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Springfield Race Riot of 1908: Preserving a Memory

Abstract

This article discusses the race riots in Springfield of 1908, specifically focusing on the efforts made to make sure that people remember this incident so it does not get lost in history.

Springfield Race Riot of 1908: Preserving a Memory

Amanda Wiesenhofer

Beneath the seemingly normal facade of Springfield, Illinois, lies a chapter in its past that has been selectively deleted from public knowledge. Ironically Springfield, the home of the Great Emancipator Abraham Lincoln, was also the site of a race riot fueled by a volatile combustion of racial tensions, false accusations, and liquor. In the sweltering heat of August 1908, two elderly black men were lynched and four white men were killed in the midst of a mob motivated by prejudice and hate. Forced to abandon their homes, innocent black citizens fled to the capital for their lives.

This was a chapter in the city's past that residents were quick to forget, while, it is visibly evident that Springfield swells with pride at the mention of Abraham Lincoln. This is because "Lincoln immortalized Springfield while the race riot scandalized it; Lincoln made the city famous while the race riot made it infamous."¹ For nearly eighty years, the facts of the riot were confined to obscure history books and the memories of those who lived through the shameful turmoil. Gradual rediscovery of the riots began during the early seventies, and has continued to the present day. A reluctant Springfield has been slow to accept its past. Residents have played a crucial role in holding the city accountable for the repercussions of those few days in August long ago. Despite this progress, most of its citizens remain oblivious to the truth. The objective nature of public history necessitates repeated attempts to bring aspects of the past to the forefront. It is important to preserve, commemorate, and educate citizens of even the most horrendous parts of history because it reveals the society's winding path and the motivating factors behind its course.

During the weeks following the riot, the media made the entire country aware of the shocking events of that week in August. The nation was appalled that this atrocity occurred in the town of the man who bestowed freedom upon the same people that it rejected nearly one hundred years after his birth. The first and most quoted documentation of the riot was written by William English Walling who traveled from Chicago days after the riot to investigate for himself. Walling became enraged at the attitude of the town whose residents were unwilling to be held accountable for the actions committed by the mob. Instead, they opted to place the blame upon the Negroes. Walling writes,

Assuming that there were exceptionally provocative causes for complaint against the Negroes, we have closed our eyes to the whole awful and menacing truth--that a large part of the white population of Lincoln's home ... [has] initiated a permanent warfare with the Negro race.²

Walling held the town accountable for its extreme actions in his article published in the 1908 edition of *The Independent*. He brought the event to the forefront without mincing words. The problem stemmed from hate, not from any mitigating circumstances. Walling ended his article with the question, "Yet who realizes the seriousness of the situation, and what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to their aid?"³ Walling's query received an almost immediate response.

One beneficial repercussion of the riot of 1908 was the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Walling's article spurred the interests of Mary White Ovington and Oswald Garrison Villard who joined together with Walling to create the NAACP in New York on February 12, 1909. On the same-day in Springfield, a celebration was held in honor of the centennial anniversary of Lincoln's birth at the state arsenal. The attendance was completely white, formally clad; while blacks gathered in an East side church similarly to honor their benefactor. Ironically, this was because blacks were banned from attending the gala at the arsenal.⁴

The drama of the race riot was quelled with time. In the following years, the only mention of the race riot came in the form of small articles mentioning the legal proceedings left in its wake. In 1912, the Illinois State Register mentioned that the legal suits filed after the riots had cost the city \$36,527, and that the damage asked for by claimants amounted to \$132,103.⁵ Another article entitled "Echo of the Race Riot" mentioned only that Mrs. Sarah E. Donnegan had settled her case against the city and received a mere \$1500 for the lynching of her husband.⁶ There may be more newspaper articles on the subject of the riot from the decade following; however, the coverage which I have encountered leads me to believe that the "echo" was considerably dampened to allow the riot to fade into the dark recesses of Springfield's past.

