

Scenes In Memphis

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THE MEMPHIS RIOTS.

There was in Memphis, on the 24th of May, an extraordinary outbreak of violence, which was the first of the kind since the close of the war. The riot was the result of the late and unjust and unprovoked massacre of the colored people, and the violence which followed was a direct consequence of the same. The riot was the result of the late and unjust and unprovoked massacre of the colored people, and the violence which followed was a direct consequence of the same. The riot was the result of the late and unjust and unprovoked massacre of the colored people, and the violence which followed was a direct consequence of the same.



SCENES IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, DURING THE RIOT—BURNING A FREEDMEN'S SCHOOL-HOUSE. [DRAWN BY A. E. W.]

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SCENES IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, DURING THE RIOT—SHOOTING DOWN NEGROES ON THE MORNING OF May 2, 1866.—[DRAWN BY A. E. W.]

During the riot - Burning a Freedmen's School-House
 During the riot - shooting down negroes on the morning of May 2, 1866

THE MEMPHIS RIOTS

There was in Memphis, on the first two days of May, an excitement unequaled since the close of the war. The origin of the disturbance between the whites and negroes of that city was highly discreditable to the colored soldiers, and the riotous proceedings which followed were a disgrace to civilization. For the riot the lower class of white citizens were as responsible as were the soldiers of the Third United States Colored Infantry for the original difficulty. This regiment, whose reputation has been a bad one, had been mustered out, since which they had frequented whisky-shops in the southern part of the city, and had been guilty of excesses and disorderly conduct. On the evening of May 1 some drunken members of the regiment were on South Street, talking noisily, when in an insolent manner they were ordered by two policemen to cease their noise and disperse. Words ensued, followed by blows, throwing of missiles, and firing of revolvers.

To understand what followed it must be remembered that the police force of Memphis is composed mostly of Irishmen, whose violent prejudice against negroes was so shamefully displayed in the New York riots of 1863. The Times correspondent thus described the riot:

Word was sent to police head-quarters, and the whole force at once proceeded to the scene of the fray, being joined on the way thither by armed and excited citizens. Meanwhile the firing had brought other negroes to the spot, some armed with clubs and some with revolvers, so that by the time the police force came up the two parties were about equal in number. The negroes held the original position, and, upon the approach of the police, showing no determination to abandon it, were fired upon by the police and citizens who accompanied them. This fire was returned, and for a while both parties busied themselves in discharging their revolvers as rapidly as possible. Meanwhile word was sent to General Stoneman, who promptly dispatched to the scene of action a company of Regulars (white), when the negroes were quickly dispersed and driven in every direction.

During the evening the wildest and most exaggerated reports soon spread throughout the city. Every communicator of the intelligence of the fight told a different story, and the highest excitement prevailed. Each rumor placed a worse aspect upon the affair than the preceding one, and only served to develop the pent-up prejudices against the negro. Soon after dark this excitement and prejudice found vent. Large numbers of armed citizens repaired to the scene of the fight and commenced firing upon every negro who made himself visible. One negro upon South Street, a quiet, inoffensive laborer, was shot down almost in front of his own cabin, and after life was extinct his body was fired into, cut and beat in a most horrible manner. In all parts of the city, wherever they could be seen, negroes were fired upon by policemen as well as citizens. They were shot while driving hacks, and quietly walking in the streets about their business. The police seemed to make it their

special business to shoot every negro they could see, no matter where he was or what he was doing. The result was that by 9 o'clock the colored population were in-doors trembling with wild alarm. How many negroes were killed during the night it is impossible to ascertain, as firing was constantly heard during the earlier hours in all parts of the city. It is estimated that from 15 to 20 were killed. So far as I have been able to learn, not a white man was fired upon by a negro during the whole night.

After the fight of Tuesday evening the negro soldiers and most of the colored population residing in the vicinity of the fight fled to the fort for security. They were perfectly quiet -- in fact, were terribly frightened for their own safety. At an early hour yesterday morning every thing in the neighborhood of the late fight was quiet and peaceable. Few, indeed, were the negroes to be seen in the vicinity. The bodies of most of those killed the evening before lay unburied where they fell, in some cases horribly mutilated and disfigured. Before the hour of 9 citizens armed with revolvers, shot-guns, and muskets, with a squad of policemen, repaired to the locality. As soon as they reached the place they commenced firing upon every negro in sight. It was said that the negroes had shot two white men who were quietly passing along in that vicinity in the morning; but this was, doubtless, one of those wild and unfounded rumors called out by the unnecessary excitement of the previous evening, and the unjust prejudice of the unrepentant rebels against the freedmen, as no such bodies were found, nor could the rumor be traced to any reliable source. Immediately upon the commencement of firing by the citizens, the report spread rapidly through the city that the fight had been renewed, and a large posse of citizens were called out by the Sheriff, armed at a large gun-store, and ordered to the field of battle. By 11 o'clock a large force had collected in the vicinity, who dealt out destruction to every colored man within reach. Several negro women and children were shot, in several instances from eight to ten bullets hitting them. So far as I could see, there were no armed negroes in the neighborhood, and I have the testimony of many respectable and reliable gentlemen to the same effect. The negro soldiers, and many not soldiers, stood trembling in the fort, filled with the direst apprehensions, and beyond even musket-range of those who were engaged in shooting down innocent and helpless men, women, and children. The arrival of a company of regulars upon the ground restored order, and the citizens and police gradually retired. How many negroes were killed in this vicinity during the morning is not known. The number, however, was considerable. During the entire day they were shot down in various parts of the city. But one white man was killed in the entire day, and he was shot by another white man for the simple reason that he stood talking with an old negro acquaintance. Such familiarity could not be tolerated. And I have, after careful inquiry, failed to find a single instance where a white man was shot at during the day by a negro.

Soon after dark the red glare of fire shot up in the southern part of the city,

then the flames burst out in the eastern part, and then they rolled up in the northern portion of the city. Some thirty houses, occupied by negroes, every school-house for colored children, and every place of worship for the freedmen were given to the devouring element. Lincoln Chapel, costing \$12,000, only served to whet the appetite of the greedy destroyer, for soon the oldest place of worship in the city -- a large brick church on the corner of Main and Overton streets, lately occupied by the freedmen, rolled away into a heap of blackened and charred ruins. And while the fire rolled onward and upward the masses smiled and approved. At this writing no estimate of the damage caused by the fire can be made, so great is the confusion and excitement.

Note:

Historians tell of a somewhat different origin to the Memphis riot than the one stated in *Harper's Weekly*. During the Civil War, the black population in Memphis had quadrupled, and racial tensions were high. The riot was sparked on May 1, 1866, when the hacks of a black man and a white man collided. As a group of black veterans tried to intervene to stop the arrest of the black man, a crowd of whites gathered at the scene. Fighting broke out, then escalated into three days of racially-motivated violence, primarily pitting the police (mainly Irish-Americans) against black residents.

In the end, 46 blacks and two whites were killed, five black women were raped, and hundreds of black homes, schools, and churches were broken into or destroyed by arson. Along with the New Orleans riot three months later, the Memphis riot helped undermine the viability and support of President Andrew Johnson's lenient Reconstruction program.

<http://blackhistory.harpweek.com/7Illustrations/Reconstruction/ScenesinMemphis.htm>