This article is protected by copyright, East Tennessee Historical Society. It is available online for study, scholarship, and research use only.

Suggested Citation:

"A DARK NIGHT": THE KNOXVILLE RACE RIOT OF 1919

Matthew Lakin*

The year of our Lord 1919," observed the Knoxville Journal and Tribune, "will mark the downward course to the valley of dissension, dissimulation, and ruin." These sentiments were echoed across the United States that year as Americans, weary from the horrors of the First World War, sought to return to the elusive "normalcy" of pre-war life. Instead, the nation found itself torn asunder by violence and suspicion as cities, North and South, erupted in racial conflict.

In the midst of the turmoil, civic leaders in Knoxville, Tennessee, remained calm. For over half a century, the city had prided itself on its peaceful race relations, said by some to be the best in the South. The summer months of 1919, however, would find that myth shattered by a bloody race riot.

The war's sudden end in November 1918 had taken the nation by surprise, both economically and socially. Postwar inflation, coupled with the cancellation of government contracts and a job market flooded by returning soldiers, had thrown the national economy into disarray, resulting in strikes, unemployment, and a ninety-nine percent increase in the average cost of living. In the absence of a common foe, the nation's wartime unity disintegrated, particularly among racial lines. Black veterans who had fought to "make the world safe for democracy" returned to find themselves still denied the rights of first-class citizens; they also found a revived Ku Klux Klan determined to keep the United States "a white man's country." White veterans returned to find their old jobs either gone or taken by blacks, many of whom were no longer willing to accord a white man the deference once thought proper. As prices, rents, and unemployment soared, men who had courageously battled the same enemy in Europe now turned on one another. "Make'em die slow," was the cry heard across the South in 1919 as seventy-eight blacks, including soldiers still in uniform, were lynched by white mobs; eleven of these victims were burned alive. Blacks who had migrated to Northern industrial centers fared little better as they clashed with whites over jobs and housing.3

* The author is a resident of Knoxville and will be expanding this article in the near future. He welcomes any additional information about the events leading up to and concerning the Knoxville race riot of 1919. All such information may be directed to his attention in care of the editor.

1Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 18, 1919.


Even worse was the wave of over twenty-five race riots that exploded across the country between May and October, inaugurating a six-month nightmare that would later become known as “the Red Summer.” Among the scenes of violence were Washington, D.C., where white mobs hunted blacks through the streets of the nation’s capital, and Chicago, Illinois, where violence and arson claimed the lives of at least thirty-eight people and left over a thousand more homeless. Already unsettled by news of revolutions abroad and radical activity at home, a stunned nation feared it might soon become engulfed in a race war. Newspapers and Southern politicians eagerly played to these fears, blaming the riots on Communist agitation and black savagery, while black Americans responded with scathing denunciations of white racism and dire warnings. “The colored man,” proclaimed one black minister, “is going to get the rights due him if it becomes necessary for a million men to die to obtain them.”

As riots continued throughout the summer, it looked as though the minister’s prophecy might well come true. In Knoxville, Tennessee, however, the turmoil seemed distant and remote, as ordinary men and women went about the business of their everyday lives. Knoxville in 1919 was a bustling city of about 80,000 inhabitants, most of whom found employment in such labor-intensive industries as the Brookside Cotton Mills, the Knoxville Iron Company, or the repair shops of the Southern Railway. An estimated 20,000 more workers commuted daily by streetcar from the various suburbs that ringed the city, while others came from the outer edges of Knox County, making the daily trek by train, automobile, or wagon. Located at the juncture of two major railroads, three U.S. highways, and various state highways and turnpikes, and situated on the Tennessee River, Knoxville served as the primary manufacturing and trading center for central and upper East Tennessee, as well as parts of southeastern Kentucky, western North Carolina, and southwestern Virginia. Its streets and sidewalks teemed daily with blacks and whites, city-dwellers and farmers, white-collar clerks and blue-collar laborers, college students and businessmen. The picture of New South prosperity, Knoxville truly was, as one observer noted, “a city set apart.”

It was also set apart in terms of relations between the races—or so its leaders thought. Knoxville was one of the few cities in the South whose black citizens could not only vote (upon payment of the state poll tax) but hold public office, serve as policemen, and sit on juries. It was the home of Knoxville College, one of the first black educational institutions to be founded after the Civil War, along with the East Tennessee News, the region’s largest black newspaper. Among its distinguished citizens were educator Charles W. Cansler, principal of Knoxville College, attorney William, director of Knoxville and Suburbs, 1920 (Knoxville, 1920), 2-3; Louis Brownlow, A Passion for Anonymity: The Autobiography of Louis Brownlow (Chicago, 1958), 2-161.


principal of Knoxville Colored High School and personal friend of Booker T. Washington; attorney William F. Yardley, veteran of the Civil War and independent gubernatorial candidate in 1876; businessman Cal Johnson, owner of a race-track and several saloons, who had risen from slavery to become one of the wealthiest black men in the South; and physician Henry M. Green, president of the National Medical Association. Since antebellum times, racial problems had been solved via discreet negotiations between white and black leaders. Cansler himself had boasted in 1918, "In no place in the world can there be found better relations existing between the races than here in our own county of Knox. No race riots have ever disgraced our city and no mob has ever vented its fury here upon any Negro victim."

Beneath the surface, however, seeds of bitterness and resentment were germinating. Since the Civil War, both whites and blacks from the rural hinterland had poured into Knoxville in search of employment. Here, they found themselves pitted against one another by unscrupulous employers, landlords, and politicians. This situation had already shown its potential for violence in June 1913, when a white mob had unsuccessfully sought to lynch a black man accused of killing a white policeman. The wartime industrial boom heightened these tensions, bringing further migrants, white and black, and filling the city's slums to overflowing. With the end of war and the onset of recession, mills and factories began to close, and competition for jobs became furious. Clashes between whites and blacks grew frequent, and Knoxville entered the summer of 1919 seething with racial animosity. The Ku Klux Klan was reported to be organizing a chapter in the city, and a number of black citizens displayed their own disgust with matters by organizing a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in early August.8

---


As temperatures rose and tempers flared, an unprecedented crime wave gripped the city as "Pants," a mysterious prowler, began burglarizing homes in the working class districts and attacking white women, most of whom described their assailant as a light-skinned Negro. Police appeared baffled as the attacks continued, and many whites soon began to suspect that authorities were content to let Pants run wild, so long as he confined his assaults to working people. Many blacks, on the other hand, conscious of growing white hostility, began steeling themselves for the worst, determined that trouble would not find them unprepared. In the meantime, Knoxville's leaders relaxed, unaware of the smoldering embers that would soon burst into flame.9

Friday, August 29, 1919, dawned like any other day in Knoxville. The summer heat had begun to give way to the cool of fall, promising pleasant weather and an ideal Labor Day weekend. This year would witness the celebration of Victory Labor Day, at which both workers and returning soldiers would be honored. A parade was planned for Monday, to be followed by festivities at Chilhowee Park, including a picnic, baseball games, political speeches, free movies, and "the greatest display of fireworks ever seen in Knoxville." A similar celebration was to be held at Chestnut View Park by the city's black community. Mayor John E. McMillan had already issued the traditional Labor Day proclamation, urging that "public and private business in the City of Knoxville be suspended . . . in order that all may join in the celebration of labor's great achievements in both peace and war."10

The weather was also ideal for the visit of Governor Albert H. Roberts, who had come to inspect the Fourth Infantry of the Tennessee National Guard. The regiment, consisting of troops from every region of the state, had been conducting its annual two-week encampment at the John Sevier Rifle Range in nearby Fountain City, under the supervision of Adjutant General Edward Baxter Sweeney. Apart from a few recently returned veterans, its companies consisted for the most part of inexperienced recruits, many of them teenagers who had been rejected for military service in World War I—some as young as fifteen years old.11 Nevertheless, after observing the men at target practice and in regimental review that afternoon, Roberts commented that "I was surprised to see the excellent condition of the men and to note the thorough military training they have acquired in such a short length of time . . . . The state guard is the only weapon Tennessee has to put down uprisings and disorders, and it must be made a very efficient organization." The Knoxville Journal and Tribune concurred, terming the review "a practical demonstration of just what kind of soldiers can be made

9Danette Welch, "Maurice Mays and the Midnight Marauder" (unpublished manuscript, in author's possession), 4-6; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, June 12, 14, August 31, 1919.

10Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 27, 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.

11Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 21, 1919; A. H. Roberts to J. M. Griggs, October 1, 1919, A. H. Roberts Papers, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Box 1, Folder 4. Most of the Guardsmen at the encampment came from Johnson City, Knoxville, Harriman, Athens, Cleveland, Chattanooga, Nashville, Jackson, Union City, and Memphis.

of men in the short space of time on the field of Chilhowee Park, at which intersection with John Shell of Leslie, Tn., reported whether Shell, a negro, or if he was accompanied by another negro if he was accompanied by another.

About the time the sun went down and the dew showed, twenty-seven-year-old, twenty-one-year-old, and their cousin, twenty-one-year-old, were preparing for bed at their farm in North Knoxville. They were living in the old house since July 10, when they were forced to leave their own, which was rented by the family's employees, with her cousin. Lindsey was a quiet, shy girl. She had left Knoxville in May to go with her cousin. Lindsey had been working in the tobacco fields in the winter and then had drifted into peaceful country.

Around 2:30 a.m., the most unwelcome guest. Cushing had been sitting up and was thinking how he would name . . . She had been so badly that she could not move away from her tresses. She was glad that the negro standing with his head in the light in the other room.

Cursing, the man charged the bedroom. If they resisted. A sob was heard as the man pulled the girl out of the bed. The intruder smacked her, and the man pulled the bed or he would kill her. Lindsey resisted and fired. The intruder fired. Lindsy ran out of the house. Smyth, the intruder then ran and fled through the bush.

12Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 27, 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.

13Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 27, 31, September 1, 1919.

