



Reflections on Springfield's Historic Race Riot

The exact causes of the race riot in Springfield in August of 1908 will never really be known. However, certain events occurred in town in July and August that stirred up the passions of Springfield citizens and were used as an excuse to terrorize the black population those fateful days. It all began around Independence Day 1908 when a white railroad engineer named Clergy Ballard was murdered after he came upon an intruder standing in his young daughter's bedroom. He gave chase to the intruder, a fight ensued outside, and Ballard received fatal cuts with a razor. The next day Joe James, a black drifter was found sleeping nearby. He was beaten unconscious by Ballard's sons and neighbors before the police arrived. He was then arrested and charged with murder and attempted rape.

About a month later, Mabel Hallam, the wife of a street car conductor, accused black caretaker George Richardson of raping her. She knew him because he often did odd jobs around her neighborhood. The August 14 edition of the *Illinois State Journal* headline read "DRAGGED FROM HER BED AND OUTRAGED BY NEGRO." A few weeks later, Richardson would be found innocent and released after Hallam admitted she had lied to cover up an affair she was having with a white man. Richardson's guilt was presumed in the August 14th newspapers, the headlines most likely helping inflame the public's temper. Crowds formed outside the Sangamon

County Jail in the sweltering August afternoon. Sheriff Charles Werner, recognizing that James' and Richardson's safety might soon be in jeopardy, secured Harry Loper's (a local restaurateur) \$5000 car as the escape vehicle. The prisoners were taken by car outside Sherman to meet a train heading to Bloomington. When the crowd learned

of the escape, they destroyed Loper's car and his restaurant. At this point, the crowd turned from seeking vigilante justice to randomly inflicting pain and/or property damage on any person who happened to be black. They proceeded to the Levee, the black business district near Washington and 7th Streets. Weapons stolen from Fishman's pawn shop were used to destroy about two

dozen black or Jewish businesses. Next, they headed to the black residential area known as the Badlands where 40 homes were burned and destroyed over the course of the evening. On the way there, the crowd confronted Scott Burton, a black barber with a white wife, who stood in the doorway ready to protect his property. He fired buckshot into the crowd, and the crowd fired back killing him. Burton's body was taken several blocks and hung from a tree. His body was riddled with forty bullets before the militia arrived. Governor Charles Deneen had called up the militia earlier when he realized the gravity of the situation. Soldiers dispersed the crowds by midnight, thus ending Friday's violence.



The militia encampment on capitol grounds. Photo courtesy of the Sangamon Valley Collection - Lincoln Library.

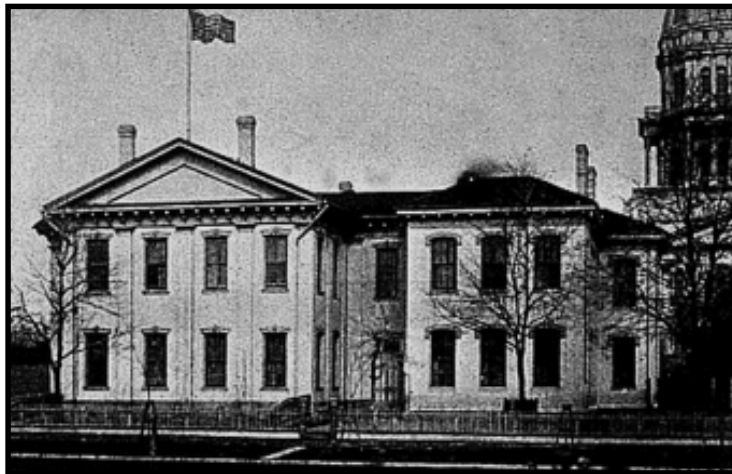
The mob once more gathered the next evening at the Old Courthouse and made its way to the State Arsenal (the State headquarters of the National Guard) across from the State Capitol. A number of blacks fled to the Arsenal from the Badlands, as well as to the countryside seeking refuge from the mobs. About five thousand National Guard troops were brought in to restore the peace. Frustrated that they were not able to gain access to the blacks in the Arsenal, the mob walked across the capitol grounds heading towards the home of eighty-four year old William Donnegan and his white wife of 32 years. He was known to be Abraham Lincoln's friend, as well as his cobbler. The crowd dragged him from his home, cut his throat, and lynched him in the Edwards School yard across the street at Spring and Edwards Streets. The National Guard cut him down and rushed him to St. John's Hospital, but he died the next day. The two-day toll was considerable: two lynchings, four whites killed, and over a hundred wounded. Property damage ranged in the hundreds of thousands, but Springfield's reputation also suffered tremendously because the riot received national attention.