Another indicator of later ignorance about the race riot appeared when 1922 surveys showed a decline in the population of the blacks in the city of Springfield with no corresponding explanation included. It states, "Similarly the number of negroes had remained comparatively small for this decrease and their proportion in the last twenty years has shown a decline."⁷ The decrease occurred partly as a result of the mass exodus of blacks that ensued amid the racial tension in the aftermath of the riot. Rebecca Monroe Veach confirms that "the riot had several repercussions, the most immediate of which was a mass exodus of the Black population from the city."⁸ Due to a lack of information, this assertion cannot be confirmed to be fact. If this is correct, then it also implies failure to include Negroes in the survey outcomes, thus continuing the trend of ignorance.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the citizens of Springfield collectively, remained ignorant of the riot and chose to eliminate it from the sphere of public life. There is a considerable gap in material available

concerning the riot from the early twenties to the forties. This may signify that Springfield purposefully allowed the memory of the riot to slip into the forgotten past, left for only historians to ponder; however, when trying to reconstruct a history of memory, historians encounter another monumental problem. The daily conversations and personal reflections of thousands of people that may have related to the seemingly taboo issue are not documented and cannot be retrieved because the witnesses have passed on. On the other hand, the level of recognition of the riots would logically seem to reflect the level of sentiment in the private sector.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the United States began to experience a push towards equal rights. The struggle for equal rights resulted from repeated agitation from the private sector. That is, the people rallied for a cause until they accomplished their desired ends. The decades spanning the nineteen-forties through the nineteen-sixties witnessed the beginning of a personal crusade to acknowledge the existence of the riot and draw from the experience in order to benefit society, especially demonstrated by the black population in order to fulfill their personal agenda: the quest for equal rights. Reviving the memory of the riot justified change. The Blacks hoped the condition of the race could be ameliorated by arguments stemming from the riot.

In 1947, the Springfield churches gathered to address the issue of race relations with the formation of the Race Relations Committee by the Springfield Council of Churches. A speech from the meeting held on 29 September 1947 directly addresses the issue of segregation and prejudice as a result of the riots. Mrs. Alice Taborn, a black woman, explained her agenda:

This brief discussion of the background of the Negro population in the city will explain why they have been so bewildered by the trends these later years of the thinking of the majority of the citizens of the city.⁹

Taborn recited a brief history of the riot and examples of continuing prejudice against Springfield's black population. She then stated the need to create equality of condition and treatment of the "Negro." Taborn explained that although the riots were a documented fact of history, the experience of the riot had not positively changed society.

Taborn pointed out, "It is interesting to observe that any research concerning this terrible occurrence gives complete detail, but there is a complete absence of information upon anything cultural or educational about Negroes in Springfield."¹⁰ She later continued, "the feelings and tensions that arose *then were* hard to dispel. There has been a decided effort to keep the Negro in his 'place' whatever that may be...."¹¹ A repeated effort to rally

awareness of race relations among citizens was the catalyst for change, although progress was slowly achieved.

During the nineteen-sixties Morton D. Barker, first-hand witness to the riot of 1908, employed his experience in the same manner as Taborn. Barker's method of social agitation came in the form of written protest. He wrote to encourage political leaders in pursuit of equal rights. Letters written by Barker mark his attempt to create social change based on the motivation of his experience. Barker wrote an un-named Congressman on 30 October 1963:

What is burned deeply in my memory is the race riot that I watched a whole night in the year 1908...They said it could not happen here.... I know legislation alone cannot accomplish the purpose, but it surely can do more than—no—enactment. Then human relations start. The pigments in our skin is a world problem, and so hard for America where we already had a long war that leaves passions and hatred embedded in our souls... [I]t would be wonderful, if each and all members resolved ... legislation would be in effect, and the vote would be from your own conscience as dictated by God.¹²