14State vs. Mays 143 Tenn. 335, 78 S.W. 720 (Tenn. 1905), Tennessee State Library and Archives, Manuscripts Division, Knoxville, Tennessee, Journal and Tribune, August 27, 31, September 1, 1919. 
of men in the short space of ten days.” That evening, a military “hop” was held at Chilhowee Park, at which the governor and local war heroes were honored, along with John Shell of Leslie, Kentucky, the oldest man in the United States. It was not reported whether Shell, who claimed to be 131 years old, took part in the dance, nor if he was accompanied by his thirtyish wife and their four-year-old son.12

About the time the dance was well under way, twenty-seven-year-old Bertie Lindsey and her cousin, twenty-one-year-old Ora Smyth, were preparing for bed at 1216 Eighth Avenue in North Knoxville. They had been alone in the house since July 10, when Smyth had arrived from her parents’ farm on Clinton Pike to stay with her cousin. Lindsey was no doubt glad to have the company; her husband, Dan Lindsey, had left Knoxville in May for Akron, Ohio, seeking work. The warm night air had become steamy after a shower of rain, but, after propping open the door to the back porch, the two women soon drifted into peaceable slumber.13

Around 2:30 a.m., they were awakened by a most unwelcome guest. Ora Smyth later testified:

My cousin had me by the arm and she was sitting up in the bed calling my name . . . She was badly frightened, so badly that the bed was shaking from her trembling . . . As I became fully awake . . . I saw a negro standing by the bed with a pistol in one hand and a flash light in the other.

Cursing, the man climbed into the bed, threatening both women with death if they resisted. A sobbing, trembling Bertie Lindsey attempted to rise several times but each time was forced back; eventually, however, she managed to scramble out of the bed. The intruder raised his gun and ordered her “to get back into the bed or he would kill her.” Instead, she made a dash for the bedroom door, and the intruder fired. Lindsey fell to the floor, moaning in agony. After threatening Smyth, the intruder then snatched a purse containing fifteen cents from the dresser and fled through the back door by which he had entered.14

---

12Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 29, 30, 1919; Memphis Commercial Appeal, August 31, 1919.
13Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, October 2, 1919.
14State vs. May 143 Tenn. 443 (1919), Transcript of Record; Box 919, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 40-46; State vs. May 145 Tenn. 118 (1921), Transcript of Record, Box 872, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 54-55; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919.
Next door, at the home of Patrolman Emmett Dyer, Mrs. Gertrude Dyer had been awakened, first by the slam of the screen door and then by the shot, but, accustomed to the noises of the nearby railroad, had returned to sleep. She was shortly roused, however, by a frantic pounding at the window, where Mrs. Dyer found a hysterical Ora Smyth screaming, "Oh, let me in, Mrs. Dyer. A man has just killed Bertie and is coming back to kill me." Horrified, Mrs. Dyer called to her husband and rushed to the front door, the hinges of which were rusted. As Mrs. Dyer struggled to open the door and Smyth begged to be let in, a man appeared walking down Eighth Avenue with a pistol and flashlight; both women began screaming, and the man disappeared down an alley. By this time Mrs. Dyer had yanked open the door, and Smyth burst inside, nearly knocking Mrs. Dyer down and colliding with Patrolman Dyer in the hallway. Dyer, who thought from the commotion that the house was on fire, listened to the sobbing woman's story of "a negro in the house" and hurried next door, where he found Bertie Lindsey's dead body lying in a pool of blood.  

Meanwhile, at the city jail downtown, patrolmen Jim Smith and Andy White were returning from Boone Street, only a few blocks from the Lindsey home, where break-ins had been attempted at two houses. No sooner had Smith, the black driver, pulled the patrol wagon into the jail than they were immediately ordered to back out and proceed to Eighth Avenue on the report that a white woman had been killed by a Negro. On the way to the house, Smith would later testify, White turned and "told me that God damned Maurice Mays killed that woman... let's go and get him."  

The man cursed by White was one of the most flamboyant and controversial figures in Knoxville. A handsome, debonair black man with skin so light he resembled an Indian, Maurice (better known as "Morrison") Mays had long been the center of attention wherever he went. Until recently, he had been the proprietor of the Stroller's Cafe on East Jackson Avenue, located in the heart of Knoxville's Bowery, or red light district. Much of the attention revolved around the goings-on at this establishment, which, despite a reputation for good food, also served as a dance hall where liquor flowed and the races mingled. Here, men and women of every color danced and made merry, earning it the nickname "the Black and Tan."  

On a typical night, Mays could be found at a table in his cafe, surrounded by adoring women of both races. Popularly described in the community as "so white he don't eat a black hen's egg, so black cow's milk," the recently divorced white women and more prominent black women had been forced to leave Knoxville to escape an angry backlash. These adventures, together with his brief career as a deputy sheriff in the wake of the killings of two men, had made him well known to law enforcement officials across the years. Several times he had been arrested on charges that, in addition to carrying a concealed weapon, he was operating a gambling house. In addition, as a teenager, he had been sentenced to six months in prison on a murder conviction. Born around 1880, he had been adopted at the tender age of six months by his foster parents, William and Frances McMillan. His black birth mother was known as a mulatto maid named Eliza Pugh, a condition that, according to the history of the city, was the subject of much speculation.  

The favorite candidate for mayor of Knoxville and head of the political machine, McMillan, a Democrat, held a loose coalition of establishment Republicans, with the votes of the city's white business leaders behind these votes, and he announced his intention to run for mayor. McMillan, Presentation of the city, and it was well understood that no two could get along in any relationship.
adoring women of both races. Popularly described in the black community as "so white he wouldn't eat a black hen's egg or drink a black cow's milk," the restaurateur was known to have a fondness for white women and more than once had been forced to leap from a window to escape an angry husband. These adventures, together with a brief career as a deputy sheriff and the killings of two men, both black, had made him well known to law enforcement officials over the years. Several times he had been arrested on charges that ranged from carrying a concealed weapon to operating a gambling house but, apart from a manslaughter conviction as a teenager, was rarely prosecuted. Born around 1887, he had been adopted at the tender age of six months by his foster parents, William and Frances Mays. His birth mother was known to be a mulatto maid named Ella Walker, who had left Knoxville shortly after his adoption. The other half of his parentage, "said to have been a white man, well known in the city," was the subject of considerable rumor and speculation.\(^{18}\)

The favorite candidate for paternity was John E. McMillan, the mayor of Knoxville and head cashier of the Third National Bank. McMillan had long watched over Mays, providing him with the capital to go into business and shielding him from harm. The motive for his benevolence was twofold. In addition to being McMillan's illegitimate (and only) son—a relationship both men freely acknowledged in private—Mays was also a vital cog in the mayor's political machine. McMillan, a Democrat elected in 1915, depended for his support upon a loose coalition of established white families and patronage seekers, coupled with the votes of the city's black population. It was Mays' responsibility to deliver these votes, and he and his foster father had spent the entire afternoon and evening of August 29 distributing blank poll tax receipts, courtesy of John E. McMillan. Presentation of these receipts was considered proof of voting eligibility, and it was well understood by all recipients how to cast their ballots.

\(^{18}\) Gladys Etter Garrison Matthews and Mary Etter interview, Knoxville, Tennessee, November 3, 1975; Beck Cultural Exchange Center, Knoxville, Tennessee; *State v. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 268; *East Tennessee News*, March 23, 1923, on file at Beck Cultural Exchange Center.
McMillan would need their votes badly; the summer months found him in a tense struggle for re-election against E. W. Neal, a local businessman.  

In the meantime, Mays was having problems of his own. For the past several years, he had been engaged in a bitter feud with Patrolman Andy White of the Knoxville Police Department, allegedly stemming from competition for the attentions of a white woman. Whatever the cause, White had developed a murderous, all-consuming hatred for Mays and vowed to put him in either the penitentiary or the electric chair. In the course of time, he had managed to persuade several others on the police force to join his vendetta; with their help, he initiated a relentless campaign of harassment against his enemy, arresting Mays on an almost weekly basis, particularly in the wake of the recent midnight assaults. It was knowledge of this feud that caused Jim Smith to ignore White’s suggestion and continue to the scene of the crime.

Within fifteen minutes, Smith and White arrived at the Lindsey home. The house was not difficult to find; it was now surrounded by a crowd of “thirty or forty people, little ones and all . . . in the yard and on the porch and some in the house.” The local constable, A. L. Wells, had already arrived and, together with patrolmen Roy Ailor, John Hatcher, and Tom Kirby, as well as a crowd of excited spectators, was inspecting a pair of tracks found in a nearby alley. On the front porch, Mrs. Dyer and several other women of the community sat with Ora Smyth as she tearfully attempted to answer the questions of Police Captain Joe Wilson. After surveying the crime scene and listening to the interrogation, White called Wilson aside with a suggestion. “Captain,” he murmured, “this looks like Maurice Mays to me.” Wilson nodded. “It looks like Mays to me, too,” he replied. With that, White, Kirby, and Hatcher were dispatched with orders to find and arrest Maurice Mays; Jim Smith was sent to drive the patrol wagon.

At about 3:30 a.m., the officers reached Maurice Mays’ home at 313 Humes Street, nearly two miles from the murder scene, and, with the permission of Mays and his foster father, proceeded to search the house. Their alleged findings would occasion much dispute. In the top drawer of Mays’ dresser, they found a pearl-handled Smith and Wesson .38 revolver. White, Kirby, and Hatcher claimed that the pistol smelled of burnt powder, evidence that it had been recently fired. Both Jim Smith and William Mays, however, each of whom took a whiff of the gun, denied that there was any smell; it was, the father insisted, “just an old, cold pistol.” Moreover, according to Smith, a twelve-year veteran of the police force, the arresting officers “smelled it too much . . . I seen them smelling it and looking like they were all dissatisfied about it, kept smelling it over and over . . . it come to the jail and they still say it smells of powder.” In addition, the officers found in Mays’ shoe, a revolver that did not belong to him. Wilson, in his possession, to keep it for a stranger for fifteen cents. The officers ordered him to get down.

