

Bloomington inescapably linked to Springfield Race Riot

The Springfield Race Riot of August 14-15, 1908, when thousands of white residents rampaged through the city's black areas destroying life and property, remains one of the darkest chapters in Illinois history. And Bloomington, although 60 miles to the north, found itself closely tied to the unfolding crisis.

On the evening of August 14, a mob numbering 5,000 to 10,000 descended on the Sangamon County Jail fully intending to lynch two African-American men—Joe James, accused of murdering a white man, and George Richardson, wrongly accused of raping a white woman.

Fortunately, Sangamon County Sheriff Charles Werner had seen to the temporary transfer of the two accused men beforehand. Harry Loper, a white Springfield restaurant owner, drove the two prisoners and several sheriff deputies to the outskirts of Springfield where they caught a northbound Chicago & Alton Railroad passenger train to Bloomington. Loper lived through the Cincinnati race riot and was not eager to relive the experience. "I didn't care whether the Negroes were hanged if they were guilty," he said later, "but I wanted to avoid the bloodshed that would be the result of an attack on the jail."

Once in Bloomington, James and Richardson were held at the McLean County Jail. This was the same jail many longtime area residents will remember. Located at the corner of Madison and Monroe streets on the west end of downtown Bloomington, it was built in 1882. This increasingly cramped and decrepit facility didn't close until 1977.

Back in Springfield, the enraged rabble, unable to get their hands on the two men, turned on the African-American community, rioting through the city's black commercial district and residential neighborhood. The mob set fire to buildings and lynched two African-American men who had no connection to the alleged crimes. Thousands more white residents came out to watch black homes and businesses burn, and when firefighters attempted to put out the flames the crowd cut their hoses.

National Guardsmen from Springfield and elsewhere played a key role in restoring order. The Bloomington-based Co. D, Fifth Regiment, arrived in the state capital the morning after the initial spasm of violence, bolstering the ranks of those already on patrol.

The Pantagraph reported a Co. D trooper used his gun to warn off a crowd closing in on a "colored brother" (as the newspaper referred to the African-American man). "In the wrecked and burnt district the soldiers are keeping the people on the move, not even small groups being allowed to congregate," it was noted.

Interest in the Springfield riot was such that The Pantagraph ran a special 3 p.m. edition on August 15.

An estimated 2,000 to 3,000 blacks fled Springfield. Conductors on the Illinois Traction System (ITS) interurban coming into Springfield from the north reported the countryside “covered with Negroes, each with a little bundle of belongings.” The refugees, reported The Pantagraph, “seem in the greatest terror and are travelling as rapidly as their baggage will permit.”

A fair number of these Springfield evacuees ended up in Bloomington to stay with friends, family or Good Samaritans.

Two days after the riot, the Rev. Henry Sallie related his harrowing escape from Springfield to a packed audience at Bloomington’s Mount Pisgah Baptist Church. Sallie, the owner of a bicycle shop and lunch counter, was having supper at home when set upon by the mob. “Seeing that if I stood my ground and tried to protect myself and property I and my friends would be killed outright we jumped out of a rear window and ran for our lives,” he said. “Others of my race in crowds were running from the locality as if fleeing before a tidal wave.”

Race relations were tense in Bloomington as well. On Aug. 17, a “miniature riot” broke out on West Market Street at the C&A bridge, where a crowd of whites hurled insults and then rocks at two African-American men until one of them emptied a revolver in the direction of his tormentors. Luckily, no one was killed or wounded in this exchange.

In a pointed editorial, The Pantagraph acknowledged that anti-black mob action was not uncommon to the North. “The race feeling is no longer sectional,” it read. “The South has no monopoly of it but it manifests itself in its most violent form in the North as well.” Even more insidious, The Pantagraph noted a telling difference between anti-black violence, North and South. “A southern lynching ... does not aim at driving the Negro out so much as intimidating and keeping him down,” noted the editorial. “But the northern mob undertakes to change the character of the population. It aims to the whole Negro race and compels the innocent and the guilty alike to move on. In involves pillage, loot and plunder.”

Northern race riots, in other words, were a form of “ethnic cleansing,” though that term was not yet in use.

During George Richardson’s stay in the McLean County Jail, The Pantagraph detailed (though thankfully in less than sensationalistic terms) his “checkered career,” which included manslaughter charges and several years in the Joliet penitentiary. A grand jury indicted Richardson on rape charges several days after he arrived in Bloomington, though the simmering “race trouble” back home prevented his swift arraignment. “His return will be delayed,” reported The Pantagraph, “until the mob spirit in the city has been fully allayed.”

About one week later, Richardson’s accuser changed her story, swearing to an affidavit that he was not her attacker. Sheriff Werner then released him without ceremony on September 4. “Richardson has been a good prisoner in the jail here and at no time has

shown evidence of anxiety,” noted The Pantagraph. “He was smiling and happy and said that he was going to live pretty straight in the future.” For his part, Richardson returned to Springfield, and there he passed away in 1948 at the age of 76.

Back in 1908, a few days after Richardson’s release, Sangamon County deputy sheriffs conducted Joe James back to Springfield. He was speedily convicted of murder, and on October 23, hanged in the Sangamon County Jail. This was done despite the fact that James was 18 years old and as a minor not subject to the death penalty.

In contrast, of the hundreds of lynch mob participants and arsonists, and the thousands of vandals, looters and co-conspirators, there was but one conviction, and that was for petty larceny.

The shock of such mob violence erupting in Abraham Lincoln’s hometown spurred civil rights activists in New York to action. Their subsequent meetings played a pivotal role in the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).