Governor Deneen called for a special Grand Jury, which convened the last weeks of August. Sangamon County State's Attorney Frank Hatch came up with 107 indictments against 80 people. Even though civic leaders pushed to bring the rioters to justice, an all white jury only arrived at one conviction against someone who stole a guard's saber. Joe James was found guilty and executed in October. George Richardson was released and lived out the rest of his life in Springfield.

The newspapers across the country covered the Springfield riot extensively. Local papers such as the *Illinois State Journal*, the *State Register*, and *Springfield Record* also covered the dramatic events, although they tended to jump to conclusions about Richardson's guilt or blame the black community for the riot. As James Krohe, Jr. writes in his pamphlet *Summer of Rage*, the *Journal* explained the causes of the riot in that "it was not in fact the whites' hatred toward the Negroes, but the Ne-

groes' own misconduct, general inferiority, or unfitness for free institutions that were at fault".

In her 1990 book *The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908*, Roberta Senechal takes issue with certain myths about the root causes of the riot. She uses labor statistics and census data to support her findings. One commonly held belief was that tension was building from an influx of blacks from the South. An-



Edwards School - Site of William Donnegan's Lynching (Southwest corner of Spring and Edwards) Photo courtesy of www.thinkquest.org.

other common misconception, Senechal finds, was that interracial competition for jobs was fostering growing resentment. Yet another myth revolved around housing competition. Instead, Senechal argues that blacks were barred from jobs whites sought such as in manufacturing and transportation. Blacks were relegated to low skill jobs or dangerous jobs in mining, or as brick workers. Furthermore, Senechal found that Springfield citizens

seemed relatively unaffected by the national economic recession of 1907. Blacks also tended to reside in black neighborhoods and she found no evidence of a housing shortage. She did find, however, that in the early part of the century, blacks had become more visible in the downtown with more black owned businesses in the Levee area and more black people living above businesses.

The rioters had been described by the press as poor, drunken, criminal riff-raff, southerners, children of southerners or immigrants. What Senechal discovered in her research is that the typical rioter was actually a "young man in his twenties, single, employed in a working-class job, and a native of Illinois." He also typically "had little if any contact at all with blacks." On the other hand, the lynching victims were well off business and home owners. Donnegan supposedly had strong political connections. According to Senechal, even a month after the riot ended, attacks and threats occurred, either directed at wealthier blacks or whites who employed blacks or had black customers. This suggests that the attacks had nothing to do with ridding the city of corrupt and immoral behavior, but rather an attempt to rid the city of blacks in general, but particularly successful blacks.

William English Walling, a socialist writer, traveled by the night train August 15th to survey the damage and gather information about the riot. Writing an article titled "The Race War in the North" for *The Independent*, he discovered to his dismay that Springfield citizens felt no remorse for the riotous behavior. Conversely, he found that Springfield "stood for the action of the mob. She hoped the rest of the Negroes might flee." Walling concluded that it was race hatred and nothing else that provoked the race war. After reading Walling's article, social worker Mary White Ovington urged Walling to call a meeting of likeminded individuals to discuss forming a biracial organization to correct the injustices suffered by blacks. The meeting occurred in January, 1909 in New York and led to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that year.

It is ironic that a race riot would take place in the same city where Lincoln made his home decades earlier. Another ironic situation developed just six months after the lynchings and riot with the 100th anniversary celebration of Lincoln's birthday. The Lincoln Centennial Association organized a party given at the State Arsenal where blacks fleeing from the mob hid a mere six months earlier. However, only white people, including the British Ambassador to the United States and William Jennings Bryan, were invited to Lincoln's birthday celebration. Blacks in Springfield held their own celebration in an east side church to remember the Great Emancipator.

