

Reconsidering the Role of the Irish in the Memphis Race Riot of 1866

By Millie Worley

On May 1, 1866, Memphis erupted in racial violence. That afternoon two horse-drawn hacks collided. One was driven by a white man and the other by a black man.¹ The two men argued and eventually came to blows over the accident. White Memphis police officers John O'Neal, David Carroll, and James Finn, accompanied by former police officer John Stephens, attempted to arrest the black man, but a nearby group of African-American federal soldiers prevented the arrest. The two groups separated, promising to meet again to settle the matter. During that initial conflict, Stephens received a fatal wound. By nightfall, another group of federal troops, probably white, had restored order.² A few white police officers returned to the scene that same night with reinforcements, but the black soldiers had already returned to nearby Fort Pickering. Army officers did not allow the black soldiers to leave after they had arrived at the fort, and most of the soldiers had already surrendered their weapons. The vast majority of the population of South Memphis (the African-American community around Fort Pickering) did not have weapons to defend themselves, and without the protection of the black soldiers the community had no protection from the mostly armed white mob.³ The white group split up and began wreaking havoc in the black community.⁴

¹ James Gilbert Ryan, "The Memphis Riot of 1866: Terror in a Black Community During Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History*, 62 (1977): 243, 246; Jack Holmes, "The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Riot of 1866," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 17 (1958): 195.

² These troops were probably white, as the African American troops had been discharged from service by April 30.

³ The actual origin of the first group of whites to return to the scene of the incident cannot be definitely discerned, although contemporary reports characterized these whites as reinforcements for the police involved in the initial armed conflict.

⁴ Ryan, "Memphis Riot of 1866," 243. "Memphis Riots and Massacres," House Report No. 101, U.S. 39th Congress, 1st Session, July 25, 1866, Report of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots. *Memphis Riots and Massacres* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

The mob set buildings on fire and then shot at any people attempting to escape the flames. Reportedly, a rioter killed a twelve-year old boy in cold blood, and another rioter stabbed a fifty-year old woman multiple times.⁵ Witnesses also said that the rioters killed at least one invalid and shot a man sitting on the porch of a hospital.⁶ Every eyewitness agreed that none of the killed by the mob had weapons at the time. The profile of the victims suggests that perhaps part of the motivation of the mob included frightening both the black population and those whites who had come from the North to assist them as teachers and missionaries.⁷

Some witnesses even named some of the men involved, such as David Roach, and other witnesses claimed to have seen a man named John Pendergast kill at least one person and participate in the burning and looting all night.⁸ Not a single white man ever served any jail time or was hanged for his crime. By the time soldiers placed the city under martial law, forty-eight people had been killed and seventy-five had been injured. Malicious, armed white men brutally raped five unarmed black women. The rioters burned over a hundred buildings, including four churches and twelve schools.⁹ Only two white men lost their lives in the riots, whereas forty-six blacks died.

Historians and the Riot

Historians have provided many explanations for the riot. Some have blamed the actions of a supposedly undisciplined group of black federal soldiers, the absence of civic leadership, the racism of the local white press, and the reportedly tense

⁵ Testimony of Dr. J.N. Sharp, *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 154-5. as found in Ryan, "Memphis Riot of 1866," 249.

⁶ Testimony of Maria Marshall, *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 179-80; Testimony of Dr. D. P. Beecher, *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 148, as found in Ryan, "Memphis Riot of 1866," 249.

⁷ Holmes, "The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Riot of 1866," 213-15.

⁸ Ryan, "Memphis Riot of 1866," 248. Ryan here is summarizing based on different testimony found in the House Congressional Report, *The Memphis Riot and Massacre*.

⁹ Ryan, "Memphis Riot of 1866," 249.

relations between black soldiers and Irish city police.¹⁰ Originally, historians tended to claim that the African-American soldiers bore much of the burden for the bloody events of that spring, but such interpretations rested largely on racist assumptions. Gerald Capers, for example, described the city's African American community as "an undigested body in the city's craw."¹¹ Capers and historian Jack Holmes, moreover, relied too heavily on white newspaper accounts, often without regard to the papers' undeniable racial bias and exaggeration. Later scholarly works drew extensively upon these early studies when piecing together the events of the riot.

Early investigations of the 1866 Memphis Race Riot, moreover, tended to claim that the "better" citizens of Memphis did not participate in the atrocities, and that the mob consisted of the dregs of the Irish community. City leaders, however, cannot be ignored in a situation this explosive. Mayor John Park, who was reportedly drunk at the time, did nothing to stop the violence. John C. Creighton, the Judge of the Recorder's Court, urged the mob to kill all the African Americans they could find and stated he would not arrest any white person for carrying concealed weapons.

