



Resurfacing a History of Extreme Racial Violence Faced by Black Communities



COLLECTION OF THE SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Above: People attempt to extinguish a burning building in the aftermath of the riots.

In August 1908, a large White mob attacked the Black community in Springfield, Illinois. Rioters destroyed homes and businesses and lynched two men, terrorizing the Black community. The event led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Today, archeological evidence gives a rare glimpse into a community devastated by the race riots of the early 20th century.

Beginnings

The Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War, and passage of the 13th Amendment made millions of enslaved Black Americans free. However, many White people continued to see Black economic and social progress as a threat.

In 1908, Springfield contained racially and economically diverse areas. A large concentration of Black residents lived in the Levee, a commercial district with residential areas. The predominantly Black Badlands neighborhood was one block north. The Levee featured Black and Jewish-owned businesses, including restaurants, hotels, grocery stores,

barbershops, and a theater. It also contained some White-owned businesses.

In August 1908, Joe James and George Richardson—both Black men—were being held in the Sangamon County Jail. James was accused of murdering a White man. Richardson was charged with sexual assault of a White woman. Little evidence backed these claims. A crowd of mostly young White men began to form outside the county jail around noon on Friday, August 14, 1908, demanding a lynching. Fearing that the mob would destroy the jail, the sheriff moved the two men to another town.

The Riot

A mob erupted after learning that the two inmates were gone. Looting and burning began at 5th and Monroe. Crowds of rioters moved into the Levee commercial district and began attacking businesses that served the Black community. By the time the rioters arrived, most residents had left town or found shelter elsewhere.

When rioters reached the east end of the Levee around 11 pm, they headed north on 9th Street to the Badlands. From there they fanned out and burned at least two dozen homes and businesses. The mob found William Smith, a Black man who suffered from paralysis. Rioters dragged Smith from his residence and beat him until a bystander intervened and carried him to safety. Archeological evidence of the house where the mob found Smith is contained within the park today.

At 2 am, rioters reached the home of Scott Burton, a Black barber. When rioters spotted Burton attempting to escape, they beat him, dragged his body into the street, and lynched him from a dead tree.

Black residents were not passive victims. In the Levee, residents positioned themselves in second-story windows and opened fire on the mob, repelling several attempted advances until the militia arrived and dispersed it.



The Illinois State Militia stands in a burned home at the corner of 9th Street and Madison in Springfield.

On the second day of the riot, the violence briefly paused as more state militia arrived. Governor Charles Deneen designated the state arsenal as a temporary refuge for Black residents and positioned troops near the state capitol and in areas that were targeted the night before. By 7:30 pm, two mobs had formed in a Black neighborhood on the southeast side of town.

One mob gathered outside the home of William Donnegan, a Black retired shoemaker who had made shoes for Abraham Lincoln and served as an Underground Railroad operative. Donnegan was married to a White woman and was quite prosperous.

Men from the crowd beat him with bricks, cut his throat with a razor, and attempted to lynch him. Militia troops found Donnegan shortly afterwards and carried him to St. John's Hospital, where he died the next day.

In total, rioters targeted almost three dozen businesses in the Levee. About half were Black-owned and most of the rest were Jewish-owned. Black homes and businesses outside the Levee were destroyed as well, including more than 40 houses and businesses in the Badlands. Damages suffered by Black businesses are estimated at \$100,000 in 1908 dollars, the equivalent of over \$3 million today.

Aftermath and the Park Today

The riot was covered extensively by the local and national press. One of the most influential articles was by William English Walling, a Chicago journalist. Walling realized that a riot like the one in Springfield could break out anywhere in the country at any moment.

Walling's article got the attention of civil rights leaders across the nation, including Mary White Ovington and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Ovington was a White suffragist and journalist in New York who started the push to create a unified civil rights organization. She invited Walling and others to New York to help draft a call to action and began laying the foundation for what became the NAACP.



Archeological site at what is now Springfield 1908 Race Riot National Monument.

The NAACP was founded on February 12, 1909. The riot in Springfield emphasized the country's poor race relations a century after Lincoln's birth. The NAACP became one of the organizations at the forefront of the modern civil rights movement from 1954 to 1964. It is one of the oldest and largest civil rights organizations in the nation.

Today, foundations of five homes protected in the park show how residents lived in the predominately Black neighborhood called the Badlands. The site is very near where the riot started. Archeological evidence shows the buildings burned in the riot were never reoccupied. The site is a rare surviving resource directly associated with race riots in America.

The race riot in Springfield was not an isolated event. Events of racial violence have occurred in many US cities.

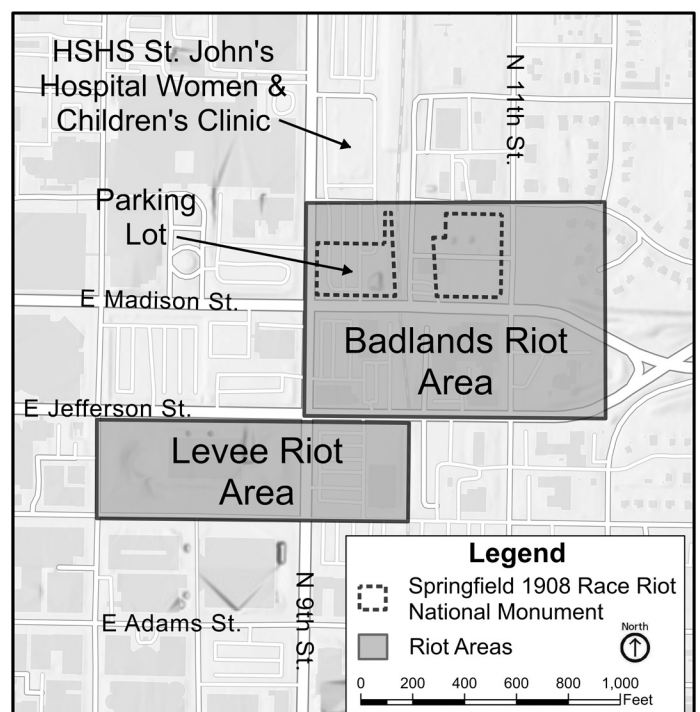
Have they occurred in the city where you live? Why did they begin? What happened to the people affected by the riots? Why is it important that we learn this history?

Visiting the Park and Contact Information

Springfield 1908 Race Riot National Monument is located in Springfield, Illinois. The park is in the central part of town along the north side of Madison Street between 9th and 11th streets. Visitors may park in the south end of the parking lot for the HSHS St. John's Hospital Women & Children's Clinic to view the site (map at right).

This is a new park currently under development. **Services are limited and construction may affect a visit.** Please contact the park for current information before visiting.

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Map of the park today, showing the areas of Springfield known as the Badlands and the Levee in 1908.