The Springfield Riot and African Americans in Pre-World War I Illinois

Riots in Watts, Detroit and other cities during the 1960s continue to this day to shape our perceptions of urban unrest and decay and racial strife, as well as the willingness of our society to address the problems that may have encouraged the violence. As these riots involved African American youth they tended to overshadowed in many American's minds riots of much different character that had occurred years before in our nation's history. During the Civil War, the draft set-off a major riot in New York that served as an excuse for the city's Irish to attack not only businesses and government buildings but also African Americans. Years later, the Chicago Riot of 1919 was particularly vicious and involved whites attacking African Americans who seemingly threatened their neighborhoods and their hegemony in the city's factories. Less well known was the Springfield Riot that had occurred a decade earlier.

When rumors swept across Springfield that an African American had attacked a white woman in that city, a white mob quickly formed and attacked the city's African American community. Within hours, the mob had caused extensive damage, injury, and several deaths, including one lynching. We typically associate lynching with the South: what would explain what occurred in Springfield?

African Americans could hardly have posed a serious threat to the white community in Illinois, few African Americans lived in the state. The 1900 U. S. Census, in fact, recorded that fewer than 10,000 African Americans as state residents. The reason that there were so few African Americans is not hard to determine. Illinois was far from a welcoming environment for African Americans. Following the Civil War the state's economy expanded rapidly and offered migrants and immigrants jobs, which would explain why the Irish, Germans, and the waves of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe poured into the state following the Civil War, those jobs were not for African Americans. To be sure, in the initial years following the Civil War, African Americans were not inclined to migrate from the South to Illinois or elsewhere. Conditions in the South were far from ideal, but newly freed slaves had at least been freed. Since they had been denied following slavery any form of compensation for their decades of toil, they seldom owned the land that they worked, but they did have the vote and for a generation—prior to the introduction of Jim Crow—they may also have had the hope of accumulating through share cropping sufficient capital to purchase the land they worked. In any case, the North offered few opportunities.

Illinois's inhospitality dated back decades prior to emancipation. The Northwest Ordinance had declared land above the Ohio to be free of slavery but Illinois's original constitution that had been adopted in 1818 nonetheless permitted the institution. It not only recognized slaves owned by the French as being property but it permitted the transport of slaves from Kentucky to Shawneetown's salt works. Over the next several years, the state's legislature—when faced with growing anti-slavery sentiment—technically outlawed slavery but allowed slave owners to continue the institution through the subterfuge of declaring slaves to be indentured servants, who, under the threat of being sent south, could only agree to perpetual indenture. No matter, though, the life of a

freed slave in Illinois was hardly better than that of a slave, that is, assuming that an African American could even reside in Illinois.

Today, communities across Illinois take considerable pride, as do many communities in our northern states, in their connection to the Underground Railroad. And rightly so given the heroism of its operators, but the railroad's existence also suggests a darker side to the state's history. No slave was truly free in Illinois until he or she reached Canada. Illinois was by no stretch of its imagination a safe haven for African Americans. Not only were escaped slaves threatened with recapture and return to the South, even those African Americans who were free found themselves within a hostile environment. The state's *Black Codes*, which had by the 1820s codified the compromised legal status of free African Americans within the state, were as harsh as any in the South, declaring, among other things, that African Americans could not own property, testify in court against white man or women and were subject to whipping as a punishment. The codes had been passed not only to control those African Americans already in the state but to discourage the stay of any who might wish to settle.

Even in the years following the Civil War, African Americans in Illinois struggled. Some had been able to acquire land to farm, but it became increasingly more difficult for African Americans to secure better jobs, as employers were reluctant to hire and unions excluded them from membership. In such cities as Springfield, even those African Americans who were able to find jobs were barred from restaurants and many public facilities. The result was that few African Americans migrated to Illinois. Several hundred African Americans had found their way to the state's capital, however, and they, as did the city's white residents, struggled through the sweltering heat of late summer 1908.

On the evening of August 4, 1908, some 5,000 rioters surged into Springfield's streets. Spurred by a rumor that an African American had sexually assaulted a white women, the mob first approached the city jail, only to discover that the police and a local restaurant owner had secreted the African American and other inmates out of town. The mob reacted violently, first destroying the restaurant and then moving on to destroy the city's small African American business district and the "Badlands", the adjacent neighborhood. On the way, the mob lynched an African American barber who had stayed to protect his property. The next day the mob reformed and moved on the state arsenal where several hundred African Americans had sought refuge but the state militia, which had been called to duty, drove it off. Over the next few hours, the mob roamed through a largely white, middle-class neighborhood and lynched a second African American, an elderly resident. The arrival of additional troops broke the back of the mob but random attacks upon African Americans continued through the summer and into the early fall.

Though riots had also occurred in other small cities across the Midwest that year, the Springfield Riot, which had occurred in Lincoln's home, shocked the nation and has since puzzled historians. A community of less than 50,000 souls, Springfield had shown no previous signs of unusual stress. Jobs were plentiful and the city's 2,500 African Americans were hardly in the position to compete against whites for the better

opportunities and the city's residential patterns gave little evidence that the slow-growing African American population were in anyway threatening the sanctity of the city's white neighborhoods. The city's 200 saloons and brothels that were concentrated in the poorer African American districts of the city may have given white cause for concern for crime but in actuality whites were the primary patrons of those establishments, not the African Americans who could not keep them out of their own neighborhoods.

If competition for jobs, the desire to protect the sanctity of white neighborhoods, nor fear of crime can explain the riot, what might? As the historian Roberta Senechal has suggested, considering who the rioters targeted may suggest why the riot occurred. The rioters had generally ignored the poorer African American community and attacked instead the few African American owned business that existed and the better African American homes. Why did they?

Tempting as it is to blame the Springfield Riot upon the community's many Southern residents, the rioters were neither Southern, nor were they those whites who frequented the city's saloons and brothels, and they were not the immigrants who worked within the region's many coal mines. They were instead residents who generally lived well away from the city's African American neighborhoods and who may simply have resented those African Americans who showed any signs of success. The motivation of the rioters may have been little more than a vicious racism that had, in fact, long characterized Illinois and other northern states. No community in Illinois and few across the entire north truly welcomed African Americans. However strong racism was across the South it was also firmly entrenched in the North and the Midwest as well.

Readings

Roberta Senechal, "The Springfield Race Riot of 1908, Illinois Periodicals Online (Northern Illinois University Libraries: DeKalb, 2003) (http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/iht329622.html).

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