By about 3:45 a.m., Hatcher had reached the corner of the street and had sent a request to “please call the street light” and demand that the street be lit. The officer on duty, Maurice, that fellow.

After some time had passed between them, with the street light being lit, Hatcher was hardly in a state of mind to be overly strident in his arrows and crying . . . she man’ and turned right. Horrified, Mays cried out, “He taken, tell the officers what he said, the officer with the backward glance and tell them he is the man. The man arrived, the horror quickly turned to joy, and Mays could not tell them that I am not the man. I knew to the patrolmen, because I know her better than that . . .”

Damn you, she’s so full of distance as Mays with .

---

20Smith interview; State vs. Mays 143 Tenn. 443, 330; C. H. Slater to Taylor, December 14, 1921; Maurice Mays to Taylor, December 16, 1921, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles; Welch, “Maurice Mays and the Midnight Murders,” 4-6.

21State vs. Mays 143 Tenn. 443, 72, 93, 97-99; State vs. Mays 145 Tenn. 118, 190-191, 183; C. W. Sanders to Taylor, November 28, 1921, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.
the summer months found him in a tense
mal, a local businessman. For the
problems of his own. For the past sev-
repeated with Patrolman Andy White of the
arrest stemming from competition for the
the cause, White had developed a mur-
and vowed to put him in either the peni-
time, he had managed to persuade
his vendetta; with their help, he initiat-
gainst his enemy, arresting Mays on an
wake of the recent midnight assaults. It
him Smith to ignore White’s suggestion
White arrived at the Lindsey home. The
row surrounded by a crowd of “thirty or
yard and on the porch and some in the
had already arrived and, together with
Tom Kirby, as well as a crowd of excit-
lks found in a nearby alley. On the front
of the community sat with Ora Smyth
questions of Police Captain Joe Wilson.
ning to the interrogation, White called
him, “this looks like
looks like Mays to me, too,” he replied.
were dispatched with orders to find and
to drive the patrol wagon.
and Maurice Mays’ home at 313 Humes
e and, with the permission of Mays
the house. Their alleged findings would
of Mays’ dresser, they found a pearl-
White, Kirby, and Hatcher claimed that
not that it had been recently fired. Both
ch of whom took a whiff of the gun,
father insisted, “just an old, cold piste-
year veteran of the police force, the
l I seen them smelling it and looking
smelling it over and over . . . it come

22State vs. Mays 143 Tenn. 443, 267; State vs. Mays 145 Tenn. 118, 202-203, 308.
23Mays to Taylor, November 10, 1921, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.
24Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919; State vs. Mays 143 Tenn. 443, 119; Fowler to Taylor, February 28, 1922, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.
25State vs. Mays 145 Tenn. 443, 258-259; State vs. Mays 145 Tenn. 118, 203, 243, 384, 308-309; Mays to Taylor, November 19, 1921; Mays to L. P. Brewer, February 1, 1922, both in Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.
would later write, “I have never had a fair and impartial chance for my life.”

By daybreak Saturday morning, the Knoxville Journal and Tribune had hurriedly published an extra edition announcing that Mrs. Bertie Lindsey had been murdered in her home on Eighth Avenue by an unnamed Negro. Word had begun to spread long before, however, as telephones rang and tongues wagged all over Knoxville. By morning, the entire city was alive with the news. All day long, hundreds of sightseers made their way to the Lindsey home to view the scene of the murder and hear Ora Smyth relate the details, while countless others filed past Bertie Lindsey’s body at the Carl R. Roberts Funeral Parlor on Union Avenue downtown.

Meanwhile, at the city jail on Commerce Avenue, police officials had begun to notice the large crowds that were already beginning to form. Around 8:00 a.m., Police Chief Ed Haynes decided to take the precaution of transferring Mays to the more secure county jail. Thirty minutes later, Knox County Sheriff William T. Cate received his prisoner, who continued to insist that he had been wrongfully arrested. Cate, an experienced lawman, noted that “feeling was getting very high” but was not worried.

Crowds continued to thicken near City Hall, just a short walk away, as the phrase described as “orderly” a glimpse of the mysterious Mays. Around noon, the afternoon paper carrying a sensational headline of Mays’ arrest and murder and Mays’ arrest was anxiously read by citizens of both counties. Knox County and all surrounding areas were on edge. The atmosphere of fear and suspicion continued.

At about this time, a small group of men, likely a mix of police and city officials, set off from Market Square and made their way to the jailhouse, perhaps to ensure the safety of General Rufus Mynatt as the plan was put in motion to remove Mays to Chattanooga. Two of the deputys Tom Day and F. T. Lowe disguised as women, came in a car to get aboard the train to Chattanooga, the center of the Southern Railway System.

Matters in Knoxville continued to develop, the crowd at the jail was a robust throng of about five hundred people. Still, the group at the jail appeared to be calm, the deputies were collected.

28 Unfortunately, this edition of the Knoxville Journal and Tribune, most likely a one-page extra, has not been preserved. The Chattanooga Daily Times reported that “the morning papers in Knoxville printed the bare fact that Mrs. Lindsey had been shot,” presumably mentioning Mays’ arrest but giving no name. Testimony at Mays’ 1919 trial corroborates this suggestion. See the Chattanooga Daily Times, August 31, 1919; State v. Mays 143 Tenn. 443, 312.

29 State v. Mays 143 Tenn. 443, 363-370; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, October 23, 1919.

30 Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919; State v. Mays No. 509 (Supreme Court of Tennessee, Eastern Division, filed June 7, 1920), Transcript of Record, Box 894, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 10. This case, that of Martin Mays, appears to be the only surviving transcript of a riot participant’s trial.
Crowds continued to gather, particularly at the south end of Market Square near City Hall, just a short distance from the funeral parlor. Groups of men also began to appear at the county jail on Hill Avenue, although these visitors were described as "orderly" and appeared to be mere curiosity seekers hoping for a glimpse of the mysterious culprit. But the general mood quickly turned ugly. Around noon, the afternoon edition of the Knoxville Sentinel hit the street, carrying a sensational headline and several front-page articles detailing both the murder and Mays' arrest. Copies of the paper were immediately purchased by anxious citizens of both races, and "there was great excitement in Knoxville and Knox County and all during the day there was talk of mob violence."

Wild, salacious rumors coursed through the city: Bertie Lindsey had been not only murdered but raped, she had been pregnant, she had been pregnant with Maurice Mays' baby. White men began making plans for "the necktie party tonight," while black men feared for the lives of themselves and their families.

At about this time, Sheriff Cate received word that a mob was forming at Market Square and making vague threats to "string up the prisoner." Alarmed, the sheriff, perhaps remembering the events of 1913, appealed to District Attorney General Rufus Myatt and Criminal Court Judge T.A.R. Nelson for permission to remove Mays to Chattanooga, which he received. With the assistance of deputies Tom Day and Fayette Burnett, Mays was removed from his cell and disguised as a woman, complete with dress, wig, and a heavy veil, then taken by automobile to the nearby town of Concord. Three hours later, Mays was safely aboard the train to Chattanooga, accompanied by the sheriff and a special agent of the Southern Railway.

Matters in Knoxville were not working out so well. Since the sheriff's departure, the crowd at the jail had grown from a handful of curious onlookers to a throng of about five hundred, while the assembly at Market Square was even larger. Still, the group at the jail, though large, had not yet become threatening, and the deputies were content to assure the doubtful crowd that Mays was in

\[31\] Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.

\[32\] Sadly, this edition of the Sentinel is likewise missing. The Chattanooga Daily Times, however, stated that "the afternoon paper came out with a full story of the murder and the mob started to form at the moment the paper reached the street." Given the massive "Killed in Effort to Escape Negro" headline and attendant coverage that appeared in the Journal and Tribune the next day, it is almost certain that the Sentinel indulged in similar sensationalism. Maurice Mays and his attorneys later charged that the Sentinel's coverage had been one of the chief causes of the riot. See Chattanooga Daily Times, August 31, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919; State vs. Mays 143 Tenn. 443, 355-356.


Chattanooga. For the most part, the crowd remained quiet and orderly at first, its members coming and going; seventeen-year-old Pat Roddy stopped by the jail that afternoon on his way to pick up a date but, seeing only “groups of angry people milling around and shouting . . . without any leadership,” lost interest and left.35

By about 6:00 p.m., the crowd was larger, angrier, and a definite cause for concern. Some fierce arguments had erupted between deputies and various members of the crowd, who continued to insist that “the negro was there, and that they would get him sooner or later.” Attempts were made by several local businessmen and public officials to address the mob, only to be shouted down as “negro lovers.” Jeff Claiborne, a forty-three-year-old candy maker and “professional gambler,” had emerged as the leader; making his way to the jail steps, he demanded that a committee of five “good citizens,” himself included, be permitted to go through the jail and search for Mays. Jailer Earl Hall and Chief Deputy Carroll Cate, the sheriff’s nephew, agreed to this request, and the men were given a grand tour of the facilities. Upon emerging, even Claiborne admitted that Mays was nowhere to be found. The mob was unsatisfied, however, and another committee of five—made up of two local businessmen, a barber, and a doctor—was formed to search for Mays, and once again the mob was unimpressed. After the search had been repeated for a third and fourth time, it became clear that trouble was imminent.36

In the meantime, the crowd at Market Square had ballooned to a surging mob of roughly five thousand. A visibly drunk Jeff Claiborne, apparently bored with the searches at the jail, had made his way to the square and now stood at the center of the throng, declaring heatedly, “That nigger is down there [in the jail] and I know it . . . I don’t believe he’s anymore in Chattanooga than I am.” Another man agreed but pointed out that “you and I couldn’t go down there and get him out by ourselves. We must have someone to help us.” Excited cries immediately arose of “We’ll help, we’re with you. Let’s go down there and get him out.” Jim Dalton, a seventy-two-year-old ironworker, gave the command to “March, boys,” and the mob proceeded down Market Street in military fashion, counting off to Dalton’s lead. It did not take long for the marchers to pass their leader, however, and the march to Hill Avenue became a thunderous charge. Although the crowd at the jail was already large enough to surround the building and fill the street, the courthouse lawn, and neighboring yards, the new arrivals pushed them aside and forced their way to the jail door, with Claiborne in the lead.37

It was now about 7:30 p.m. As Hall, Cate, and the other deputies gaped at the sea of angry faces that stretched before them, Claiborne climbed the jail steps, claiming that he had been deceived and asking for a committee of twelve men to help him “find that nigger if he is anywhere on the premises.” He then warned the deputies to “open up the jail or the crowd will pick it clean.” Hall promptly refused, and the crowd started tearing down the jail and searching for Mays. “Every man for himself,” shouted a man in the crowd, as the deputies looked on in horror.38

At this point, Cate, who was now in the lead, returned the fire as the mob prowled beyond their control, Cate and Hall had bolted the heavy front window “prepared for the siege.”39

Within minutes, the crowd was smashing glass and tearing at the walls and window in the jail. They shattered a telephone pole, a railroad embankment, and a stationary railroad car against the walls of the building. As the mob surged on the ground floor, the crowd grew and filled the streets, with only the deputy sheriff’s brother, who had already called the police, standing between them and the building. Outside, a carload of onlookers had further encouraged the rioters. As the police prepared to move in, shots were fired from the windows above them, and the crowd began to disperse. Porches and doors were completely blocked.