¹⁰ Other articles involving the riot include, Marius Carriere, "An Irresponsible Press: Memphis Newspapers and the 1866 Riot," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 60 (2001): 2-15; DeeGee Lester, "The Memphis Riots of 1866," *Eire-Ireland* 30 (1995): 59-66; Kevin R. Hardwick, "'Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned': Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866," *Journal of Social History* 27 (1993): 109-28; Polly Owen, "Is it True What They Say About the Irish?," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 32 (1978): 120-32; Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith, "Duty of the Hour: African-American Communities in Memphis, Tennessee, 1862-1923," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 55 (1996): 130-43; Eugene J. Cornacchia and Dale C. Nelson, "Historical Differences in the Political Experiences of American Blacks and White Ethnics: Revisiting an Unresolved Controversy," *Ethnic and Racial Studies [Great Britain]* 15 (1992): 102-24; Brian D. Page, "An Unholy Alliance: Irish-Americans and the Political Construction of Whiteness in Memphis, Tennessee, 1866-1879," *Left History* 8 (2002): 77-96. Several theses have also been written that involve the subject, including but certainly not limited to the following: John Z. Terreo, "Reporting by Memphis Newspapers Prior to the 1866 Race Riot and During the 1968 Sanitation Strike: a Historical Study," (M.A. thesis, Memphis State University, 1987); Vincent L. Burns, "The Memphis Race Riot of 1866," (M.A. thesis, Memphis State University, 1972); Ernest Walter Hooper, "Memphis, Tennessee, Federal Occupation and Reconstruction, 1862-1870," (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1957); Leigh D. Fraser, "A Demographic Analysis of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee, 1820-1972," (M.A., thesis, Memphis State University, 1974).

¹¹ Gerald M. Capers Jr., *The Biography of a River Town*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: the University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 175. For more general history of the city of Memphis, Tennessee, see Shields McIlwaine, *Memphis Down in Dixie* (New York: EP Dutton, 1948).

Tennessee Attorney General William Wallace actually led one of the mobs and gave a speech encouraging the men to gather weapons and organize.¹²

Federal military leaders also bear some responsibility. Captain Arthur W. Allyn, who commanded federal troops at Fort Pickering, heard random shots the night of April 30, but failed to secure the city at that time, instead preferring to dispatch the next day a small force that in no way prevented the outbreak.¹³ The actions of General George Stoneman, the federal commander in Memphis, also deserve close scrutiny. Shelby County Sheriff T.M. Winters requested troops of Stoneman in order to keep a lid on the boiling situation, but Stoneman refused, citing pressure to turn over law enforcement to city officials. He then suggested to Winters that he organize a white posse to secure the city, although the General declined to lead any part of the mob himself.¹⁴ Much of Memphis's Irish leadership participated either in the riot itself or in turning a blind eye to the situation until innocent citizens had already died.

More recently, historians have pointed to racial, class, and ethnic tensions as underlying causes of the riot.¹⁵ Of course, white racism pervaded Memphis in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Newspapers in the city routinely published highly inflammatory articles that portrayed recently freed African Americans in an unfavorable light. In fact, when Congress sent a committee to look into the riots, investigators pointed to an extremely biased conservative press as being one of the major problems that contributed to the violence. But if racism was the main cause, why did the mob protect certain African Americans and allow so many others to survive? Other historians claim that economic competition between the Irish immigrant workers and African Americans who had just moved to the city lay behind the outbreak of violence.¹⁶ If the mob was mainly responding to

¹² Testimony of Captain A.W. Allyn, *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 246, as found in Ryan, "The Memphis Riot of 1866," 250.

¹³ Ryan, "The Memphis Riot of 1866," 246.

¹⁴ Ryan, "The Memphis Riot of 1866," 247; *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 24.

¹⁵ Ryan, "The Memphis Riot of 1866," 244.

¹⁶ Kathleen Christ Berkeley, "Like a Plague of Locust': Immigration and Social Change in Memphis, Tennessee, 1850-1880," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1980, 173-177.

economic considerations, though, why did they attack males and females, young, old, and invalid? Many city employees who worked for low wages and could have been threatened by competition with African-American workers did not participate in the riot. If economic considerations caused the riot, low-wage city employees, such as hospital orderlies and the Street Commissioner's Force, should have been represented among the rioters. Another historian, Barrington Walker, theorizes that the Irish, especially Irish Catholics, were asserting their "whiteness" and that their frustration at being compared to black people pushed them to collective violence.¹⁷ He extensively discusses this theory from the perspective of the witness testimony found in the Congressional Report.¹⁸ The basic assumption of his work is that the mob was nearly entirely Irish, and he moves from that assumption to an argument that the mayor and city officials, who were also mostly Irish, supported the mob.¹⁹ Walker and other recent historians have fallen into the trap of accepting the Irish stereotype. Historian Darrell B. Uselton, for example, argues that the Irish who were governing Memphis during the riot, including police officers and fire fighters, ignored the law in order to wreak vengeance on the African-American community they hated.²⁰

The Irish Americans of Memphis

Only recently have historians begun to thoroughly study the role of Irish Americans in the South.²¹ The Irish did not make up a significant portion of the overall southern population, as only 84,000 of the 1.2 million Irish immigrants living in America by 1860 resided in the eleven Confederate states.²² In Tennessee

¹⁷ Barrington Walker, "'This is the White Man's Day': The Irish White Racial Identity and the 1866 Memphis Riots," *Left History*, 5 (1997): 50-51.

¹⁸ Walker, "'This is the White Man's Day,'" 39, 41, 45.

¹⁹ Walker, "'This is the White Man's Day,'" 40.

²⁰ Darrell B. Uselton, "Irish Immigration and Settlement in Memphis, Tennessee: 1820s-1860s," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, 50 (1996), 31.

²¹ David T. Gleeson, *The Irish in the South: 1815-1877*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). In this general discussion of the southern Irish population, Gleeson focuses on the struggle of Irish immigrants to both retain their cultural integrity and find a socially accepted role in southern society.

²² Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 2.

specifically, the Irish population increased dramatically between 1850 and 1860, from 2,640 to 12,498, a 373.0 percent increase.²³ Although very few immigrants settled in the mountainous areas of eastern Tennessee, Nashville and Memphis were largely affected by the increase in Irish immigration.²⁴ Memphis, for example, experienced a 490.8 percent increase in its Irish population between 1850 and 1860.²⁵

Much of the discussion of Irish workers has assumed that rapid increase in population led to the creation of a permanently uneducated laboring class that lived and died as the dregs of southern cities. However, this was not the experience of the Irish in Memphis. The Irish had developed a sense of community, especially in the context of their Catholic churches. Many people of Irish descent owned small businesses, and unemployment was not a significant problem. In fact, even before the outbreak of the Civil War, many people of Irish descent found work in the city and earned reasonable wages. And on at least three separate occasions, low-wage Memphis Irish laborers joined together to improve their working conditions, precipitating actions which eventually culminated in a successful strike at the Memphis Naval Yard in 1853 that secured a twenty-five-cent-per-day pay increase for the laborers.²⁶

Not only did the Irish fight for better working conditions, but they also actively participated in politics in Memphis and struggled to achieve greater political power throughout the South.²⁷ Deeply loyal to the Democratic Party, the Irish played an active role in the social and political destiny of the region.²⁸ Understanding the political dynamics of the Irish community reveals why so many white, native-born Americans, especially Radical Republicans, attempted to discredit and strip power from the Irish. Indeed, Irish loyalty to traditional southern causes, such as secessionist Democratic ideals, made them a threat to Republican control during Reconstruction. For this reason, historian David T. Gleeson argues that the Reconstruction period was the pivotal time in the Irish becoming truly southern.²⁹

²³ Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 27.

²⁴ Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 34.

²⁵ Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 35.

²⁶ Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 52.

²⁷ Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 189.

²⁸ Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 189.

²⁹ Gleeson, *The Irish in the South*, 4.

The Political Environment

Throughout the 1860s, the Republican Party controlled the federal government, including both houses of Congress. Far from being a unified political entity, the Republican Party was split into two main factions: the Conservatives and the Radicals.³⁰ The Conservatives generally followed the ideology of Abraham Lincoln and desired a swift end of hostility between the Union and the Confederacy. Conservatives tended to be less supportive of dramatic changes in the status of the freed African Americans. The Radicals followed the ideology of such leaders as Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens, and former Confederates—and even some northerners—viewed them as vindictive, aggressive, and intolerant. The Radicals supported civil rights for African Americans, especially the right to vote.³¹ Across the nation, the end of the Civil War brought a threat to Republican control. While Conservatives could potentially find common ground with the Democrats, Radicals had little hope of seeing their goals achieved if the Republican Party suffered a serious blow to its power. The most straightforward way of taking care of this threat was enfranchising African Americans, but this plan threatened Republican unity in the North because many Conservative northerners still adhered to racist attitudes.³² President Andrew Johnson, openly Conservative, had, in the eyes of many Radicals, not taken decisive enough action to control the native southern population. Many Radicals considered the Memphis riot proof that Johnson's policies were too lenient and that the current authority in the South was unacceptable.³³

With the Democratic Party in Tennessee essentially powerless, the Radical

³⁰ David Donald, *The Politics of Reconstruction* (Nashville: Parthenon, 1965), 2.

³¹ Donald, *The Politics of Reconstruction*, 2-3.

³² Donald, *The Politics of Reconstruction*, 17-18.

³³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution: 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 262. For more general studies of Reconstruction, see also William Archibald Dunning, *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction and Related Topics* (New York: Peter Smith, 1931); Robert Selph Henry, *The Story of Reconstruction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co, 1938); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction: 1865-187* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America During the Period of Reconstruction: April 15, 1865-July 15, 1870* (New York: Da Capo P, 1972); Walter L. Fleming, *Documentary History of Reconstruction: Political, Military, Social, Religious, Educational and Industrial, 1865 to the Present Time* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co, 1907).

“Parson” William Brownlow was elected governor of the state on March 4, 1865, by an overwhelming margin of 23, 352 to 35.³⁴ Brownlow sought to gain authority over the city government of Memphis. His election did not necessarily reflect the attitudes of all Tennesseans, as the election was openly rigged in favor of the Unionists of eastern Tennessee.³⁵ From the beginning of his tenure, Brownlow sought to punish his enemies and maintain a hard, forceful control over the “disloyal” majority of the state.³⁶ Even the *New York Times* seemed worried about Brownlow’s ability to serve justice, telling him to “make some attempt to infuse a little moderation into his language and demeanor” and to control his desire for revenge.³⁷ In 1865 Brownlow consolidated his control over future elections by pushing through a law that disfranchised all former Confederates of every level of involvement.³⁸ A law was even passed disarming everyone except former federal soldiers and Unionist citizens.³⁹

Lest he be interpreted as a supporter of African American civil rights, Brownlow thought the former slaves, and black citizens in general, were inferior, and he never wanted to allow the group to vote.⁴⁰ However, he also understood that his party was in the minority and much in need of numerical support in the future.⁴¹ So, at the same time that South Carolina and Mississippi began conferring specific civil rights on their African-American populations, Tennessee declared a black citizen to be a competent witness on January 25, 1866. Such symbolic action led much of the black population to consider Brownlow an ally, and despite his distaste for them, he trumpeted this friendship.⁴² Brownlow realized that his own political success hinged on African-American suffrage. The Governor had disfranchised

³⁴ E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 261.

