

Columbia Race Riots

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

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

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

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

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

The Columbia Race Riot of 1946 was part of a larger movement by African Americans in Tennessee to oppose a social and legal system that treated them as second class citizens. African Americans, who fought for freedom in World War II, were no longer willing to be denied their freedom at home. Events like the Columbia Race Riot brought attention to the inequalities of the Jim Crow south and represented the first steps in the long march for equal rights.

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

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

Columbia Race Riots

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