Hill Avenue,

35Knoxville Journal and Tribune, October 21, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, October 21, 1919; Pat Roddy, Jr., 75 Years of Refreshment (Knoxville, 1983), 40.
36Knoxville Sentinel, October 22, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, October 22, 1919.
37Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, October 21, 1919; Brewer, “Guest of Honor.”
38Knoxville Journal and Tribune, October 21, 1919. “Guest of Honor.”
39Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, October 21, 1919. “Guest of Honor.”
the deputies to “open up,” or the jail would be blown to pieces.38

Twelve men stepped forward, and Hall was about to open the door to admit them when a member of the crowd shouted that he would “follow the committee in.” Hall promptly refused to admit anyone, repeating that Mays had been removed to Chattanooga and declaring that no further searches would be permitted. “Tear down the jail,” roared the mob. “He’s in there, or they wouldn’t mind us searching for him. There’s enough of us here to knock every brick out of the building.” A furious Claiborne then turned to the crowd and vowed to “shake hands with that damn negro” or tear apart the jail and everyone in it. As the mob cheered, Chief Deputy Cate thrust his pistol through the bars of the jail door and warned, “Every man who is not out of sight inside a few minutes will be shot down.” Instead of dispersing, however, the mob only scattered from range, then began throwing rocks and jeering, “He’s afraid to shoot... Let’s go and get him, too.”39

At this point, Cate panicked and fired a single shot, after which his pistol jammed. In response, over a dozen members of the mob produced guns and returned the fire as the crowd surged toward the door. Realizing the situation was beyond their control, Cate and Hall withdrew inside the jail, where they slammed and bolted the heavy riot doors, extinguished the lights, and, in Hall’s words, “prepared for the siege.” It was now about 7:50 p.m.40

Within ten minutes, a heavy shower of stones and lead had shattered every window in the jail. The mob then turned its attention to gaining entry, using a telephone pole, a railroad crosstie, and the heavy gunwale from a barge as battering rams against the front and side doors, as well as the bars of a large double window on the ground floor. Inside, the deputies loaded their pistols and listened with trepidation to the mob’s angry cries. “I had only one round of cartridges,” one later recalled, “and that wouldn’t... amount to anything in that crowd.”41

Earl Hall had already called the police department with repeated pleas for assistance, but no policemen would arrive for another half-hour.42

Outside, a carnival atmosphere prevailed. Concerned citizens and curious onlookers had further swelled the ranks of the mob, as men, women, and children cheered, fired shots into the air, and gawked in astonishment at the spectacle before them. Porches and yards were crammed with spectators, and the streets were completely blocked. According to the Knoxville Sentinel:

Hill Avenue, on which the jail is situated, was literally packed

---

38Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919.
39Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, October 21, 1919; Brewer, “Guest of Honor.”
40Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919; Brewer, “Guest of Honor”; Roddy, 75 Years, 40.
41Nashville Banner, August 31, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 1, 1919; Mrs. Grace McKeelvy McCarty, interview with Danette Welch, Knoxville, Tennessee, August 15, 1997 (in author’s possession); Rogers interview; State vs. Mays No. 509, 26, 32.
with a mass of humanity, extending all the way to Gay Street, and surrounding the county courthouse. The rear court yard was congested... Market Street was like wise thronged. Several men had stationed themselves at the rear of the jail building, to make sure that the jailers did not attempt to escape with the wanted prisoner.42

One member of the crowd was Earl Rogers, a twenty-year-old railway apprentice. Upon hearing of the commotion at the jail, he promptly boarded a streetcar outside his home on Hart Avenue and headed downtown. Nearly eight decades later, he would recall, “I wanted to see some excitement.” He arrived in time to witness a charge of dynamite rip the bars from the double window. Cheering wildly, hundreds poured through the opening. Earl Hall bravely attempted to hold the crowd back, to no avail. In a few minutes, the main doors burst open, forced from the inside by the mob.43

Though Rogers elected not to go inside, thousands chose otherwise. For the next several hours (from about 8:30 p.m. until well after midnight), a parade of citizens passed through the jail, in the words of one participant, “like a swarm of bees.” The deputies within were quickly overwhelmed by the flood of intruders, who, once inside, proceeded to ransack the building in their search for Maurice Mays. Every inch of the jail was thoroughly searched by men. New York stood before the door, ready to shoot the first man who appeared.44

Inflamed by alcohol, the mob found more satisfaction in rioting than in the jail, which was looted and vandalized. The jailer’s quarters ransacked, the offices and rooms were rifled, and the records of the county were destroyed. Three feet to the east of the jail, Lawrence Galyon, attempting to carry the entire family away, was caught in the crossfire of the rioters.

It was the mob’s attention. After battering in the outer doors, members of the mob forced their way into the inner doors, to the cheers of the crowd. Twenty-nine-year-old Charles Cash, a twenty-two-year-old militiaman while Charles Cash, a twenty-two-year-old militiaman

42Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.
43Rogers interview; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, 1919.
44State vs. Mays No. 509, 45
45Knoxville Journal and Tribune.
46Knoxville Sentinel, October 26, 1919.
Mays. Every inch of the jail, including the roof, chimney, furnace, and coal bins, was thoroughly searched by men with flashlights. On the ground floor, Deputy Frank York stood before the door to the Negro cellblock with a drawn pistol and threatened to shoot the first man who approached. Apparently York’s threat was more convincing than the chief deputy’s; at any rate, the mob turned its attention to something of greater interest: several bottles and kegs of confiscated liquor found in the basement, along with a captured moonshine still. The men immediately procured cups and began “tapping” the kegs, while others made off with bottles. One man attempted to carry the entire still away on his back. “There was,” one witness later recalled, “plenty to drink all around.”

Inflamed by alcohol and rage, the mob soon lost interest in finding Mays and found more satisfaction in wholesale looting and destruction. Guns and ammunition were stolen from the armory, the safe was broken open and emptied, and the jailer’s quarters raided. Lights were shot out, telephone lines and water pipes ripped from the walls, toilets smashed, furniture wrecked, and pages ripped from the jail records. Three federal prisoners, George Goodyear, Robert McNish, and Lawrence Galyon, attempted to help the deputies restore order, but the jail was quickly reduced to a shambles.

It was the mob’s activities on the upper floors that would attract the most attention. After battering down the outer doors to the cellblocks of state prisoners, members of the mob began working on the heavy combination locks of the inner doors, to the cheers of the prisoners. On the third floor, Martin Mays, a twenty-nine-year-old chain maker, together with Charles “Mudcat” McCall, a twenty-two-year-old millworker, took turns at the lock with a hammer and chisel while Charles Cash, a forty-three-year-old carpenter, held a candle to aid them. Earl Hall begged the men not to cut the lock and even offered them the key. “You are too damned late with your key,” came the reply.

Work was still in progress on the locks at 10:00 p.m., when cries arose that “The soldiers are coming.” The Fourth Tennessee Infantry, only one day away from the completion of its encampment, had been summoned shortly after the break-in, when Earl Hall had slipped out of the jail to telephone the rifle range. Unfortunately, most of the Guardsmen had left the camp on weekend passes, and their superiors were forced to round them up from their Saturday night haunts—a slow and difficult task. At first, only two hastily assembled squads, a total of sixteen men and an officer, were sent to the jail to deal with the mob; hopelessly outnumbered, these unfortunate were quickly disarmed, stripped of their uniforms, and severely beaten. Shortly afterward, however, Adjutant General Sweeney himself arrived, leading three companies up Hill Avenue from Gay Street in full battle array. The new arrivals were at first jeered, but, as he approached the jail, the General eventually succeeded in making himself heard.

---

44State vs. Mays No. 509, 45; Knoxville Sentinel, October 21, 1919; Brewer, “Guest of Honor.”
45Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.
46Knoxville Sentinel, October 21, 22, 1919.
by the crowd. His speech was apparently the first to which the mob willingly listened, as he stated:

I have as much right to be here in the south. The negroes who should be hanging in this jail . . . Governor Robb will make a full punishment.

These assurances made the mob retorn to destroy the cells where the convicted murderers and cajoled, threatened, and smashing and stealing and the other children and the other children earlier in the afternoon.46

While the mob had not armed and organizing for a general reprisal against the city it had already left the city and the veteran of the Spanish War, they're gonna have a riot.

As evening drew near customers passed through and Central, all buy a young clerk, "Whatever customer to enter the store bought a box of shells. "Ammunition." Etter, a man over the counter and men the shotgun beneath the snarled Etter, "you don't wanna be first to get it." With this


49Danizer interview; Mrs. "Guest of Honor."