He wrote to Governor Otto Kerner on 2 August 1967,

There seems to be no direct answer to riots—but something tangible and of value to continue this democracy must ensue I know from experience that riots and lawlessness is almost a disease and when they start the mind is no longer normal. In 1904*, I was out all night in the Springfield riot and saw the start and it was almost unbelievable what a most peaceful city like ours without rancor could achieve with murder, arson and hafter in a few short hours.¹³

A repeated effort to raise awareness of race relations was the driving force behind the equal rights movement. In Springfield, the riots served as justification for a change. State Senator Paul Simon addressed the Illinois State Historical Society on 1 October 1967 concerning the riots that shame Illinois history. Simon stressed the need, not only to record the events as history, but also to actively confront the issues raised by the riots. Simon gave a short history of Illinois riots. He followed this by saying,

*The year mentioned by Barker in his letter to Governor Kerner was incorrect. The mistake was most likely a minor error because Barker's other letters give reference to 1908 as the correct date of the riot.

Other events could of course be recorded, but adding to the grim picture would serve no purpose. We should ask ourselves: What can we learn from all of this?... What concerns me most, as I view our history and as I view our current scene, is the general indifference to the problems.... If responsible citizens are willing to realistically face the needs which exist today, and the differing needs which will exist a decade from now, then riots on the Illinois scene will make their appearance rarely. This is one page of history we should not want to fill.¹⁴

This was public acknowledgment, yet the message was catered to the same narrow audience: the historical community. The race riots had yet to be discussed within the wider context of civic life and popular culture.

During Black History Week in 1972, the *Illinois State Register* published an article entitled "An Unpleasant Day in 1908 Will Long Be Remembered." This appears to be the first time since the decade following the riot that a periodical with a general audience gave attention to the riot, although, there may be others. The article focused on the work of the bi-racial NAACP for the advancement of equal rights. The remainder mentioned the Springfield riot in a regurgitation of condensed historical facts only two paragraphs long. It admitted, "August 14, 1908—That is a date which will long be remembered in the history of Springfield, and even the country. It is not a pleasant memory."¹⁵ However small the mention, Springfield was slowly beginning to awaken from its ignorance.

The following year, James Krohe Jr. published a pamphlet containing a succinct and telling account of the history of the riot of 1908 (complete with a map plotting the sites of the riot) entitled *Summer of Rage*. Krohe wrote in his forward,

Springfield and its inhabitants enjoy the distinction of having a rich sense of civic history and a generous share of attention in history books. Our most prominent place in the state's and nation's history can be explained by the two outstanding facts of our past: Abraham Lincoln and the 1908 race riot.... Our most famous resident is remembered in restored buildings, bronze tablets, statues, and solemn holidays, but there are no memorials for our most famous event.¹⁶

Krohe was the first to mention the failure on the part of the city to memorialize the victims of the tragedy. Memorials or a physical sign of remembrance would commemorate the event and might help to solidify its place in Springfield. He explained this lack as follows:

It is painful, and some would say unnecessary, for a proud and progressive community to acknowledge such a tragic episode in its past. Even 65 years after the killing and pillage ended many thoughtful citizens object to public discussion of this sensitive subject.¹⁷

Published materials such as *Summer of Rage* helped call attention to the events of the riot. Another short publication called *Growing Up With Springfield* by Rebecca Monroe Veach was also published in the 1973. Throughout the seventies, history books began to dedicate growing attention to the riot. While this is positive, again it appeared within the scholarly bounds of the historical community. Gaining access to the information required a visit to the local library. This was non-conducive to raising public awareness. Again there was a spurt of newspaper articles concerning the riot. This time they employed personal narratives. Wilmetta Flynn and Julia Shipp, twin sisters, were 5 when the riot occurred. They recalled,

“Sure we remember the race riots in 1908.... We were scared. But my daddy said not to worry. He told my mother to get some blankets and take us children over to Nineteenth and Madison Streets....My father stayed back at the house to guard it. We laid there and watched a mob hang a man from a railroad signal. We watched them with our own eyes.”¹⁸

Already the memory was dimmed. No one was hanged on a railroad signal. Unfortunately, many of the witnesses were aging and the oral history was slipping away. In 1973, the historical society collected oral history as well, but it was practically unused until much later.