³⁵ The East Tennessee Central Committee provided for the election, and it was dominated by Unionism. Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 260-1.

³⁶ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 262-3.

³⁷ *New York Times*, March 22, 1865, as found in Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 264.

³⁸ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 269. Such measures were being taken by Radical Republican leaders across the nation. Donald, *The Politics of Reconstruction*, 17-18.

³⁹ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 270.

⁴⁰ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 292.

⁴¹ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 284-6.

⁴² Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 292-93.

many of the native Memphians because they had not remained loyal to the Union during the war. But the majority of white citizens left in the city had come from Ireland. Thus, Reconstruction politics created a complex situation in Memphis. The Radicals needed non-Irish voters to gain control, but the non-Irish whites overwhelmingly sided with Conservatives.

The situation in Memphis presented a real problem for Brownlow. He disliked Irish rule, mostly because the group did not support his agenda. However, the Irish could not easily be disfranchised. He had only two real options to gain control of the rebel stronghold of Memphis: either he could allow African Americans to vote since they were almost certainly going to support his Radical agenda, or he could discredit the Irish citizens to the extent that special legislation from a higher authority than city ballot boxes could be justified to remove them from power. In July of 1866, after it had become clear that the political situation in Tennessee would require more Radical voters in the coming elections, Brownlow chose to enfranchise African Americans to solidify his power base. He managed to control the city of Memphis without resorting to this action that he so disliked, but he needed the African-American vote to win across the state. Brownlow also employed other tactics to appeal to African Americans and Radicals. Later, Brownlow, in response to outside pressure, pushed the Fourteenth Amendment through the legislature by having representatives who did not show up for the vote arrested and forcibly brought to make a quorum, which only escalated the tension.⁴³ Thus, a political tug-of-war centered on Irish- and African-American votes characterized Tennessee, which created problems for the congressional committee that came to Memphis to investigate race riot in 1866.

The Congressional Report

Analysis of the Memphis Race Riots cannot rely mainly on the Congressional Report because it contains only secondary information and its creators had political goals in mind. The report includes letters and data gleaned from various sources

⁴³ Raymond Cooper, "Parson Brownlow: A Study of Reconstruction in Tennessee," *Southwestern Bulletin* 19 (1931).

and contains only interviews with alleged witnesses, rather than complete witness statements. Historians' reliance upon this document has perpetuated the myth that the mob not only was mostly Irish, but was also led by policemen and firefighters. The actual lists of rioters and data from the police and fire departments of the time cannot support this theory. Individual motives—rather than a collective Irish racism or ethnic identity—explain the involvement of specific Irish policemen and firefighters.

Near the end of May, a committee of three congressmen came to Memphis to investigate the riot and write a report on the events, which would become *The Memphis Riots and Massacres*, the official Congressional Report on the subject. Two of the three had Radical affiliations, Ellihu B. Washburne of Illinois and John M. Broomall of Pennsylvania, and the third, George S. Shanklin of Kentucky, had more Conservative ties. Their agendas reflected the larger struggle over Reconstruction. The Radicals wanted to push the idea of giving some freedmen the right to vote because freedmen would certainly vote overwhelmingly for Radical candidates, which would solve the “Irish problem” in Memphis. Conservatives also wished to blame the Irish but instead of enfranchising African Americans, they sought to exonerate former Confederates. For the Conservatives, reenfranchising these former Confederates would most effectively remedy the “Irish problem.” The Congressional Report oozes these political motivations. In essence, the worse the Irish city government looked, the better the Radicals' chance of passing legislation that would put other Radicals in Memphis in power. (In fact, not long after the House Report, the Tennessee legislature enacted legislation that allowed Governor Brownlow to appoint the entire police force, and the Metropolitan Police Force took over in the late summer of 1866.)⁴⁴ Many historians have relied heavily on this Report, despite its political leanings, because it contains interviews as well as other documentation such as letters and employee lists. Because the committee investigated the riot and wrote the Report immediately afterward, the Report comes

⁴⁴ Relative to Memphis, An Act to Establish a Metropolitan Police District, and to Provide for the Government Thereof, passed May 14, 1866, Memphis/Shelby County Archives, Memphis, Tennessee.

closer to being a primary source account of the riot than any other document.

The Report reveals the ways in which the Radicals perpetuated nineteenth-century stereotypes of Irish Americans. For example, in the lists of city employees and officials, the Report identifies each person by ethnicity and lists the overall number of Irish in each capacity. Also, the Report documents employees of the city who worked during the months of April and May, even though the lists are not accurate portrayals of who worked at the time of the riot. Nearly all of those people shown on the list for the month of April who were not working at the time of the riot were of Irish descent. Thus, the list appears to show more Irish working for the government at the time of the riot than actually were.⁴⁵

The questions asked by the committee to the witnesses interviewed also reveal the Committee's anti-Irish bias. The Committee asked questions such as, "You would be in favor of such a proposition as President Johnson announced in his letter to [Mississippi] Governor [William] Sharkey, that all those who had borne arms, had property to the amount of \$250, and could read and write, should have the right of suffrage?" and even "Suppose one man is fighting in the Union army and another one in the rebel army—which is loyal and which disloyal according to your judgment?"⁴⁶ With this line of questioning, the committee was testing its witnesses, trying to discover their political feelings and/or trap any closet Confederates into revealing their disloyalty. Such a tactic not only put the witnesses on the defensive but also ensured that the committee knew who its political allies were before asking for serious opinions about the riot. The committee also posed even more telling questions, such as, "Suppose you were to have a mayor chosen by the Irish and that class of men who control your elections here, or one chosen by the resident Negroes; which do you think you would prefer to trust your life and property under?"⁴⁷ This question asks the witness exactly how he feels about the idea of African Americans being allowed to vote and at the same time reveals the witness's tendency towards anti-Irish sentiment. This type of question entails an effective rhetorical strategy,

⁴⁵ *Memphis Riots and Massacres*. The Mayor sent a list of officials, and the list is printed with indications of ethnicity. However, this list may not have been entirely accurate.