50Donnie Johnson, interview with the Gillespie Avenue Boys.
I have as much respect for a white woman as any man in the south. The negro who committed the murder this morning should be hanged. Hell is too good for him. But the negro is not in this jail. . . . I can promise you that when that negro is tried, Governor Roberts will not extend clemency, but will permit the full punishment provided by law.\footnote{Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.}

These assurances brought a few drunken cheers but no cooperation, as the mob returned to destroying the jail. Shortly after Sweeney's arrival, the locks to the cells were finally broken and all white prisoners released, including four convicted murderers and a certified lunatic. The cry then arose that Mays was hiding in the sheriff's residence which adjoined the jail. General Sweeney pleaded, cajoled, threatened, and even allowed three committees of twenty-five to search the house, all in vain as the mob stormed past the Guardsmen into the home, smashing and stealing everything in sight. Fortunately, there was none of the Cate family inside; Deputy Austin Cate, the sheriff's oldest son, had taken Mrs. Cate and the other children to stay with relatives in neighboring Jefferson County earlier in the afternoon.\footnote{State v. Mays, No. 509, 8; Mrs. Wanda Cate Watts Lawson, telephone interview with author, October 12, 1997.}

While the mob howled for Mays, members of the black community were arming and organizing for defense. Throughout the day, rumors had flown that a general reprisal against blacks was being planned; many worried families had already left the city to stay with friends and relatives elsewhere. Those who remained began making battle preparations. Joe Etter, a black storekeeper and veteran of the Spanish-American War, had warned his wife earlier in the day, "If they're gonna have a race riot, I'll be killed in it."\footnote{Dantzler interview; Mrs. Helen Beatty, telephone interview with author, May 5, 1998; Brewer, "Guest of Honor."}

As evening drew nigh, tension mounted further. A steady procession of black customers passed through Sam Bowers' hardware store at the corner of Willow and Central, all buying ammunition. Finally, an alarmed Bowers warned his young clerk, "Whatever you do, do not sell any more ammunition." The next customer to enter the store was Joe Etter, who approached the counter and requested a box of shells. "I'm sorry," the white clerk replied, "but we're all out of ammunition." Etter, a big man known for his fierce temper, leaned menacingly over the counter and repeated his request. The clerk, placing a trembling hand on the shotgun beneath the counter, repeated that the store was out of bullets. "Yes," snarled Etter, "you do have ammunition, and as soon as I find some, you'll be the first to get it." With that, he stormed out as the clerk breathed a sigh of relief.\footnote{Donnie Johnson, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, May 23, 1998. Johnson, proprietor of the Gillespie Avenue Barber Shop, heard the story years later from the clerk, a loyal customer.}
With the storming of the jail, nerves frayed to the breaking point; the cries of the mob echoed for blocks, and the explosion of the dynamite was felt all over the city. The corner of Vine and Central avenues, the center of both the black community and the Bowery district, was thickly crowded, even though most businesses had closed early. Groups of armed men stood guard on the street corners while others watched from windows and rooftops, determined to “not let a white face cross Central Avenue.” In the tense atmosphere, several light-skinned blacks were mistaken for whites and assaulted before they could identify themselves.51

The events that followed, one resident later recalled, were “like a dark night” descending on Knoxville. Around 11:30 p.m., Dr. Joseph Carty, the proprietor of the Economy Drug Company on Vine and Central, was preparing to go home and leave his assistant in charge of the store. Though he had noticed a “tense feeling undercurrent ... growing in bitterness,” the white pharmacist, accustomed to the rough sights and sounds of the Bowery, saw no cause for alarm. Suddenly, a series of shots rang out on Central Avenue, and Carty and his helper looked out the window to behold “a few white men” shooting. Though he never saw who fired the first shot, Dr. Carty later stated that the shots “seemed to be the signal ... negroes ... poured down to the corner of Vine and Central from every direction. They came out of Central from both directions, out of Vine from the east and from the west. In a few minutes there were more than a hundred of them ... shooting soon began in earnest.”52

Only three blocks away, a mob of one hundred or more whites, still seeking Mays, had gathered at the city jail on Commerce Avenue. Upon hearing the shots, they rushed to Vine and Central, where a vicious street battle soon erupted between blacks and whites armed with guns, knives, and brickbats. “Blood,” according to one witness, “was everywhere.” At this point, Carty and his assistant decided it was time to leave, jumping into the pharmacist’s car and racing up Vine Avenue to safety.53

At the jail, five truckloads of rioters had just left for Chattanooga with the avowed purpose of finding Maurice Mays. Their departure, however, had scarcely dented the ranks of the mob, which was now spoiling for a new fight. Reinforcements of National Guardsmen had arrived but were still outnumbered by a margin of over five to one. “I have been a good sport with you,” pleaded an increasingly desperate General Sweeney, “now be good sports with me! ... The negro is not here ... Go find him, wherever he is ... I am not trying to defend any negro; I would like to see the negro punished as much as you do.” He was still arguing with the crowd when several white men came running up with exc-

51Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 1, 1919; Danteler interview; Dobbins and Stockley, “Precious Memories,” 97; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.

52Mrs. Ella Thrasher, telephone interview with author, August 6, 1999; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 1, 1919. Mrs. Thrasher’s husband, Willie Thrasher, often described the riot to her in these terms.

53Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919; John Thompson, telephone interview with author, September 11, 1998.
ed reports that gangs of armed blacks were holding up whites near Vine and Central. Alarmed, the general dispatched a platoon of troops to investigate. They had not even left the scene before they were met by two civilians and a soldier with the news (later proven false) that two soldiers had been killed at Vine and Central by an army of blacks on its way to the jail. The command of “Double time!” was given, and the Guardsmen ran toward Gay Street; with drunken war whoops, the mob followed, on foot and in automobiles.54

Soldiers, rioters, police, and deputies swept up Gay Street, the main business artery of the city, to Vine Avenue, carrying many bystanders and new recruits with them. Some members of the mob began breaking into stores along the way to secure weapons, while others, fearful of missing the excitement, followed on the heels of the Guardsmen. Their coming had been anticipated. Streetlights had been shot out at the intersection of Vine and Central, gravel trucks had been overturned to serve as barricades, and black snipers had been posted in alleys, doorways, windows, and on rooftops. It was now shortly after midnight.55

Unaware of the pandemonium, fifteen-year-old Bill Young had just bade farewell to his sweetheart at her home on West Church Avenue, after returning from a dance at Cherokee Country Club. Remembering that Gay Street was closed beyond Jackson Avenue due to construction of a new viaduct, he turned his father's Overland car northward to Vine Avenue, intending to turn onto Central and thus reach his home in North Knoxville. He had just passed the intersection of Vine and Gay when he spotted a large crowd of blacks milling about at Central, brandishing guns and shouting. Almost eighty years later, the events of that night remained vivid in his memory:

I didn’t know what in the hell was going on down there, but I didn’t want any part of it... so I turned my car around and started back up [toward] Gay Street to go to Broadway and here came all these men with rifles and shotguns and pistols and all that stuff, marching toward me on Gay Street and I was scared to death... but they didn’t bother me, they just walked around me on both sides.56

---

54Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, September 1, 1919; Reddy, 75 Years, 40; Graham, The Soul of John Brown, 100-101. Guardsmen later noted that this false report turned the mob’s sympathy completely in their favor. See Memphis News - Scimitar, September 3, 1919.


56Bill Young, interviews with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, January 21 and February 11, 1999. Both the Journal and Tribune and the Sentinel would later erroneously describe Young as a “lone, daredevil motorist” who initiated the shooting. Young insists that no shots were fired while he was present and the author accepts his account. It is unclear whether the newspaper accounts may have been referring to another motorist, though Young does not recall seeing any other cars on the street. See Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.
rifles, shotguns, bullets, knives, meat cleavers, baseball bats, and anything that might serve as weapons. Several thousands of dollars. Attempts were made to bribe some police officers with money to turn a blind eye to the rioters. At some points, the police looked in on blacks in search of firearms.

Armed and ready, the rioters advanced along Vine and Gay Street, searching further for May's men. By the time the Avenue had subsided, an estimated 4,000 rioters were reloaded and prepared to fire from the rifle range, including eager civilians, were posted to guard two Browning machine guns. The city's intention of Vine Avenue and Gay Street was upon command.

During this interval, officers who had volunteered to fire into the crowd, two other officers, appeared on the corner of Vine and Central Avenue, with three snipers. As the fire was directed at a telephone pole, then into an open street, and heading up Vine toward Central, and the shooting resumed, the crowd panicked; someone screamed, sweeping the street before them. The sniper's bullet struck Payne, where he was virtually in the middle of the street. The gunners, meanwhile, continued firing as theapperrently made up commander of the machine guns shouted at the men to cease their firing and walked away. The men refused to leave, and Payne and fired. The machine guns were brought to bear, and the rioters were disarmed.

Instead of staying to see what developed, a terrified Young "high-tailed it" to Broadway and rushed homeward. His decision was a wise one, for shooting erupted within seconds of his departure. Though it was never determined how the firing began, Vine Avenue quickly became a no-man's-land as bullets flew and men scrambled for cover. The resulting storm of lead forced the blacks to retreat toward Central; at least one black man, Jim Henson, was shot down in the process, apparently the first man to be killed.

Meanwhile, those whites who were unarmed busied themselves with obtaining weapons. Stores and pawn shops on Gay Street, Vine Avenue, Wall Avenue, Market Square, and Jackson Avenue were broken into and raided of all pistols, rifles, shotguns, bullets, knives, meat cleavers, baseball bats, and anything that might serve as weapons. Several thousands of dollars. Attempts were made to bribe some police officers with money to turn a blind eye to the rioters. At some points, the police looked in on blacks in search of firearms.

57Memphis Commercial Appeal, August 31, 1919.


59Memphis Commercial Appeal, August 31, 1919.

