

1908 Race Riot Pamphlet

Produced by the SPRINGFIELD CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

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Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908

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Get ready to embark on a history and emotion-filled journey through the events that have become known as “the Springfield Race Riot of 1908.”

Join us as we go back in time and explore the occurrences leading up to those two sweltering days in August of 1908 and the birth of the NAACP.

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Springfield’s population in 1908 totaled about 47,000, with approximately 5.5% of those black. Although this low percentage did not facilitate a large uprising against the black population here, relations were becoming more strained in large cities such as Chicago and New York where blacks were competing with whites in the same job market. Riots had occurred in the North as early as the first half of the 1800s, but news coverage remained relatively quiet and the violence seemed to be contained in the North... until now.

On August 14, 1908, tension filled the air as two black men sat in the county jail, accused of unrelated sexual assault and murder crimes against whites. A large white crowd had gathered outside the jail, wanting to take matters in their own hands, chanting for vigilante justice.

Sensing the eminent danger for the two prisoners, police secretly took them out through the back door and put them on a train to a jail 60 miles away. Learning that they had been tricked and that the prisoners were gone, the now-angry mob erupted in violence, destroying buildings, looting, and eventually lynching two prominent members of the black community. The rampage continued until Governor Charles Deneen called in the Illinois National Guard to control the situation.

People across the nation were shocked by racial riots and it was bitter irony that one had occurred in Springfield, Illinois, the hometown of Abraham Lincoln. Activists believed that if it could happen in Springfield, it could happen anywhere.

This is where our journey begins... on the corner of 7th & Jefferson

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Map of the 1908 Race Riot

The entire story of the Springfield Race Riot of 1908 is told in a series of markers placed along the path of the destruction in downtown Springfield. Walk the route of one of Springfield's most disturbing historical events that prompted a great national civil rights victory.

Map shows:

1. Old County Jail, Seventh and Jefferson
2. Loper's Restaurant, 223 South Fifth
3. The Levee Business District, Seventh and Washington Street
4. Scott Burton's Lynching, Eleventh and Madison
5. Payne's Hardware, Fourth and Monroe
6. State Arsenal, Second and Monroe
7. Edwards School, Spring and Edwards
8. Old Court House, Adams between Fifth and Sixth Streets

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1. Seventh and Jefferson — Old County Jail Site

It was here the white mob congregated on August 14, 1908, demanding the release of George Richardson and Joe James, two black prisoners being held on counts of crimes against whites. Richardson was accused of raping Mabel Hallam, a white woman, and James was accused of the murder of Clergy Ballard, a white man. The county sheriff, with the help of Harry Loper, a white restaurant owner, secretly transported the prisoners to Bloomington, Illinois. The realization of this escape ignited the Race Riots.

2. 223 South Fifth — Loper's Restaurant

The owner of Loper's Restaurant, Harry Loper, assisted Sheriff Werner in the removal of George Richardson and Joe James from the County Jail. The riot escalated as the mob, outraged by Loper's assistance in the prisoners' transport, demolished his restaurant and destroyed his car that had been used to move the prisoners.

The first fatality of the riot, Louis Johnson, was a patron at Loper's Restaurant. He was killed by a rioter's bullet.

3. Seventh and Washington Street — (The Levee) Business District

Still enraged, the rioters moved to a small black business district, breaking windows and doors, stealing or destroying merchandise, and wrecking furniture and equipment. By the time the mob finished looting this area, fifteen black and several Jewish businesses had been vandalized, destroying several blocks of businesses. Fishman's Pawn Shop, the first Jewish store attacked in this area, turned out to be methodically chosen. The mob obtained weapons from this store. The rioters then moved north toward the black residential neighborhoods known as the "Badlands."

4. Eleventh and Madison — Scott Burton's Lynching

Around 2:00 a.m. on August 15, 1908, rioters came to the home of Scott Burton. The black barber tried to escape, but was attacked and beaten unconscious. The mob then paraded him from his porch to Twelfth and Madison and hanged him from a tree in front of a saloon. Burton's body became the symbol of the mob's hatred of blacks and was riddled by bullets until the militia came and put a stop to the destruction of his body.

This lynching occurred in a location known as the "Badlands." This area suffered serious damage including the destruction of 40 black homes and businesses.

5. Fourth and Monroe — Payne's Hardware

After the taking the day to cool off, the mob reassembled around 7:00 p.m. and walked to Payne's Hardware Store for a length of clothesline rope. This rope was intended to be used to hang William Donnegan, an elderly, retired black shoemaker.

6. Second and Monroe — State Arsenal Site

In the daylight of August 15, 1908, while the mob was temporarily quiet, two-to-three thousand black residents took this opportunity to flee Springfield, many never to return. By this time, up to five thousand Illinois National Guard troops were brought in to restore order to the capital. They took up residence at the State Arsenal, which in turn served as a safe haven for many black families.

The rioters had intended to attack the State Arsenal, but decided against it upon the realization of the National Guard militia's presence. Frustrated, they turned toward William Donnegan's residence.

7. Spring and Edwards — Site of Edwards School and William Donnegan's Lynching

A result of his powerful political connections and wealth as a black man, the elderly William Donnegan was taken from his home by the mob and dragged across the street to Edwards School. The rioters slashed Donnegan's throat and were in the process of hanging him in front of the school when the militia approached. The mob fled while the militia rushed Donnegan to St. John's Hospital, where he died the next day. This was the last mob action of the riot.

8. Adams between Fifth and Sixth Streets — Sangamon County Courthouse Site

After the August 1908 Race Riot, conclusion was sought at this site, including:

Joe James, a black man, was tried and convicted for the murder of Clergy Ballard. Despite the fact that James was 18 years old and, as a minor, not subject to the death penalty, he was executed on October 23, 1908.

During the Grand Jury investigation of the alleged rape of Mabel Hallam, a white woman, by George Richardson, a black man, Mrs. Hallam admitted that the accusation had been fabricated. Consequentially, Richardson was released.

In August of 1908, a special Grand Jury returned 107 indictments against nearly 80 white riot suspects on charges ranging from malicious mischief to murder. The trials that followed resulted in only one conviction – petty larceny.

Some of the riot victims are buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery and the Mechanicsburg Cemetery. These burial sites have been marked to signify each victim's role in the Race Riot events.

The Race Riot of 1908 was the catalyst that led to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

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