Columbia Race Riots

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Essential Question: What role did the Columbia Race Riots play in sparking the Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee?

The Columbia Race Riot began on February 25, 1946 with a disagreement over a radio. Gladys Stephenson had taken her radio to a local store to be repaired. Her son, James Stephenson, a Navy veteran, accompanied her to pick the radio up. Mrs. Stephenson and the clerk got into an argument concerning the radio. James Stephenson intervened and during the ensuing fight the clerk, William Fleming, crashed through a window. The police arrested the Stephensons, charged them with breach of the peace and released them after they paid a $50 fine. Fleming's father was not satisfied with the punishment and swore out a warrant for James Stephenson charging attempted murder.

Tensions began to escalate as crowds of whites started gathering in the town square to discuss the incidents. The African American community heard rumors that the whites were planning to lynch Stephenson. Many in the African American community were veterans who armed themselves in preparation for fighting back. The white citizens then ordered that the businesses in the Mink Slide, the African American business district, turn off their lights. The white citizens then shot out the street lights. Patrolmen responded to the area and more shots were fired. All four patrolmen were injured by the gunfire.

The sheriff requested assistance from Governor Jim Nance McCord who sent the highway patrol and Tennessee State Guard to Columbia. Early on February 26th, the highway patrolmen entered the Mink Slide and began to steal cash and goods while searching homes and businesses without warrants. The officers seized about 300 weapons and arrested 100 African Americans. The prisoners were denied bail and legal counsel. On February 28, two African American prisoners were killed while in police custody. The police claimed that the men tried to take their weapons and escape.

The NAACP sent Thurgood Marshall and Walter White to Tennessee to help organize a defense of the men accused of shooting the four patrolmen. Of the twenty-five African Americans tried, only two were found guilty despite being tried before an all-white jury. A federal grand jury ruled the deaths of the prisoners to be justifiable homicide. The Stephensons were never tried and no whites were ever charged for crimes related to the riot.

The Columbia Race Riot of 1946 was part of a larger movement by African Americans in Tennessee to oppose a social and legal system that treated them as second class citizens. African

Americans, who fought for freedom in World War II, were no longer willing to be denied their freedom at home. Events like the Columbia Race Riot brought attention to the inequalities of the Jim Crow south and represented the first steps in the long march for equal rights.

Sources: "Columbia Race Riots." *tn4me.org.* The Tennessee State Museum. n.d. Web. 27 July 2014. <http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/era_id/3/major_id/11/minor_id/26/a_id/110>

"Columbia Race Riots." *Tennessee Encyclopedia and History and Culture* 1st edition. 1998. Print.

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Imagine that you're a relative of one of the African American individuals killed in prison and are writing a reflective journal entry. Use the text to explain the buildup of the riots and the events that followed. Things to keep in mind: Why were the riots taking place? What came out of them? How do you feel about the judge's ruling? (At least 2 paragraphs.)

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Answers will vary, but should address the questions in the prompt.

Thurgood Marshall on the Columbia Race Riots

Thurgood Marshall's fight against segregation and racism took him all over the country and into perilous territory, especially when investigating a race riot. Marshall frequently said that the most frightening case he ever worked on was in Columbia, Tennessee. Local police, Marshall said, had plans to lynch him.

After World War II, nearly a million black soldiers returned home from overseas duty. Because of deep-seated racism among the military brass, relatively few African Americans had seen any combat. Instead, they had been relegated to the motor pool and the mess hall. Furthermore, returning vets resented that they had fought Aryan supremacy in Europe only to meet white supremacy at home.

In 1946, Columbia, TN, a fistfight between a black veteran and a white shopkeeper sparked a riot, led by white civilians and law enforcement officers, that destroyed the black business section of the city. More than 100 black men were arrested, 27 were charged with rioting and attempted murder and one died in peculiar circumstances in the local jail. The Columbia riot made national headlines. It was the first major racial confrontation following WWII.

Three months later, Thurgood Marshall came to town as lead attorney for the defense. The mood was tense. Marshall and the other lawyers working on the case could not safely stay in town during the trial, so they roomed in Nashville, 74 miles away. Nevertheless, with the help of local lawyers and Howard University law professor Leon Ransom, Marshall's defense team achieved the unthinkable: the eventual acquittal of all but one of the defendants by an all-white jury. It was a sweet victory for Thurgood Marshall but it could also have been his last. He recounts the story here.

