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Race Riot of 1919 Gave Glimpse of Future Struggles

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THE WASHINGTON CENTURY

Nobody knows precisely how or where it started, but on a steamy Saturday night, July 19, 1919, the word began to spread among the saloons and pool halls of downtown Washington, where crowds of soldiers, sailors and Marines freshly home from the Great War were taking weekend liberty.

A black suspect, questioned in an attempted sexual assault on a white woman, had been released by the Metropolitan Police. The woman was the wife of a Navy man. So the booze-fueled mutterings about revenge flowed quickly among hundreds of men in uniform, white men who were having trouble finding jobs in a crowded, sweltering capital.

Late that night, they started to move. The mob drew strength from a seedy neighborhood off Pennsylvania Avenue NW called "Murder Bay," known for its brawlers and brothels. The crowd crossed the tree-covered Mall heading toward a predominantly poor black section of Southwest. They picked up clubs, lead pipes and pieces of lumber as they went.

Near Ninth and D streets SW, they fell upon an unsuspecting black man named Charles Linton Ralls, who was out with his wife, Mary. Ralls was chased down and beaten severely. The mob then attacked a second black man, George Montgomery, 55, who was returning home with groceries. They fractured his skull with a brick.

The rampage by about 400 whites initially drew only scattered resistance in the black community, and the police were nowhere to be seen. When the Metropolitan Police Department finally arrived in force, its white officers arrested more blacks than whites, sending a clear signal about their sympathies.

It was only the beginning. The white mob – whose actions were triggered in large part by weeks of sensational newspaper accounts of alleged sex crimes by a "negro fiend" – unleashed a wave of violence

that swept over the city for four days. Nine people were killed in brutal street fighting, and an estimated 30 more would die eventually from their wounds. More than 150 men, women and children were clubbed, beaten and shot by mobs of both races. Several Marine guards and six D.C. policemen were shot, two fatally.

"A mob of sailors and soldiers jumped on the [street]car and pulled me off, beating me unmercifully from head to foot, leaving me in such a condition that I could hardly crawl back home," Francis Thomas, a frail black 17-year-old, said in a statement to the NAACP. Thomas said he saw three other blacks being beaten, including two women. "Before I became unconscious, I could hear them pleading with the Lord to keep them from being killed."

The Washington riot was one of more than 20 that took place that summer. With rioting in Chicago, Omaha, Knoxville, Tenn., Charleston, S.C., and other cities, the bloody interval came to be known as "the Red Summer." Unlike virtually all the disturbances that preceded it – in which white-on-black violence dominated – the Washington riot of 1919 was distinguished by strong, organized and armed black resistance, foreshadowing the civil rights struggles later in the century.

Postwar Washington, roughly 75 percent white, was a racial tinderbox. Housing was in short supply and jobs so scarce that ex-doughboys in uniform panhandled along Pennsylvania Avenue. Unemployed whites bitterly envied the relatively few blacks who had been fortunate enough to procure such low-level government jobs as messenger and clerk. Many whites also resented the black "invasion" of previously segregated neighborhoods around Capitol Hill, Foggy Bottom and the old downtown.

Washington's black community was then the largest and most prosperous in the country, with a small but impressive upper class of teachers, ministers, lawyers and businessmen concentrated in the LeDroit Park neighborhood near Howard University. But black Washingtonians were increasingly resentful of the growing dominance of the Jim Crow system that had been imported from the Deep South.

Racial resentment was particularly intense among Washington's several thousand returning black war veterans. They had proudly served their country in such units as the District's 1st Separate Battalion, part of the segregated Army force that fought in France. These men had been forced to fight for the right to serve in combat because the Army at first refused to draft blacks for any role other than laborer. They returned home hopeful that their military service would earn them fair treatment.

Instead, they saw race relations worsening in an administration dominated by conservative Southern whites brought here by

Woodrow Wilson, a Virginian. Wilson's promise of a "New Freedom" had won him more black voters than any Democrat before him, but they were cruelly disappointed: Previously integrated departments such as the Post Office and the Treasury had now set up "Jim Crow corners" with separate washrooms and lunchrooms for "colored only." Meanwhile, the Ku Klux Klan was being revived in Maryland and Virginia, as racial hatred burst forth with the resurgence of lynching of black men and women around the country – 28 public lynchings in the first six months of 1919 alone, including seven black veterans killed while still wearing their Army uniforms.

