in May 1978, several guns – most of them inoperative – had been handed over to police at the Move house; however, prosecutors at the trial of the Move Nine told the jury that at the time of the August siege there had been functioning firearms in the house."^[19] The standoff lasted about an hour before MOVE members began to surrender.

The MOVE 9

The nine members of MOVE charged with third-degree murder for Ramp's death became known as the MOVE 9. Each was sentenced to a maximum of 100 years in prison. They were Chuck, Delbert, Eddie, Janet, Janine, Merle, Michael, Phil, and Debbie Africa.

In 1998, at age 47, Merle Africa died in prison.^[20] Seven of the surviving eight members first became eligible for parole in the spring of 2008, but they were denied. Parole hearings for each of these prisoner were to be held yearly from that time.^{[21][22]} In 2015, at age 59, Phil Africa died in prison.^[23]

On June 16, 2018, Debbie Sims Africa, who was 22 when sentenced, was released on parole and reunited with her 39-year-old son, Michael Davis Africa, Jr. She gave birth to him a month after she was imprisoned, and he was taken from her a week later. The release of Debbie Sims Africa renewed attention on members of MOVE and the Black Panthers who remain imprisoned in the US from the period of the 1960s and 1970s; there are at least 25 still in prison as of June 2018.^[19]

On October 23, 2018, Michael Davis Africa, the husband of Debbie Sims Africa, was released on parole.^[24] In May 2019, Janine and Janet Africa were released on parole after 41 years of imprisonment.^[25] On June 21, 2019, Eddie Goodman Africa was released on parole.^[26] Delbert Orr Africa was granted parole on December 20, 2019 and released January 18, 2020.^[27] Chuck Sims Africa is the only member of the original Move 9 still imprisoned.^[26]

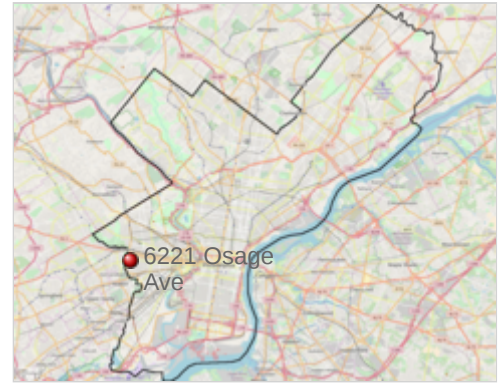
1985 bombing

In 1981 MOVE relocated to a row house at 6221 Osage Avenue in the Cobbs Creek area of West Philadelphia. Neighbors complained to the city for years about trash around their building, confrontations with neighbors, and that MOVE members were broadcasting sometimes obscene political messages by bullhorn.^{[28][29]} The bullhorn was broken and inoperable for the three weeks prior to the police bombing of the row house.^[29]

The police obtained arrest warrants in 1985 charging four MOVE occupants with crimes including parole violations, contempt of court, illegal possession of firearms, and making terrorist threats.^[3] Mayor Wilson Goode and police commissioner Gregore J. Sambor classified MOVE as a terrorist

organization.^[30] Residents of the area were evacuated from the neighborhood. They were told that they would be able to return to their homes after a twenty-four hour period.^[15]

On Monday, May 13, 1985, nearly five hundred police officers, along with city manager Leo Brooks, arrived in force and attempted to clear the building and execute the arrest warrants.^{[15][30]} Water and electricity was shut off in order to force MOVE members out of the house. Commissioner Sambor read a long speech addressed to MOVE members that started with, "Attention MOVE... this is America". When the MOVE members did not respond, the police decided to forcefully remove the members from the house.^[15]



Location of the MOVE house, bombed in 1985 by the PPD, within Philadelphia

There was an armed standoff with police,^[5] who lobbed tear gas canisters at the building. The MOVE members fired at them and a gunfight with semi-automatic and automatic firearms ensued.^[31] Police went through over ten thousand rounds of ammunition before Commissioner Sambor ordered that the compound be bombed.^[31] From a Pennsylvania State Police helicopter, Philadelphia Police Department Lt. Frank Powell proceeded to drop two one-pound bombs (which the police referred to as "entry devices"^[30]) made of FBI-supplied Tovex, a dynamite substitute, targeting a fortified, bunker-like cubicle on the roof of the house.^[28]

The resulting explosions ignited a fire from fuel for a gasoline-powered generator stored in the rooftop bunker. The fire spread and eventually destroyed approximately sixty-five nearby houses. Despite the earlier drenching of the building by firefighters, officials said they feared that MOVE would shoot at the firefighters, so held them back.^{[11][28][31][32]}

Mayor Wilson Goode later testified at a 1996 trial that he had ordered the fire to be put out after the bunker had burned. Police Commissioner Sambor said he received the order, but the fire commissioner testified that he did not receive the order.^[33] Eleven people (John Africa, five other adults, and five children aged 7 to 13) died in the resulting fire. Ramona Africa, one of the two MOVE survivors from the house, said that police fired at those trying to escape.^[34]

Aftermath

Mayor Goode appointed an investigative commission called the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission (PSIC, aka MOVE Commission), chaired by William H. Brown, III. Police commissioner Gregore J. Sambor resigned in November 1985; in a speech the following year, he said that he was made a "surrogate" by Goode.^[35]