⁴⁶ *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 93, 96.

⁴⁷ *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 139.

because both the Radical interviewer and the witness know what the correct answer should be. Few witnesses would answer this question “incorrectly,” and so the committee received testimony from Memphians who supported African-American suffrage over Irish rule. Such testimony proved invaluable to the Radical cause.

The committee’s questions also often forced the witness to distinguish between the “better class” of white citizens and the Irish. The congressional committee attempted to elicit evidence that the Irish population, especially those employed by the city, mistreated African Americans more than the native southern white population. J.S. Chapman had to answer these questions: “As a general thing, have the manifestations of feeling on the part of the old citizens of Memphis—leaving out the Irish population—towards the Negroes been kind or unkind?” and “How is it that they [the Irish] have control of the city?”⁴⁸ Obviously this committee did not focus on just gathering evidence regarding the violence of early May. Rather, they sought to blame the Irish for the massacre of so many African Americans.

The Months before the Riot

A closer look at the situation preceding the riot calls into question the interpretation of the congressional committee. The African-American population drastically increased following the Emancipation Proclamation, so that the percentage of African Americans in the city of Memphis grew from 17 percent in 1860 to 39 percent in 1870; in Shelby County the percentages grew from 35 in 1860 to 48 in 1870.⁴⁹ This demographic shift certainly affected the number of people competing for low-wage jobs in the city. Along with these newcomers to the area, the Irish were dominating the city government by 1866. The mayor, recorder, most police officers, firemen, and city council members were Irish, and over 90 percent of the police officers claimed to be of Irish descent.⁵⁰ This increase in Irish leadership resulted from Governor Brownlow’s disfranchisement of most ex-Confederates in 1865 to consolidate Republican control of the state. In the

⁴⁸ *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 192-93.

⁴⁹ Capers, *Biography of a River Town*, 164.

⁵⁰ *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 365-371; Holmes, “The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Riot of 1866,” 199.

spring of 1866, no African Americans could vote, which opened the door for Irish influence in Memphis' government. The city government, however, certainly did not exercise ultimate authority. The federal soldiers stationed at Fort Pickering, under military orders, routinely patrolled the city and made arrests.

By the spring of 1866, racial tensions pervaded the city. Because of the hostility between police department and African-American troops, General Stoneman and other military leaders had mustered the African-American soldiers stationed in Memphis out of service by late April 1866. The soldiers, however, did not disperse immediately because they were waiting for their pay. Allowed to keep their side arms, the soldiers left Fort Pickering on at the end of April.⁵¹ General Stoneman, the man ultimately responsible for the soldiers based at Fort Pickering, believed that longstanding problems existed with the police and African-American federal soldiers arresting each other. After the riot, he explained that whenever a police officer arrested a soldier or vice versa, the arresting group used unnecessary brutality.⁵² Moreover, shopkeepers often accused the black soldiers of committing armed robbery. Also, in December of 1865 there were multiple reports in the newspapers about African-American soldiers killing innocent white citizens in cold blood.⁵³ The *Memphis Daily Post*, a paper not typically sympathetic to the conservative viewpoint, published inflammatory articles that seemed to support black civil rights. For example, one article, entitled "A Bit of 'Outrage'" read, "The 'niggers' of course, may be kicked, cuffed, bruised and beaten, but they must never reply. Oh no, of course not."⁵⁴ The article not only expressed a clear political opinion, but also used sarcasm to mock the conservative majority, which fueled further conflict in the city.

⁵¹ Holmes, "The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Riot of 1866," 220.

⁵² Official Report, Major General George S. Stoneman to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, May 12, 1866, in *American Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events of the Year 1866*, VI, (New York, 1873): 730, as found in Holmes, "The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Riot of 1866," 207.

⁵³ Holmes, "The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Riot of 1866," 217-19. See *Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 14, 1865, December 19, 1865, December 20, 1865.

⁵⁴ *Memphis Daily Post*, January 30, 1866.

The Phantom Police Officers

Although many witnesses reported seeing Irish police officers leading the riot, an examination of records of the Recorder's Court in Memphis reveals that police officers in general did not play an especially significant role in the riot. Moreover, those officers who did participate in the riot did not show a tendency to arrest African Americans more than whites and Irish during the period beginning just after the Battle of Memphis in 1862 until the opening of the Freedmen's Bureau in early 1865.

Despite the implications of the Congressional Report, witnesses only actually named ten police officers or former police officers who participated in the riot. The night officers were Barney Burns, John Eagen, Thomas McCormick, and Michael Moore. Witnesses also identified six day officers: David Carroll, James Finn, John O'Neal, David Roach, John Stephens, and Thomas Sweatt. The list of city employees printed in the House Report identifies these men as officers, but payrolls and city council minutes do not confirm their status. In fact, two officers, Thomas McCormick and John Stevens, left the force in April of 1866 prior to the riot.⁵⁵ Their dates of resignation match exactly the number of days they received pay in that month, meaning that neither man was working as an active police officer at the time of the riot. John Eagen also ceased to work as a police officer in the month of April, although apparently under different circumstances.