Washington's newspapers made a tense situation worse, with an unrelenting series of sensational stories of alleged sexual assaults by an unknown black perpetrator upon white women. The headlines dominated the city's four daily papers – the Evening Star, the Times, the Herald and The Post – for more than a month. A sampling of these July headlines illustrates the growing lynch-mob mentality: 13 SUSPECTS ARRESTED IN NEGRO HUNT; POSSES KEEP UP HUNT FOR NEGRO; HUNT COLORED ASSAILANT; NEGRO FIEND SOUGHT ANEW. Washington's newly formed chapter of the NAACP was so concerned that on July 9 – 10 days before the bloodshed – it sent a letter to the four daily papers saying they were "sowing the seeds of a race riot by their inflammatory headlines."

Violence escalated on the second night, Sunday, July 20, when white mobs sensed the 700-member police department was unwilling or unable to stop them. Blacks were beaten in front of the White House, at the giant Center Market on Seventh Street NW, and throughout the city, where roving bands of whites pulled them off streetcars.

One of black Washington's leading citizens, author and historian Carter G. Woodson, 43, the new dean at Howard University, was caught up in that night's horror. Walking home on Pennsylvania Avenue, Woodson was forced to hide in the shadows of a storefront as a white mob approached. "They had caught a Negro and deliberately held him as one would a beef for slaughter," he recalled, "and when they had conveniently adjusted him for lynching, they shot him. I heard him groaning in his struggle as I hurried away as fast as I could without running, expecting every moment to be lynched myself."

The Parents League, a black citizens group that had been formed primarily to improve the "colored schools," printed and distributed about 50,000 copies of a Notice to the Colored Citizens, a handbill that advised "our people, in the interest of law and order and to avoid the loss of life and injury, to go home before dark and to remain quietly and to protect themselves."

The city's chief executive, Louis Brownlow, the chairman of the District Commissioners, issued an urgent appeal: "The actions of the men who attacked innocent Negroes cannot be too strongly

condemned, and it is the duty of every citizen to express his support of law and order by refraining from any inciting conversation or the repetition of inciting rumor and tales."

But a crucial event had already occurred that morning that would overwhelm Brownlow's good intention. The Washington Post published a front-page article that would be singled out by the NAACP, and later by historians, as a contributing cause of the riot's escalation. Under the words "Mobilization for Tonight," The Post erroneously reported that all available servicemen had been ordered to report to Pennsylvania Avenue and Seventh Street at 9 p.m. for a "clean-up" operation.

It was never clear how this fictional mobilization call was issued, but it became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as white rioters gathered and blacks began arming themselves in defense. Longtime Post reporter Chalmers Roberts, in his history of The Washington Post, called the paper's riot coverage "shamefully irresponsible."

As blacks realized that authorities were not protecting them, many took up arms. More than 500 guns were sold by pawnshops and gun dealers that Monday, when the worst violence occurred. White mobs were met by black mobs up and down the Seventh Street commercial corridor. Black Army veterans took out their old guns; sharpshooters climbed to the roof of the Howard Theatre; blacks manned barricades at New Jersey Avenue and at U Street.

Black men were driving around the city firing randomly at whites. Blacks turned the tables and pulled whites off streetcars. At Seventh and G streets NW, a black rioter emptied his revolver into a crowded streetcar before taking five bullets from police. At 12th and G NW, a 17-year-old black girl barricaded herself in her house and shot and killed an MPD detective. In all, 10 whites and five blacks were killed or mortally wounded that night.

James Scott, a World War I veteran, boarded a streetcar at Seventh Street and Florida Avenue NW late Monday night and quickly noticed he was the only black man on board. As he headed for a vacant seat, a white soldier barred his way and shouted, "Where are you going, nigger?"

"Lynch him!" yelled another white. "Kill him! . . . Throw him out the window," others yelled.

"I was being grabbed from all sides. I forced my way to the rear door and was hit by something as I stepped off, which cut my ear and bruised my head," Scott recalled in a statement to the NAACP. "As the car moved away, the conductor fired three shots at me."

Finally, on Tuesday, as city leaders and members of Congress realized the situation was out of hand, President Wilson mobilized

about 2,000 troops to stop the rioting – cavalry from Fort Myer, Marines from Quantico, Army troops from Camp Meade and sailors from ships in the Potomac. City officials and businessmen closed the saloons, movie houses and billiard rooms in neighborhoods where violence erupted.

Despite the federal troops, white mobs gathered again. But a strong summer downpour doused their spirits and heavy rains continued through the night, effectively ending the riot of 1919.

In the ensuing months, the NAACP and others pushed for hearings into the riot. But the episode became a mostly forgotten chapter of Washington history, largely because conservative Southern congressmen blocked further inquiry.

Sociologist Arthur Waskow, who interviewed riot survivors in the 1960s, said the experience gave them a new self-respect and "a readiness to face white society as equals. . . . The Washington riot demonstrated that neither the silent mass of 'alley Negroes' nor the articulate leaders of the Negro community could be counted on to knuckle under."

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