60Roddy, 75 Years, 41; John, 1919; Whitmore, 10; Shoemaker, 41; Inman, 1919; Scimitar, September 3, 1919.
rifles, shotguns, bullets, knives, razors, axes, hatchets, pitchforks, garden shears, meat cleavers, baseball bats, pokers, brass knuckles, and any other items that might serve as weapons. Damage from the raids would amount to more than fifty thousand dollars. Attempts by authorities to prevent the looting had little effect; some police officers were even reported to have passed out weapons and ammunition to the rioters. At least one store on Central Avenue was also raided by blacks in search of firearms.58

Armed and ready, the main portion of the mob hastened to the vicinity of Vine and Gay; splinter groups scattered to other sections of the city, either to search further for Mays or to attack other black communities. Shooting on Vine Avenue had subsided, and an interval of around thirty minutes ensued as guns were reloaded and threats exchanged. Further reinforcements had now arrived from the rifle range, including the local machine gun company. Troops, joined by eager civilians, were positioned along both sides of the street and in alleys, while two Browning machine guns were placed opposite one another near the intersection of Vine Avenue and State Street, the gunners being instructed to fire only upon command.59

During this interval, Lieutenant James Payne, an Army artillery instructor who had volunteered to assist the troops, began creeping down Vine Avenue with two other officers, apparently to conduct reconnaissance. The trio had neared the corner of Vine and Central when another volley of gunfire erupted from the black snipers. As the fire was answered by the whites, Payne ducked, first behind a telephone pole, then into a doorway. A huge crowd of blacks suddenly appeared, heading up Vine toward Gay. “Here they come!” shouted a member of the mob, and the shooting redoubled. In the midst of the confusion, the machine gunners panicked; someone screamed, “Let ‘em have it,” and both guns began blazing, sweeping the street before them in a deadly crossfire. At the same moment, a sniper’s bullet struck Payne in the chest. The lieutenant staggered into the street, where he was virtually “cut in two” by the bullets, bleeding to death on the sidewalk. The gunners, meanwhile, blinded by panic and smoke from the guns, continued firing as the approaching blacks scattered and fell. Captain Harry Knox, commander of the machine gun company, screamed and signaled frantically for the men to cease their fire; after several minutes, his signal was finally seen and obeyed. In the meantime, a National Guardsman spotted the sniper who had shot Payne and fired. The man tumbled from an upper window and fell to the sidewalk below.60

Details after this point would become extremely murky. The rattle of the machine guns was heard for miles, prompting men of both races to come running

59Memphis Commercial Appeal, August 31, 1919.
60Roddy, 75 Years, 41; Johnson interview. By some accounts, at least one other white was accidentally killed in the fracas. See Memphis Commercial Appeal, August 31, 1919; Memphis News-Sentinel, September 3, 1919.
to the scene, armed and eager to participate. Fighting quickly spread to adjacent streets and alleys, and the Bowery became a war zone. Hundreds of bystanders, black and white, were caught in the resulting mêlée; men out for a night on the town, young and old, blundered directly into the fray, as did others on their way to work or home. Prostitutes and their clients poured from the nearby brothels in various stages of undress, and drunks burst from the saloons to witness the excitement. Violence and confusion reigned for the next several hours, with "shooting ... being continued almost incessantly." At least one further charge of the machine gun emplacements, possibly more, was attempted by the blacks, only to be repulsed each time by a hail of bullets. Among those killed was Joe Ewer, who lost his life in a bold attempt to single-handedly capture a machine gun. At some point during the battle it began to rain, turning Vine Avenue into a "river of blood," the next day, massive bloodstains were visible on the pavement. Officers of the National Guard later remarked that "the battlefields of France and Flanders were preferable to the street fighting at Knoxville."61

While the battle raged, terror and panic were widespread, aided by rumors and the echo of the machine guns. Many black citizens barricaded themselves in their homes, others hid in forests and cemeteries or under houses and boxcars, and still others fled the city with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Grace McKelvey, a fifteen-year-old white girl living on Front Avenue, just two blocks from the jail, witnessed a crowd of terrified men and women, all black, "come running like rabbits," presumably fleeing the fighting along Central Avenue. Blacks who fled to the train depots were met by waiting gangs of armed whites, as were unsuspecting travelers from other cities; at least two black men, Carter Watkins and Claude Chambers, were shot and robbed in this fashion, "their only crime ... [being] that they did not instantly throw up their hands at the direction of the mob."62 Rumors circulated (and persist to this day) that blacks were being hunted down and killed all over the city. Several whites hid black friends or workers in their homes or businesses for the duration of the riot; one black man was concealed in the belfry of a church.63

61Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919; Mrs. Stella Brewer, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, January 13, 1998; Fred Ford, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, August 28, 1998; Memphis News - Scimitar, September 3, 1919. The exact geographic scope of the riot remains difficult to ascertain. Though the worst violence centered around Vine and Central, scattered areas in and around downtown, particularly Mechanicsville, a racially mixed neighborhood to the northwest, and "the bottoms near the university" (current site of the Knoxville World's Fair Park), were also the scenes of fighting, though details remain unclear.


63Mrs. Mary Chavannes, telephone interview with author, August 30, 1999; Toby Julian, telephone interview with author, August 19, 1999; Mrs. Johanne Kelly, telephone interview with author, April 13, 1998.

Similar uproar prevailed in other cities, particularly those in mixed neighborhoods where race riots were common. Police and National Guardsmen were called to quell the violence, and a plot by blacks to take over the city was foiled. By the morning of August 29, 1919, police were able to disperse the rioters, succeeded in calming the city, and attempting to muster a fight. The riot was a precursor to the Great Migration, and the "barred zone" along Central Avenue was a symbol of the struggle of blacks to gain freedom from white supremacy.

The next day was Sunday, and businesses canceled services, urging blacks to stay home. In many places, which would excuse any violence, the city was allowed to return to normal, and regular services were held. Prayers were said for "the beloved city" and "the fair and beautiful city where we may live together in peace and safety." The city was slow to return to normalcy, as over two hundred National Guardsmen were sent to keep order throughout the city. A later report on the riot was followed by a proclamation urging blacks to return to their usual avocations and to avoid "any action which will result in new disorders and violence, and through vandalism and incendiary incitement.

Meanwhile, Guardsmen patrolled the city, machine gun at each corner.

64Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 1919.

65Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 1, 1919.

ate. Fighting quickly spread to adjacent areas, creating a war zone. Hundreds of bystanders, resulting in melee; men out for a night on the town, and women, fled the fray, as did others on their way home. In all, about 500 people were injured, with some being treated in the hospitals.

Among those killed was Joe Green, a member of the Black Legion, who was gunned down in the melee. The incident sparked a citywide riot, with hundreds of people taking to the streets to protest the violence.

Meanwhile, Guardsmen patrolled the streets of the barred zone, posting a machine gun at every corner of Vine and Central and searching all blacks seen on the streets. The city was in chaos, with violence and lawlessness rampant.

Similar uproar prevailed among whites. Across the city, white men, particularly those in mixed neighborhoods, locked their doors and windows, loaded their guns, and herded their wives and children into the cellars amid excited reports of a plot by blacks to take over the city and slaughter the white population. Bands of men and boys with shotguns patrolled the streets in some communities, while others seized the nearest weapons and marched to Vine and Central to confront the expected onslaught, picking up recruits and drafting bystanders along the way.

Around 3:15 a.m., the remaining companies of National Guardsmen arrived, swelling the regiment to full strength, and a charge by the soldiers, aided by white rioters, succeeded in capturing the square at Vine and Central. The mob then attempted to muster a further assault on the barricades beyond Central Avenue but was ultimately forced back by the Guardsmen, who proceeded to establish a “barred zone” along Central Avenue and seal off the black community, allowing no whites to enter and no blacks to leave. What became of the barricades beyond Central Avenue remains unclear.

The next day was Sunday but proved to be no day of rest. Most black churches canceled services, urging their congregations to “remain quiet and do nothing which would excite an outbreak of any kind.” Though attendance was sparse, regular services were held by white churches, with pastors condemning mob law and prayer being said “that the Lord will restrain the evil passion of men so that we may live together in peace.” Meanwhile, disorder and panic continued to spread, aided by rumors and general lawlessness. Calls from all over Knoxville engulfed police headquarters, overwhelming the exhausted force with reports of mobs and shooting, most of which proved false. In an attempt to remedy this situation, over two hundred white civilians were sworn in Sunday afternoon as special deputies and patrolmen, issued badges and guns, and assigned to beat the county. A 10 p.m. curfew was imposed, and Mayor McMillan issued a proclamation urging that “all classes of citizens... remain at their homes or in their usual avocations and in preventing unlawful gatherings which may result in new disorders.” By midnight, the city’s fever had begun to subside, though scattered incidents would continue for the next two days.

Meanwhile, Guardsmen patrolled the streets of the barred zone, posting a machine gun at every corner of Vine and Central and searching all blacks seen on the streets. The city was in chaos, with violence and lawlessness rampant.

---

Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 247; Mrs. Pauline Griffin, telephone interview with author, July 9, 1998; Charles Lipp, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, September 12, 1999. Rumors of an imminent “Negro uprising” persisted for the next several days, keeping the white population in a state of hysteria.

Knoxville Journal and Tribune, August 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919.

Mrs. J. S. Dailey interview, Knoxville, Tennessee, no date, Beck Cultural Exchange Center; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 1, 1919; Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 248.
the street, as well as black passengers on trains and streetcars. Many of those searched were roughly handled, including women and children, and a number of black men were shot and bayoneted without provocation. In one instance, a deaf man was “shot to pieces” for failing to obey a soldier’s command to “Halt;” in others, Guardsmen helped themselves to the cash and cigarettes of those searched and even shot at some for sport. Homes were also searched, leading to several violent confrontations. Such treatment was bitterly protested by black leaders, including Charles Cansler, who observed that “there is very little difference in being mobbed by lawless citizens and being victims of a mob of soldiers.” Not surprisingly, most black workers chose to stay home for the next several days, while others, fearful of returning home, were provided with food and temporary lodging by their employers. Several blacks reportedly left the city in the days that followed, though it remains unclear how many eventually returned. “Many of these negroes,” noted one reporter, “will leave only for the period of tension, but many stated that they will never return.”