According the Memphis City Council Minutes, Mayor John Park suspended Eagen on April 25, 1866 at the request of the Freedmen's Bureau. They charged Eagen with mistreating a free woman of color named Molly Davis. The committee acquitted him of wrongdoing, but when he reported back for duty at the police department, he was not allowed to begin work and never again worked as a police office.⁵⁶ On September 4, 1866, Eagen petitioned for the pay he missed while not

⁵⁵City Council Minutes, Shelby County and Memphis Records, vol.2 and vol. 3, Memphis/Shelby County Archives. Local historian Joe Walk has done extensive study of police officers during the nineteenth century. He has an unpublished chronological list of the names of all officers mentioned in these records.

⁵⁶ Memphis City Council Minutes, August 7, 1866, 44. The payrolls also indicate that Eagen was only paid for a partial month in April and never received another paycheck.

working, citing that he had been cleared but not allowed to work. The committee rejected his petition.⁵⁷ The fact that the police department did not reinstate Eagen after allegedly abusing an African American and that the Mayor himself suspended Eagen does not support the idea that the Irish authorities blatantly mistreated the black population. African Americans were only involved in 34.7 percent of his overall arrests in the period leading up to his suspension, which ranged from January 6, 1863 through April 25, 1866.⁵⁸ Although he did receive a suspension for mistreating an African American woman, his arrest record does not reveal a tendency to target black citizens for arrest. His statistical record gives no indication that he should have been taken off the police force before the Molly Davis incident. This, along with his swift suspension, seems to lend the city government an air of fairness. The other important element of Eagan's story applies to his motivation. Having just lost his job because of the testimony of an African American at the request of the Freedmen's Bureau, he was probably nursing severe bitterness over his experience.

David Roach, although employed by the police department at the time of the riot, also may have had an unusual employment history with the police department. From July of 1864 to July of 1865, Roach was not working as a police officer.⁵⁹ Given that the City Council made appointments in July, the dates lead to the conclusion that Roach did not receive an appointment in July of 1864. This suggests that his relationship with the city government may have been somewhat tenuous. Officer Barney Burns also worked off-and-on for the police department. He worked from March 28, 1864, through August of 1864, but did not begin working for the department again until the spring of 1866.⁶⁰ Taken together, these

⁵⁷ Memphis City Council Minutes, September 4, 1866, 83.

⁵⁸ Recorder's Court records. January 6, 1863-January 31, 1863; Recorder's Court records. February 1863-November 1863.; Recorder's Court records. November 1863-August 1864; Recorder's Court records. August 1864-December 1864; Recorder's Court records. January 1865-February 1865. All of these records can be found in the Memphis/Shelby County Archives. This statistic was compiled from all of these record books.

⁵⁹ Day Police Time Book. August 1861-February 1866. Memphis/Shelby County Archives.

⁶⁰ Recorder's Court records, March 28, 1864-August 1864. Burns' precise dates of employment are unclear.

cases suggest that police officers did not receive automatic reappointments and, more importantly, that they may not have been serving on active duty as officers when the riots broke out.⁶¹

Other employees of the city also probably rioted out of individual motivations. Based on an analysis of the Congressional Report, historian Altina Waller claims that seven firefighters participated in the riot.⁶² However, the payrolls for the Fire Department can confirm that only two of the men named in the Congressional Report were actually working as firemen at the time of the riots.⁶³ One of those men, Henry Dunn, died due to a gun wound received during the riot. Interestingly, Dunn was employed as an engineer, making him second-in-command, on Firesteamer number two. The second man was fireman John Reed, who would have known Dunn very well because he was Chief of Firesteamer number two.⁶⁴ Al Young, a former fireman who participated in the riot, also worked with Firesteamer number two up until March of 1866.⁶⁵ Thus, all the firemen involved most likely knew each other well and were affected deeply by the loss of Henry Dunn. This analysis, along with the small number of active police officers who actually participated in the riots, leads to the conclusion that personal experiences, rather than occupational identity, might have lay behind their participation in the riot.

Other city employees did not participate in the riot at all. The vast majority of the Street Commissioner's Force claimed Irish descent, but out of sixty-six listed

⁶¹ The police payroll shows a list of officers the city was paying and where they signed for their money. These records give a concrete way of determining which of the rioters were actually active police officers at the time of the riot. Also, many times the payroll shows the same officer's name spelled in several different ways, which can help to sort out the names found in other records. For example, the police officer John Eagen could also appear under the spelling Eagan, Agan, or Agen. The city directories give another option for checking spellings, occupations, and even sometimes addresses. During that time period, people commonly used phonetic spellings of their names. The Job Bledsoe census of 1865 also lists residents and and their occupations. A complete search for a person should include multiple sources.

⁶² Altina L. Waller, "Community Class and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866," *Journal of Social History* 18(1984), 237.

⁶³ Payroll Firesteamers, June 1863-August 1867. June 1, 1866 Payroll for May 1-31. Can also be found on microfilm: Reel No. 436, Memphis/Shelby County Archives.

⁶⁴ Payroll Firesteamers, June 1, 1866 Payroll for May 1-31.