The eighties followed a similar pattern as the seventies, marked with sparse mention, usually by the same authors, to the race riot. In 1990, the first book was published that dealt solely with the exploration of the 1908 Springfield Riot. Roberta Senechal's book, *The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot*, was aimed at establishing the contributing factors of the race riot. In her introduction, she defined her purpose as a sociological quest, not a historical account. Senechal stated the following about her book: “A close analysis of the actors in Springfield's riot enables us to assess and improve the fit between theories of social conflict and actual racial violence on the local level.”¹⁹ This was another account directed at academia that failed to address the need for public education and awareness.

In 1991, two sixth graders at Isles Elementary School created a project for their project history fair about the riots of 1908. Linsay Harney and Amanda Staab became exceedingly concerned as to why no memorials had been constructed. Harney and Staab contacted Cullom Davis, a Springfield historian to discover the reason. Davis expressed that there had previously been failed attempts to encourage the city to act.²⁰ Harney and Staab collected a petition signed by over 300 students and faculty at Isles School to have a marker built in Springfield. The attempt resulted in an ordinance in 1991 that created a committee that would seek to memorialize all historical events. In 1992 a separate committee was created to address the 1908 memorial specifically.²¹

In 1993 Carl Madison, Harry Wright, and their associate Keith Pinn accepted responsibility for bringing the riot to the public forum. Madison, Wright, and Pinn joined together to create a private, non-profit organization that would establish memorials to honor the memory of the victims of the 1908 riot. The project was to be funded through donations, and the newly created organization, "Memorial 1908 Inc." set its initial goal to place tombstones on the graves of four victims in Oak Ridge Cemetery. Memorial 1908 Inc. eventually planned to build a fifteen-foot-tall obelisk situated on a city-block-sized piece of property. The monument would include the names of the six victims plus other information surrounding the riot. Mayor Ossie Langfelder had appointed a committee in 1992, but the members of Memorial 1908 Inc. did not want to wait any longer to act. Memorial 1908's motto was "Erasing history doesn't lead to progress."²² The men behind the project hoped to memorialize the victims as well as to raise public awareness. The markers were finally placed on the headstones in August of 1994.²³ The dream of the monument has yet to be realized.

The committee formed by Langfelder in 1992 remained dormant until 1994 save for a commemorative lunch, a few meetings, and some recording work. The fact that so much initiative was assumed by the private sectors proves the unwillingness of the city, as a whole, to come to grips with the memory of the riot. Finally, the 1908 Historical Events Marker Committee erected eight markers on important sites of the riot to commemorate the event. These markers form a walking tour that attempts to re-create the path of the mob. The dedication took place on Sunday, 8 September 1994; it was the first official 1908 race riot memorial walking tour. The ceremony was presided over by Mayor Langfelder; Harney and Staab also attended to see their goal reach completion.²⁴

Thus, several advancements occurred during the nineties that bringing the riot to public attention; however, during my research despite all the attempts that had been made, many residents of Springfield had little to no knowledge of the riot. As a resident of Springfield, I was oblivious to the fact for the majority of my time spent *living there*. Upon entering the visitor's center in

downtown Springfield, my inquiries about the riot were met with confused looks as I was directed first to the Archives, and from there to the Historical Library that lies two stories beneath the Old State Capitol. I discovered that I had sauntered casually past one marker every Sunday on my way to Trinity Lutheran Church for nearly six years. Communities are resistant to change. Springfield has acknowledged its past and now she must embrace it.