“How many have been killed and wounded,” observed the Journal and Tribune, “remains a matter of guesswork.” Newspaper accounts later claimed that only two people, Payne and Etter, had been killed and only fourteen wounded, but eyewitness accounts told a very different story. Robert Shersky, the white proprietor of the nearby Vine Avenue Grocery, heard the shooting from his living quarters above the store and made his way to the scene to investigate. There, he saw the machine guns being fired indiscriminately, raking buildings and shooting at anything that moved, black or white. Gangs of whites were shooting, stabbing, and beating blacks to death, pulling them from trains and dragging them out from under houses and boxcars while National Guardsmen stood idly by or joined in the attacks. White participants later boasted of “mowing negroes down like grass,” and numerous witnesses told of seeing black corpses stacked “like cordwood.” Black participants, while admitting heavy losses, insisted that several whites were also killed, shot down by black snipers in the battle at Vine and Central. Charles Cansler, recalling the riot as “one of the most tragic events in the history of Negroes in Knoxville,” would later write that the conflict “resulted in several deaths on both sides.”

67Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 1, 2, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 2, 1919; Miller interview; Memphis Commercial Appeal, September 3, 1919; Poindexter interview; Knoxville Colored Men’s Business and Civic League to Roberts, September 11, 23, 1919; Maurice Mays, Tire, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.


69Knoxville Journal and Tribune; Shersky interview; Hugh Lindsay, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, July 25, 1998; Fletcher Walters, telephone interview with author, March 25, 1998; Rev. Isaac Stafford, interview with Anne Wilson, Knoxville, Tennessee, March 10, 1979, Beck Cultural Exchange Center; Charles Cansler, “Negro Life in Knox County and Knoxville,” in Mary U. Rothrock, ed., The French Broad - Holston Country: A History of Knox County, Tennessee (Knoxville, 1946), 230. One other death was acknowledged by local authorities, that of Nelson Easley, a decorated black war veteran who reportedly “dropped dead . . . [due to] heart trouble superinduced by excitement over the race trouble.”

The most disturbing development centered the disposal of the bodies of the dead. Brady, a white storekeeper from the nearby community of Beverly, had journeyed to Knoxville’s outskirts, where he had boarded a train heading for a one-horse farm near the town he became caught up in the chaos of the riot and was afterwards found to have been thrown from his wagon through the front of the hotel, while National Guardsmen searched through his wagon for bodies. Both wagons were reportedly used to drive bodies to the Gay Street Bridge, where they were dashed into the Tennessee River. Other bodies were said to have been hauled outside the city and buried in mass graves.

The true number of black residents killed by Knoxville’s black citizens, Governor Robert Brackenridge and the National Guard was eventually buried in mass graves.

70James Poindexter, telephone interview with author, September 22, 1906, Journal of the Senate of the State of Tennessee, April 22, 1906, p. 292. See also, “Report of the Governor,” (1906), Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 1, 2, 1919, p. 1. The most reliable estimate is 300. This estimate was based on the number of bodies laid to rest in the mass graves.

71Knoxville Journal and Tribune; Knoxville Sentinel, September 3, 1919; Knoxville Colored Men’s Business and Civic League to Roberts, September 11, 23, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune; The Promise of America: A History of Knoxville, Tennessee, Tennessee (Knoxville, 1946), 230. One other death was acknowledged by local authorities, that of Nelson Easley, a decorated black war veteran who reportedly “dropped dead . . . [due to] heart trouble superinduced by excitement over the race trouble.”

72Knoxville Journal and Tribune; Knoxville Sentinel, September 3, 1919; Knoxville Colored Men’s Business and Civic League to Roberts, September 11, 23, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune; The Promise of America: A History of Knoxville, Tennessee, Tennessee (Knoxville, 1946), 230. One other death was acknowledged by local authorities, that of Nelson Easley, a decorated black war veteran who reportedly “dropped dead . . . [due to] heart trouble superinduced by excitement over the race trouble.”
trains and streetcars. Many of those women and children, and a number of tight provocations. In one instance, a deaf served a soldier's command to "Halt!" in the cash and cigarettes of those. Homes were also searched, leading to an event was bitterly protested by blacks who observed that "there is very little difference" between soldiers and victims of a mob of soldiers chose to stay home for the next evening, were provided with food. Several blacks reportedly left the city, remains unclear about how many eventually. One reporter, "will leave only for the day; will never return."

"wounded," observed the Journal and Newspaper accounts later claimed that killed and only fourteen wounded, but story. Robert Shersky, the white police, heard the shooting from his living to the scene to investigate. There, he minimally, raking buildings and shooting. Gangs of whites were shooting, stabbing from trains and dragging them out. National Guardsmen stood idly by or boasted of "mowing niggers down" of seeing black corpses stacked "like heavy losses, insisted that several and snipers in the battle at Vine and "one of the most tragic events in and later write that the conflict "result-

The most disturbing stories concerned the disposal of the dead. Joe Brady, a white storekeeper from the nearby community of Andersonville, had journeyed to Knoxville that weekend in a one-horse farm wagon to buy supplies, boarding his horse in a livery stable on Central Avenue. While in town, he became caught in the race riot and was afterwards forced to drive his wagon through the barred zone while National Guardsmen loaded it with bodies. Both wagons and trucks were reportedly used to haul corpses to the Gay Street Bridge, where they were dumped into the Tennessee River. Other bodies were said to have been hauled outside the city by rail and buried in mass graves.

The true number of dead and wounded would remain a mystery. Knox County Coroner Arthur Gray declined to conduct an inquest, asserting that "no mysterious circumstances" existed to justify an investigation. Despite repeated protests from black citizens, Governor Roberts similarly refused to authorize an inquiry into the National Guard's conduct. Overwhelmed local hospitals failed to keep records of those treated for injuries, and many casualties were treated by private physicians, making a precise reckoning of the riot's toll impossible. Carroll Cate later estimated that twenty-five to thirty people had been killed; Major Maurice Roberts, an officer of the National Guard, placed the body count at thirty to forty; other estimates ranged into the hundreds.

86 James Pointer, telephone interview with author, October 24, 1997; Brewer, "Bill People." Pointer heard the story from his neighbor, Joe Brady, as a young man in Andersonville. Knoxville was not the only city where such actions were taken in the aftermath of a race riot. Similar measures were employed in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1906, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921. See Charles Crowe, "Racial Massacre in Atlanta, September 22, 1906," Journal of Negro History 54 (April 1969): 172; Scott Ellsworth, Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 (Baton Rouge, 1982), 66-69.

87 Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 1, 1919; Roberts to Charles W. Cansler, October 2, 1919, Roberts Papers, Box 5, Folder 5; Brewer, "Guest of Honor." Rufus Mynatt's testimony later stated, "Among the outstanding cases in which Judge Mynatt served was the Maurice Mays trial... The sensational case started the Knoxville race riot when hundreds of Negroes were slain here and martial law was virtually in effect." See "Colorful Career Closes," Knoxville Journal, March 10, 1939.
Immediate reactions were marked by shock and disbelief. “I think of all the things that ought to shake our optimism it is this Knoxville riot,” remarked one prominent Southern liberal. “It is the last place a thing like this should have been expected to happen.” Rather than acknowledge the outbreak as symptomatic of deeper problems, however, embattled civic leaders instead chose to wrap themselves in a blanket of denial. “It has gone out in the world that it was a race riot,” declared the Journal and Tribune. “It was not that, it was a ‘hoodlum riot’. . . an outbreak of the rabble . . . [that] quickly degenerated into a spasm of plunder, destruction, and the liberation of guilty criminals.” Drunkenness, irresponsible rumors, and “the lowest types of blacks and whites,” it was asserted, not racism, lay at the root of the disturbance. “That mob would have been equally determined to take a white man from the jail and lynch him,” maintained state Senator John C. Houk, who insisted that “there is no hostility in Knoxville toward the negro. He is the freest there of any place in the country and he knows it.” Black leaders joined in the chorus. Reverend J. H. Henderson, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church, the city’s largest black congregation, urged his parishioners “not to lose faith in Knoxville. The white people here are kind and considerate . . . Let us as colored people continue to live up to our duty as citizens and we will have no need to fear mobs.”

In one historian’s words, such explanations “would have been easy to accept ... had the riot stopped at the jail.” Tirades against “hoodlumism” could not explain away the free-for-all at Vine and Central, the assaults on black citizens, or the satisfaction expressed by members of the mob at having shown blacks “who was boss.” The riot’s true causes—white paranoia, black frustration, mutual suspicion and resentment—had been brewing for years. Had Bertie Lindsey’s murder or Maurice Mays’ arrest never occurred, some other incident might have ignited racial violence. Yet to admit this fact was to question not only Knoxville’s reputation as a progressive New South city but segregation itself. It was easier simply to dismiss the events as a “general outburst of meanness on the part of a noisy few.”

The barred zone was reopened to traffic on September 1, and by the next day most of the Guardsmen had departed. On September 6, the municipal election was held amid grave concern. In the aftermath of the riot, several McMillan campaign posters had been defaced, torn down, and replaced with signs threatening violence against black voters. Supporters of the mayor attempted to provide black citizens with safe transportation to the polls, but to no avail. When the ballots had been counted, E. W. Neal was found to have triumphed over the incumbent by a slim margin of 641 votes to 631.

Maurice Mays returned to court still protesting his innocence. “I am not a murderer,” he declared in his first appeal last October, “I am an innocent man. I did not try.” Neither a change of venue, nor a change of judges, and, on October 1, 1919, according to County’s history began. Six counties, and on October 1, 1919, had been appointed by Governor Nelson’s refusal to allow the state attorney general Reuben Clover, who had been assaulted since he dared to lay still or he would be hanged. On October 4, 1919, Maurice Mays was found guilty, deliberated only eighteen minutes, and was convicted the “hearty approval,” of the jury.