⁶⁵ Payroll Firesteamers, April 2, 1866 Payroll for March 2-April 1.

as paid employees at the time of the riot, none participated.⁶⁶ Most of the orderlies who worked at the City Hospital also claimed to be Irish, but out of fifty orderlies employed at the time of the riot, not one was among the rioters. These employees received very low pay, and they had a much greater chance of losing their jobs to African Americans than either the policemen or firemen. Yet they did not strike against African Americans in the riot.⁶⁷ Obviously, the common trait among the rioters could not have been that they were Irish city employees.

Despite witness confusion, based on the names given, only seven men of the sixty-eight that appear in the Congressional Report were definitely working as police officers at the time.⁶⁸ In other words, roughly 10 percent of the rioters were working as police officers when the riot broke out. One of the men mistaken for an officer, John Stephens, died during the initial conflict between the African-American soldiers and police officers and did not participate in the pillaging at all. Why investigations ever listed him as a rioter seems a reasonable question. Another interesting statistic, the percentage of police officers involved in the riot, shows that the vast majority of police officers did not participate. Less than four percent of Memphis police officers appeared as rioters in the witness statements. Why have both witnesses and historians claimed the police force was the most active part of the rioting mob? One explanation could be that the police did play an important part in the beginning of the riot when they attempted to arrest two black men in a large crowd of African-American civilians and former federal soldiers. Another explanation could be the political bias of the House Report.

Yet another possible explanation for the inflated references to police involvement could include an incentive for witnesses to insert police officers into their testimony during the investigation of the riots. In a letter from General Stoneman to Mayor John Park on May 5, 1866, Stoneman indicated that he expected the city government to reimburse victims and the United States government for losses incurred during

⁶⁶ Payroll Street Commissioner's Force, December 1865-June 1867. June 1866.

⁶⁷ Payroll City Hospital, January 1866-March 1868. June 1866.

⁶⁸ Waller, "Community Class and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866," 237. Waller claims that sixteen of the named rioters were police officers, but a careful cross-referencing of the payrolls, City Council Minutes, and Recorder's Court log only confirms seven officers.

the riot.⁶⁹ Although newspapers did not publish General Stoneman's letter, the Freedmen's Bureau records that contain the witness statements about the riot also contain a copy of the letter, which means that the Bureau very possibly could have informed witnesses of the letter's contents.⁷⁰ If this is the case, witnesses who may have thought that they would be compensated for losses *by the city government* probably also believed that compensation for losses would be given first to people who suffered at the hands *of city government employees*. Complete accuracy in eyewitness testimony rarely occurs, and having an incentive to place police officers at the scene of their losses could definitely shape at least some people's memories of the event.

The Records

The Recorder's Court records used here to investigate the activities of the six confirmed police officers contains the list of arrests for minor offenses. A statistical analysis of the records of the police involved in the riot reveals whether or not this group tended to seek out African Americans more than whites. Part of the traditional story of the riot has been that the police department had a longstanding feud with the African-American population and that the Irish in general abused African Americans. If the police records do not provide evidence of this feud existing prior to the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau, then the evidence disproves the argument that the Irish employed by the city always acted with racial motivation. Once the Freedmen's Bureau opened, the police department had to battle with its agents for jurisdiction. Once the Bureau courts made a decision, no civil authorities could overturn it, and the police had to bring all African-American suspects in front of the Bureau judge.⁷¹ A city could operate independently of Freedman's Bureau courts' jurisdiction only if it allowed the testimony of African

⁶⁹ This letter is published within General Stoneman's testimony, *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 4, 53.

⁷⁰ Records of the Memphis Sub-District of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau): Docket, Provost Marshall Freedmen, October 1865-March 1866. Roll No. 22.

⁷¹ Paul David Phillips, "History of the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee," (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1964), 154.

Americans.⁷² On January 25, 1866, the legislature passed a bill making testimony from African Americans admissible in court.⁷³ So, the police department had to adjust first to the authority of the Freedmen's Bureau and then to the reality of the freedmen testifying. For this reason, records of arrests after the Freedmen's Bureau opened cannot portray the officers' actual motivations.

The Recorder's Court docket reveals not only possible racial motivations of police officers involved in the riot, but also the number of African Americans arrested over time. Studying the percentages of arrests of African Americans along with the different charges involved in many of the cases shows the growing racial tension as Memphis became a haven for freedpeople. These records list the name of the party charged, the date, the charge, the arresting officer, the sentence or fine imposed, and in special cases the status of the case. In many cases, the markings "(col)," "contra," "f.m.c.," or "f.w.c." indicate when officers had brought in an African American. This set of records does present a main problem. The Recorder's Court records actually make up only one part of a continuum of records. The Freedmen's Bureau took over the work of the Recorder's Court, literally by beginning its own record-keeping in the back of the Recorder's Court book. After the Freedmen's Bureau closed, the Municipal police force took over the record-keeping for these types of offenses. But the records of these three entities only apply to minor offenses. Major offenses, such as murder, rape, kidnapping, and the like appear in Shelby County records. Thus, while the Recorder's Court records provide a wealth of information about the day-to-day proceedings of law enforcement in Memphis, the information lacks certain relevant information.

The records of arrest in the city of Memphis do not show that Irish police officers particularly targeted African Americans. The police officers known to be involved in the riot who actually were working as officers at the time of the riot did not, according to the records, let any possible racial motivations affect their

⁷² Phillips, "History of the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee," 161.

⁷³ Phillips, "History of the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee," 160.