The memory of the race riot has traveled a cyclical path: from publicity, to private internalization and public ignorance, to personal crusade with guilt as a motivating factor, and so on. But the key element for incorporation into heritage is education. Krohe stated in 1973, before the monuments existed,

“...young people and adults living in Springfield are entitled to a balanced and accurate account of the event. Most citizens appear either to know nothing about the riot or to have a crude impression based on hearsay rather than history.”²⁵

Education is the only way to disseminate the truth and ensure that history will survive the test of time. Raj Mudahar, a student at Southeast High School in Springfield, claims that his history class spent approximately five minutes mentioning the riot. Conversely, Lutheran High School teacher and administrator Mike Filter informed me that he spent approximately one-half of one period covering the race riot. Filter has included this topic in his American History curriculum for five or six years. Filter added that every year he adds more to that particular lesson. Additionally, he offers extra credit for those students who trace the route of the walking tour *that covers the downtown area*. These are steps in a positive direction, yet the public schools (that reach a larger and more diverse student base) still remain apathetic about the *riot*. However, this conclusion is admittedly based on incomplete information, as my impromptu survey only included one public and one private school.

Citizens must remain aware of historical truth. Krohe states, “One measure of a community’s essential strength and self-esteem is its capacity to confront the mistakes as well as the accomplishments of its past and to learn from them.”²⁶ Truth fights ignorance, and education promotes awareness. Senator Paul Simon warned as early as 1967, “History should teach us that we tolerate such indifference at our own peril.”²⁷ Springfield needs to grow up before it is *too late*.

Endnotes

- ¹James Krohe Jr., *Summer of Rage: The Springfield Race Riot of 1908* (Springfield, IL: Sangamon County Historical Society, 1973), iii.
- ²William English Walling, "The Race War in the North," *The Independent* LXV (July-December 1908).
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Bruce Alexander Campbell, *The Sangamon Saga: An Illustrated Bicentennial History of Sangamon County* (Springfield, IL: Phillips Brothers Inc., 1976), 202.
- ⁵*Illinois State Register* (Springfield). 1 March 1912.
- ⁶*Illinois State Register* (Springfield). 1 May 1912.
- ⁷Shelby B. Harrison, *Social Conditions in an American City: A Summary of the Findings of the Springfield Survey* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1922), 23.
- ⁸Rebecca Monroe Veach, *Growing Up With Springfield. A History of the Capital of Illinois* (Springfield, IL: Boardman-Smith Funeral Chapel, 1973), 41.
- ⁹Alice Taborn, "A History of Race, Relations In Springfield, Illinois," speech given before the Race Relations Committee meeting of the Springfield Council of Churches, 29 September 1947.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Morton D. Barker Sr., to Congressman, 30 October 1963.
- ¹³_____, to Governor Otto Kerner, 2 August, 1967.
- ¹⁴Paul Simon, "Riots in Illinois History,," *Dispatch* 3, no.2, (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Society) February 1968, 4.
- ¹⁵"An Unpleasant Day in 1908 Will Long Be Remembered," *Illinois State Register*, 8 February, 1972.
- ¹⁶Krohe, *Summer of Rage*, iii.
- ¹⁷Ibid
- ¹⁸"Neighbors," *State Journal Register*, 21 May 1978.
- ¹⁹Roberta, Senechal. *The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois in 1908* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 10.
- ²⁰"Race Riots Finally Make the Grade," *Decatur Herald & Review*, 18 September 1994.
- ²¹Sangamon County Historical Society, "A Look Back: The 1908 Race Riot, *Historico*, March 1994.
- ²²Doug Pokorski, "Men Work to Preserve History," *State Journal Register*, 26 September 1993.
- ²³_____, "1908 Victims to Have Memorials," *State Journal Register*, 20 February 1994.
- ²⁴_____, "Springfield Prepares to Honor Victims of Race Riot," *State Journal Register*, 11 August 1994.
- ²⁵Krohe, *Summer of Rage*, iii.
- ²⁶Ibid iv.
- ²⁷Simon, "Riots in Illinois History."

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