The MOVE Commission issued its report on March 6, 1986. The report denounced the actions of the city government, stating that "Dropping a bomb on an occupied row house was unconscionable."^[36] Following the release of the report, Goode made a formal public apology.^[37] No one from the city government was criminally charged in the attack. The only surviving adult MOVE member, Ramona Africa, was charged and convicted on charges of riot and conspiracy; she served seven years in prison.^[38]

In 1996 a federal jury ordered the city to pay a US\$ 1.5 million civil suit judgement to survivor Ramona Africa and relatives of two people killed in the bombing. The jury had found that the city used excessive force and violated the members' constitutional protections against unreasonable search and seizure.^[33] In 1985 Philadelphia was given the sobriquet "The City that Bombed Itself."^{[39][40]}

2002 shooting of John Gilbride

After John Africa's death, his widow, Alberta, married John Gilbride, Jr. Together they had a child, Zackary Africa, circa 1996. The couple divorced in 1999. Gilbride no longer supported MOVE and resettled in Maple Shade, New Jersey. Alberta Africa was living in Cherry Hill, New Jersey with their son John Zachary Gilbride, as he was legally known.^[41]

On September 10, 2002, in the course of their bitter custody dispute, Gilbride testified in court that MOVE had threatened to kill him.^[42] The court granted Gilbride partial custody of Zackary, allowing him unsupervised visits.

On September 27, 2002, shortly after midnight and prior to Gilbride's first visitation date with Zackary, an unknown assailant shot and killed Gilbride with an automatic weapon as he sat in his car parked outside his New Jersey home.^[41] Investigators did not name a suspect and the Burlington County Police did not release ballistics information.^[43]

The case remains unsolved. A MOVE spokeswoman initially said that the U.S. government had assassinated Gilbride in order to frame MOVE.^[43] His ex-wife Alberta Africa denied that the murder had occurred. She said in 2009 that Gilbride "is out hiding somewhere."^[43] Tony Allen, an ex-MOVE member, says that MOVE murdered Gilbride.^[43]

In 2012 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that Gilbride had told friends and family that he had recorded incriminating evidence in a notebook as security against a "hit" by MOVE. Gilbride said he had placed the notebook inside a locker for safekeeping. The Burlington County Prosecutor's Office declined to follow up on the report.^[44]

Current activities

Ramona Africa acts as a spokesperson for the group. She has given numerous speeches at events in the United States and other countries. Mumia Abu-Jamal, a journalist and activist, was convicted and originally sentenced to death for the unrelated 1981 murder of police officer Daniel Faulkner. In 2011 his sentence was commuted to life. He had reported on MOVE and expressed his support for them. MOVE continues to advocate for Abu-Jamal's release as well as for that of imprisoned MOVE members. MOVE regards them all as political prisoners.

Birdie Africa, also known as Michael Moses Ward, was the only child to survive the 1985 MOVE bombing. As an adult, he accidentally drowned in 2013 in a hot tub on board the ship Carnival Dream while cruising in the Caribbean.^[45]

In media

Representation in other media

- On the 25th anniversary of the 1985 bombing, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* published a detailed multimedia site containing retrospective articles, archived articles, videos, interviews, photos, and a timeline of the events.^[46]

Documentaries

The Bombing of Osage Avenue is a 1986 documentary by Toni Cade Bambara and Louis Massiah that contextualizes the bombing using the history of the Cobbs Creek community and focuses on the bombing's impact on the community's residents. The film also uses footage of the hearings of the MOVE commission. It premiered on WHYY-TV, Philadelphia's public broadcasting station.^[47]

- *Let the Fire Burn*, a documentary about MOVE composed largely of archival footage, was released in the Fall of 2013. It was directed and produced by David Osder.^[48]

See also

- Anarcho-primitivism
- David Shrager – trial lawyer who represented Michael Ward's father in a lawsuit against the city for injuries suffered in the fire.
- Neo-Luddite
- Partisan Defense Committee

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External links

- Official MOVE website (<http://www.onamove.com/>)
- "John Africa's MOVE Organization" (<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/index-bb.html>), collection of pro-MOVE documents
- "9 Nine The Story of MOVE" (<http://www.move-thestory.com>), *9 Neuf Histoire de communaute MOVE* (in French), French website about MOVE

News media

- E-library of documents concerning the group (registration required) (https://web.archive.org/web/20090104060246/http://www.icsahome.com/info_serv_grp/move.asp)
- "Philadelphia: 1980s, MOVE siege" (http://www.philly.com/philly/photos/Philadelphia_The_1980s_MOVE.html) – 30 photos related to the 1985 incident from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.
- "25 Years Ago: Philadelphia Police Bombs MOVE Headquarters Killing 11, Destroying 65 Homes" (http://www.democracynow.org/2010/5/13/25_years_ago_philadelphia_police_bombs) – video report by *Democracy Now!* May 13, 2010.

- ["1985 MOVE Bombing at 30: "Barbaric" 1985 Philadelphia Police Attack Killed 11 & Burned a Neighborhood"](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/5/13/move_bombing_at_30_barbaric_) (http://www.democracynow.org/2015/5/13/move_bombing_at_30_barbaric_). – video report by *Democracy Now!* May 13, 2015.
- ["The Empire Files: An Unparalleled Act of Police Terror"](http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=15755) (http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=15755), *The Real News*. February 27, 2016.

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