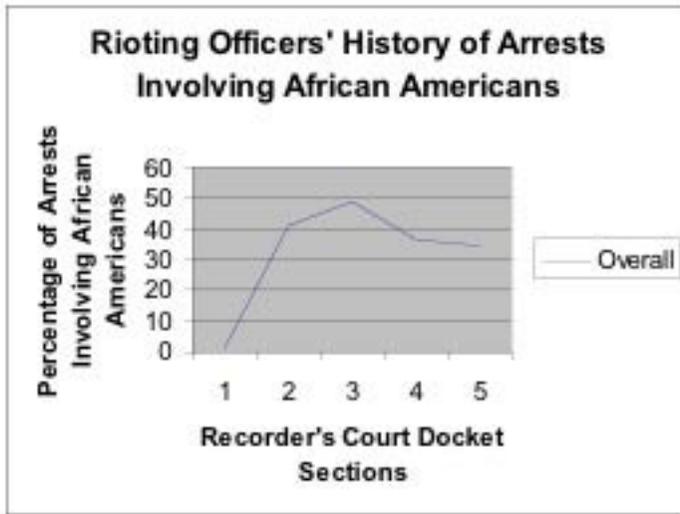
activities on the job.⁷⁴ The Recorder's Court Dockets⁷⁵ that include records of arrest cannot prove whether the officers always acted professionally, or whether they always acted fairly, but the numerical reality of the records can show whether or not African Americans had a greater likelihood of being arrested by these certain officers. However, the percentage of arrests involving African Americans did not rise steadily until the riot. In fact, the percentage increased along with the population of African Americans. The percentage of arrests involving African Americans peaked during the time of the most rapid influx of freed blacks, between November 1863 and August 1864, but the percentage leveled out at approximately 35 percent in the period leading up to the riot. The increase in African-American arrests corresponds to the rise in the African-American population; it does not necessarily indicate developing racist action on the part of the police. The records cannot be used to mitigate the heinous nature of the rioting officers during the riot. However, the data does contradict the conclusions of the Congressional Report, as well as the conclusions of most historians. The evidence does not support the claim that the police department in Memphis before the riot was a hotbed of racist activity. Rather, the reasonable levels of African-American arrests support the theory that the rioting officers acted not as a collection "Irish police force" per se, but as angry individuals.

Recorder's Court Docket Sections

1. June 1862-Jan 1863
2. Feb 1863-Nov 1863
3. Nov 1863-Aug 1864
4. Aug 1864-Dec 1864
5. Jan 1865-Feb 1865

⁷⁴ The six officers referred to in the calculations are David Roach, Barney Burns, Thomas Sweatt, John O'Neil, David Carroll, and John Eagen. John Eagen was not actually working as an officer at the time of the riot.

⁷⁵ The Recorder's Court Records are contained in several bound Docket books, all found in the Memphis/Shelby County Archives. The Docket books used here are the following volumes: May 1862-January 1863, February 1863-November 1863, November 1863-August 1864, August 1864-December 1864, January 1865-February 1865.



Reconsidering the Irish and the Riot

The Memphis Race Riot of 1866 caused immeasurable pain and suffering, and its impact on the Memphis community cannot be overestimated. For such an important event, it has yielded relatively little scholarly research. The work that does exist tends to oversimplify the causes of the riot, especially by grouping the Irish-Americans into one large category and approaching the riot as a collective Irish action. The Congressional Report contains witness testimony and other information, but its authors had many reasons to desire the downfall of the city government. Probably because of the politically slanted version of events found in the Report, the mostly Irish police department tended to take the brunt of the blame for both causing and leading the riot. Evidence from the Recorder's Court, though, does not support such a clear-cut version of the events. More research is necessary to determine what motivations united and lay behind the actions of the rioters. Whatever the answer to that question, historians will never again be able to tell the simple tale of Irish police officers taking the leading role in the Memphis Riot of 1866. The evidence simply does not support such an explanation.



Southland Greyhound Park in West Memphis, Arkansas, which opened in 1955, serves as an example of Arkansas's heritage of legalized gambling. Although attendance has fallen off in recent years at Southland and at racetracks across the country, the park's long existence makes it all the more difficult to understand why the state has failed to enact further legal gambling, such as casinos or a lottery.

Photo courtesy Judy Pierce and Michael Lamb

The Memphis Massacre of May, 1866, helped shock Northerners into taking measures to protect freedmen that culminated in the passage of the 14th Amendment. This article offers an hour by hour retelling of what happened during that first week in May.

<https://thereconstructionera.com/the-memphis-massacre-of-1866/> John C. Creighton had emerged as an important figure in Irish American politics in Memphis in 1866. He was elected recorder for the city and he had a following among immigrant voters. He reflected the political climate of the time. Although the 1866 Memphis Massacre happened 150 years ago, it still has a powerful legacy in the South. Exactly 150 years ago this month, three days of riots in Memphis, Tennessee, left nearly 50 dead, scores more injured, over 90 buildings wrecked, and black residents scattered and terrified. The unrest started with a rumor of black-on-white crime: Black soldiers stationed at Fort Pickering on the city's south bluffs had allegedly killed white policemen attempting to arrest an African American soldier. Black Memphians competed with the Irish for low-paying jobs. Following the war's end in Memphis as elsewhere in the former Confederacy, politicians prioritized peace with ex-Confederates over justice for African Americans. This set the stage for the violent days of May 1866.