The change in the form of city government was another sign of the deteriorating conditions of race relations. In 1911 Springfield's city government switched over from an aldermanic, ward-based government to a commission form of government. This meant that five city commissioners would be elected in non-partisan, at-large elections. Springfield citizens hoped that overhauling city government might bring about reforms they felt necessary. A

sense permeated Springfield that the corruption and the vice concentrated in the Levee and Badlands had somehow created the conditions provoking the riot. This new form of government had the effect of greatly reducing the influence of blacks and working class whites. In Senechal's book, she offers startling evidence in that between 1911 and the late 1970s only one city council member had lived on the east-side. Not until the late 1980s did Springfield's government revert back to the aldermanic system but only



*Walking Tour Dedication Ceremony. September 18, 1994. Photo courtesy of the Sangamon Valley Collection - Lincoln Library. * 1908 Race Riot maps can be found at www.cook-witter.com.*

after a lawsuit was filed. In the court case *Frank McNeil et al. vs. the City of Springfield*, Judge Harold Baker concluded that the commissioner government system violated the Federal Voting Rights Act by diluting the voting power of black residents. Prior to the initial restructuring and race riot, the black vote could potentially affect election outcomes and thus, blacks could demand and receive patronage jobs and political favors. Startling statistics illustrate Senechal's point that the commission style government diluted the black vote. Between 1911 and 1919, there

1908 Race Riot Walking Tour

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| 1) Seventh and Jefferson | Site of Old County Jail |
| 2) 223 South Fifth | Site of Loper's Restaurant |
| 3) Washington St. between 7 th and 10 th | The Levee |
| 4) Eleventh and Madison | Area of Scott Burton's Lynching |
| 5) Fourth and Monroe | Site of Payne's Hardware |
| 6) Second and Monroe | Site of State Arsenal |
| 7) Spring and Edwards | Site of Edwards School and William Donnegan's Lynching |
| 8) Adams between 5 th and 6 th | Site of the old Sangamon County Courthouse |

were no black patrolmen on the police force. But the year before the riot, four out of 41 officers were black. The city fire department also maintained one all-black engine company, but this did not change after the new form of government.

In the decades following the riot, a handful of stories in *The State Journal Register* and the *Illinois Times* have appeared reminding Springfield citizens of our painful past. Roberta Senechal's book provides a detailed look at Springfield around the time of the riot; she also provides plausible theories about the causes of the riot, at the same time dispelling myths perpetuated through the years. However, it was not until 1994 that any physical monuments were established to commemorate the tragic series of events. The city paid for eight plaques marking various steps in the riot. This historic walking tour was dedicated on September 18, 1994, almost ninety years after the tragedy. A couple of years later, the City of Springfield put together a video called "Springfield Had No Shame: The Springfield Race Riot of 1908." These are positive steps towards ensuring a constant visible sign that we must

persevere to become color blind and not repeat the mistakes of almost a century ago.

Sources from the Sangamon Valley Collection - Lincoln Library

Sources:

Illinois State Journal newspaper, August 15, 1908.

Krohe, James, Jr. *Summer of Rage*. Sangamon County Historical Society, 1973.

Senechal, Roberta. *The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

The State Journal Register newspaper, September 18, 1994.

Walling, William English. "The Race War in the North". *The Independent*, LXV (September 3, 1908), pp. 529-34.



PEOPLE IN TRANSITION

Jim Watson has been appointed to replace Representative **Tom Ryder** (R-Jerseyville), who has resigned after 18 years to become vice president of external affairs at the Illinois Community College Board.

Warren Township Supervisor **Suzanne Simpson** has been appointed to complete Representative **Andrea Moore's** (R-Libertyville) current term. Governor George Ryan appointed Moore as assistant director of the Department of Natural Resources.

Representative **Vince Persico** (R-Glen Ellyn) resigned his seat effective January 9th to become a lobbyist in Springfield. **Roger Marquardt**, president and administrator of the Illinois Public Airports Association, has been appointed to complete Persico's term.



In Memorium

The Honorable Michael Bilandic died January 15, 2002. Bilandic became an alderman in 1969 and was appointed mayor of Chicago after the senior Richard Daley's death in 1976. He then went on to serve on the Appellate Court and Supreme Court. He served as chief justice from 1994-1997. Last year, Bilandic's name was pulled out of the hat by Secretary of State Jesse White to be the tie-breaking member of the Legislative Redistricting Commission.

