

# **The History of Racial Violence in American Cities**

**Lucia Ryan, 2019**

This summer I researched eight major moments of racial violence in New York City history and built a website around this research. The long-term goal of this website is that it will act as a public, user-friendly, accessible resource for both students and educators learning about the history of racial violence in all American cities. The site provides primary sources, images, timelines, maps, narrative, and archived newspaper articles. This summer, I focused on solely New York City as the first section of the site, and studies events such as slave conspiracies, slave revolts, and riots.

The website contains two maps that I made, one for all of the U.S., and a more detailed one for just New York City. The New York map features the eight riots and their locations within the city. Each riot has its own page on the website. The eight riots are the 1712 slave revolt, 1741 slave conspiracy, 1863 draft riots, 1900 tenderloin riot, 1935 Harlem uprising, 1943 Harlem uprising, 1964 Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant riots, and the 1991 Crown Heights riot. Each riot page contains a “period profile,” which provides context to the riot: it explains what was happening the city and country at the time of the violence and how this context might explain why the riot occurred. In crafting these profiles, I sought to demonstrate that no race riot was random or spontaneous. While some sources or media may have framed these riots as “eruptions,” suggesting an unexpected and inexplicable nature to the riots, I found in my research that each event of violence can be explained by the preexisting racial tensions of the time and place of the riot. In writing a historical narrative for each of these New York riots, I aimed to tell a greater story of New York City and its evolving history of racial tension, while providing historical analysis for the specifics of each riot as well.

Each riot page also contains images of the event, a timeline or “unfolding-of-events”, and at least one download-able primary source that I obtained through online archival research. Some of the riot pages also contain a list of newspaper articles reporting on the event at the time. I used WordPress to build the website, with the help of the Bowdoin Academic Technology and New Media Consultant David Israel. In working on this site, I had to learn some very basic HTML code, such as with inserting images, captions, links, and PDFs, in creating content for each page. I created the content for each page through research in digital archives, such as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library Digital Collections, and the New York Historical Society Digital Collections, Black Freedom Struggle, The New York Times archives and Time Machine, Black Studies Center, and the La Guardia and Wagner archives, as well as books and articles obtained through the Bowdoin, Bates and Colby Libraries.

This research project affirmed for me how vital it is to consider the historian, and his or her research focus and questions, when analyzing historical records and accounts of an event. For example, for the 1991 Crown Heights riot—in which blacks and Jews in Crown Heights, Brooklyn attacked each other following the accidental killing of a young black boy and the murder of a Jewish man—there is still debate over what to call the event, its characterization varying among historians and journalists. Some have memorialized the riot as a pogrom, a lynching, and an event of anti-Semitism in which black people exclusively targeted and attacked Jewish people. Some have memorialized it a moment emblematic of the systemic racism against blacks in New York City; a breaking point for blacks after years of experiencing municipal neglect, police brutality, and general discrimination from their white neighbors. This riot was especially challenging to research and write about because of these varying historical accounts, as they forced me to be particularly analytical, inquisitive, and open-minded when evaluating them.

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