Marshall: There was an altercation when a radio repairman struck a Negro woman, who called him a liar. And as a result, her son, a teenager, knocked the white man down and beat him up. The mob came down to the Negro section of town to work it over, and the Negroes fired back. That night the National Guard came in and surrounded the Negro neighborhood, which was called Mink Slide, and set up fifty-caliber machine guns and just - I mean, it was horrible. These wood houses, they just went right through them like that. I don't know how many people got killed.

But it ended up, one white man was killed, and a whole gang of Negroes were charged with murder.

We went down to try that case, and I got ill. I had Virus X, and I was in the hospital for about three months. And when I went back afterwards, the mob got me one night, and they were

taking me down to the river, where all of the white people were waiting to do a little bit of lynching.

Interviewer: When you say they were taking you down to the river, what were they doing? Escorting your car?

Marshall: No, they pulled the car over, and behind me I could see there were three or four state highway patrol cars and two city cars, and they wanted to see my - No, they said they had a warrant to search the car. It was a dry county, and they knew that lawyers are gonna drink liquor. Well, believe it or not, we didn't have any whiskey in the car. They looked around, they said, "We'll go in the trunk." I told the other two cars, "Look, wherever they go, you go. Don't let them put something in there, on us."

So I could hear a guy behind, but I could never see him, and they said, "Well, maybe they'll let us search them."

I said, "You got a warrant to search us?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Well, the answer is, no."

And "So, well, I guess you have to let them go."

So I told a local lawyer, [Z. A.] Looby, I said, "You'd better drive," because it was his car, "because I've got a New York license," and he said, "Okay," and we drove off.

The sirens went off again, and the guy came back and said - I was in the back seat - and they said, "You were driving this car, weren't you?"

I said, "I'm not answering any questions."

They said "Well, let's see your driver's license." So I gave it to him, and he carried it back, and again - I never found out who this voice was - so then the guy says, "Get out."

I say, "What's up?"

He says, "Put your hands up."

I said, "What is it?"

He said, "Drunken driving."

I said, "Drunken driving? I haven't had a drink in twenty-four hours. Drunken Driving?"

He says, "Get in the car."

And then they told Looby and the others to keep going up the road, and they wouldn't go. They stayed following this police car, and when they couldn't shake Looby, they turned around and went back into town, and when they got into town - the big, wide street, nobody there hardly, about two or three people, middle of the afternoon, they were all down at the river.

So then we realized what was up. And he said, "There's a magistrate over there, on the second floor. You see him, right over there?" I said, "Yes, what about it?"

He said, "You go over there. We'll be over."

I said, "No you won't." I said, "If we go over, I'm going with you."

He said, "Why?"

I said, "You're not going to shoot me in the back while I'm 'escaping.' I mean, let's make this legal."

So he said. "Smart-ass nigger," and things like that, and so we went over, and there was a little gentleman, the magistrate; a little man, he couldn't have been much over five-foot-one at the most, and he said, "What's up?"

[The officer] said, "It's drunken driving."

[The magistrate said], "He doesn't look drunk to me."

I said, "I'm not drunk."

He said, "You want to take my test?"

I said, "Well, what's your test?"

He said, "I'm a teetotaler. I've never had a drink in my life. I can smell liquor a mile off. You blow your breath on me."

I said, "Sure," and I blew my breath. I almost rocked this man, I blew so hard.

He said, "Hell, this man hasn't had a drink. What are you talking about?"

And I turned around and looked, they're gone. So I said, "What else is there?"

He said, "You're free to go." So I went out and ran as fast as I could, down to this Mink Slide, which was about three blocks down. And when I got down there, I told what had happened, and they said, "Boy, they'll be down here in a minute."'

So they put me in this other car, and we went down, and we forked out like that, and I went around like this, and came on back to Nashville.

The other funny thing, I remember, I called Tom Clark, who was attorney general, and I told him what happened, and he said, "Drunken driving?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Were you drunk?"

I said, "Well, Mr. Attorney General, about five minutes after I hang up this phone, I'm going to be drunk. I'm going to be drunk!"

Source: Marshall, Thurgood. "Interview." *Americanradioworks.org.* American Public Media, n.d. Web. 25 July 2014, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/marshall/columbia.html>