For all his appeal, in January 1919, the state legislature demanded a re-examination of the trial, requiring the personal presence of Judge Foster. On November 24, 1920, the Tennessee Supreme Court handed down a verdict and ordered that Mays be retried. Three women were excluded, over the protests of the same sort of place, the court. Three women were again convicted and a new jury was convened. The verdict, desperate appeals from the newly electrocuted, the condemned man’s last letter, to Governor Candler, three justices of the State Supreme Court, and the governor’s own son. Privately, however, Governor Candler was damaging his chances for re-election.

72Minutes Inter - Racial Conference Including Committee on After War Program and Representative of State YMCA Committee Held at Atlanta, Georgia, September 17, 1919,” Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) Papers, Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center, Series II, Folder 1; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 10, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 16, 1919; Chattanooga Times, September 2, 1919.

73LaMotion, “Tennessee Race Relations,” 84; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, November 9, 1919.
rock and disbelief. “I think of all the people here and in this Knoxville riot,” remarked one man, “I have never seen anything like this. If this is a race riot, I say let’s have it out in the world that it was a race riot. I knew it wasn’t that. It was a ‘hoodlum riot’, and a mob degenerated into a spree of plundering and arson.” Drunkenness, irresponsibility, and violence, it was asserted, not the mob would have been equally as bad if the black man had tried to shoot and lynch him,” maintained state Senator E. H. Henderson, pastor of the largest black congregation, urged his people to remain calm. The white people here are kind and patient, he said, and will continue to live up to our duty as citizens.”

The reports “would have been easy to accept if there were no “hoodlumism” could not be accepted, the assaults on black citizens, the shooting of the mob at having shown blacks the way to the polls, the paranoia, black frustration, mutinying for years. Had Bertie Lindsey’s death been allowed, some other incident might have been possible. It was to question not only Knoxville’s segregation, but segregation itself. It was easier to accept the burst of meanness on the part of a few.”

On September 1, and by the next day, September 2, the municipal election and the results of the riot, several McMillan campaign meetings were held and replaced with signs threatening the mayor attempted to provide black voters with a safe route to no avail. When the ballots had been counted, McMillan triumphed over the incumbent by a

slim margin of 641 votes. McMillan’s defeat would mark his retirement from public life.74

Maurice Mays returned to Knoxville under heavy guard on September 25, still protesting his innocence. “My imprisonment for the murder of Mrs. Lindsey,” he declared in a written statement, “is one of pure persecution and oppression. I am innocent of the crime as is the judge before whom I am to be tried.” Neither a change of venue nor a continuance could be secured by his attorneys, and, on October 1, 1919, one of the most sensational murder trials in Knox County’s history began. Seven black appeals to racism were made during the course of the trial; at one point, former Knoxville mayor Samuel Heiskell, who had been appointed by Governor Roberts to serve as special prosecutor, unsuccessfully sought to introduce as evidence several photographs of white women found in Mays’ home. Most controversial of all, however, was Judge T.A.R. Nelson’s refusal to allow the defense, headed by former Knox County district attorney general Reuben Cates, to introduce the testimony of three white women who had been assaulted since Mays’ arrest, including one whose attacker “told me to lay still or he would shoot me like he did Bertie Lindsey.” Finally, on October 4, 1919, Maurice Mays was convicted of murder. The all-white jury had deliberated only eighteen minutes. On October 18, Judge Nelson, giving the verdict his “hearty approval,” sentenced Mays to death.75

For all his approval, Nelson had neglected an important point of law. In January 1919, the state legislature had revised the sentencing procedure for capital trials, requiring the penalty to be decided by the jury rather than the judge. On November 24, 1920, the Tennessee Supreme Court accordingly reversed the guilty verdict and ordered that Mays receive a new trial. By now the number of assault victims willing to testify had increased to fifteen, but their testimony was again excluded, over the protests of the defense that “This shows a system of crimes... the same sort of place, the same hour, the same weapon.” On April 23, 1921, Mays was again convicted and again sentenced to death. Following the upholding of the verdict, desperate appeals for clemency were made by Mays and others, white and black, to the newly elected governor, Alfred A. Taylor. Among those pleading on the condemned man’s behalf were John E. McMillan, sheriff Cate, Charles Cansler, three justices of the Tennessee Supreme Court, and Dave Taylor, the governor’s own son. Privately, Taylor expressed sympathy for Mays but, fearful of damaging his chances for re-election, ultimately refused to intervene. Thus, on

74Nashville Banner, September 4, 6, 1919; McMillan, “Far from the Peaceful Shore,” 30-31; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 2, 4, 6, 7, 1919; Knoxville Sentinel, September 1, 8, 1919.

75Knoxville Sentinel, undated clipping in National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Series I, Box D-61; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, September 25, October 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 18, 1919; State v. Mays 143 Tenn. 443, 126-122, 292-302. For an account of Mays’ legal saga, see John Egerton, “A Case of Prejudice: Maurice Mays and the Knoxville Race Riot of 1919,” Southern Exposure 11 (July/August 1983), 56-65.
March 15, 1922, Maurice Mays died in the electric chair at the state penitentiary in Nashville. His last words were, "I am as innocent as the sun that shines." A few years later, on June 30, 1926, John E. McMillan committed suicide.66

Fifty-five men and women, all white, were eventually arrested for participation in the riot. Beginning October 14, 1919, twenty-two of this number were tried together on charges of housebreaking, larceny, and release of prisoners (no prosecutions resulted from the rioting at Vine and Central). When all evidence had been presented, the prosecution, headed by Rufus Mynatt, waived closing arguments, noting confidently that "We have an unusually intelligent jury... and it would be a waste of valuable time to argue the case." Unimpressed, the jury of twelve white men returned the next day, October 25, with a verdict of acquittal for fourteen defendants, while deadlocking on the remaining five (charges against three men had already been dismissed. "There was never," declared a disgusted Mynatt, "a more guilty set of men turned loose."77

The legacy of the riot would be felt for years to come. In August 1921, a second mob attempted to storm the county jail after a black hobo was arrested on the charge (later proven groundless) of having raped and beaten a white schoolteacher. This time, however, Sheriff Cate and his deputies were ready, and the would-be rioters scattered before a shower of buckshot. Threats of mob violence again arose in 1929, when a mentally retarded black man confessed to the murder of three whites, and in 1933, when a black laborer was arrested and charged with the rape and murder of a white restaurant worker. In each case, fears were widespread that a second major riot might erupt, but violence failed to materialize, prompting sighs of relief from blacks and whites alike. Incidents of this sort would persist until the 1960s.78

Nevertheless, civic leaders continued to dismiss the riot as an aberration, a mere hiccup in Knoxville's tradition of progress and tranquility. So complete was this self-deception that by 1941 a prominent white minister could state that

---

66Egerton, "A Case of Prejudice," 62-63; Mays vs. State 226 S.W. 233 (1920); Knoxville Sentinel, April 21, 22, 23, 1921, March 15, 1922; Lawson interview; East Tennessee News, March 23, 1922; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, July 1, 1926; McMillan, "Far from the Peaceful Shore," 52-33. In regard to the campaign for Mays' reprieve, see the numerous letters and petitions in Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Paroles and Paroles, particularly John E. McMillan to Taylor, November 29, 1921; Cansler to Taylor, November 10, 1921; Grafton Green to Taylor, March 10, 1922; Nathan L. Bachman and Colen P. McKinney to Taylor, March 14, 1922; Dave Taylor to Governor Al A. Taylor, November 10, 1921.

77Knoxville Sentinel, September 12, October 24, 25, 27, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, October 26, 1919; Lamon, "Tennessee Race Relations," 82-83. Two of those receiving mistrial, Martin Mays and Charles Cash, were retried and convicted in 1920, both receiving prison sentences of one to ten years. Mays was ultimately pardoned in 1921; Cash was paroled later the same year. Convict Record Book P, Tennessee State Prison Records (Record Group 55), Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 238, 273.

78Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 253-254; Brewer, "Guest of Honor," Knoxville News - Sentinel, December 27, 28, 1929; Knoxville Journal, January 1, 1933; Smith interview.
“Knoxville fortunately has no recent record of outbursts of race hatred.” To others, the riot’s significance was more apparent. Working-class whites saw the incident as a major victory, a vindication of their superiority that put blacks “in their place” once and for all. For blacks, the riot came to symbolize perseverance and survival, a sign, as the child of one participant remarked, of “how far the black people have come.” It also served as a bitter testimony to the realities of life in a segregated world. “Since the Civil War,” one survivor later observed, “Negroes in east Tennessee had been celebrating freedom. We had a history of thinking we lived among the best white people in the South. But when the summer of 1919 came around, we found out it wasn’t true.”

For over fifty years, Knoxville, Tennessee, had boasted of its harmonious race relations, holding itself up as a model to other American cities. Yet when racial violence swept the nation in 1919, Knoxville failed to escape. National unrest combined with existing local tensions to produce a violent racial conflagration that claimed several lives, destroyed thousands of dollars’ worth of property, left the city bitterly divided, and led to the execution of an innocent man. Unwilling to confront the challenges posed by the riot, Knoxville’s leadership sought to deny the incident’s racial overtones, portraying it as the work of a few excited rumor-mongers and drunken hoodlums. No amount of denial, however, could erase the mark left on the city. In the decades that followed, men of both races would often point to the bullet holes in buildings at Vine and Central, telling their children and grandchildren the story of that dark night in Knoxville and “the Morris Mays race riot.”

26 S.W. 233 (1920); Knoxville Sentinel, 30 Mar. 1922; East Tennessee News, March 23, 1922; “Far from the Peaceful Shore,” 32-33. In various letters and petitions in Maurice Mays McMillan to Taylor, November 29, 1921; Taylor, March 10, 1922; Nathan L. Bachman to Governor Alfa Taylor, November

17, 1919; Knoxville Journal and Tribune, 27-28, 72-83. Two of those receiving mistrials, Dobbins and Stokely, were retried in 1920, both receiving prison sentences for conviction; Cash was paroled later the same year. Record Group 25, Manuscripts Division, National Archives.

78Station WROL [radio broadcast], Knoxville, Tennessee, February 10, 1941, 9:30-10:00 p.m. (typescript), CIC Papers, Series VII, Folder 199.