

The Atlanta Race Massacre of 1906 A brief history

Atlanta was primed for trouble in 1906.

Atlantans imagined their city as a progressive place with peaceful race relations. Some took comfort from the fact that it was home to six Black colleges and a growing middle class of African Americans.

But beneath the surface, the city was simmering with class and racial tensions. Atlanta was a boomtown, a railroad and industrial center of 115,000 that had grown tenfold since Union troops left it in ruins during the Civil War only four decades before. The Black population was one of the fastest-growing segments. Many whites resented the competition for jobs and detested the mingling of races that occurred in an urban center, especially in the saloons and dives of a couple of notorious red-light districts.¹

During the 1890s and early 1900s, white Southerners reasserted their control over Blacks through a number of measures designed to segregate the races and prevent African Americans from voting. Lynchings became more common, and race riots broke out in places such as Wilmington, North Carolina; Brownsville, Texas; and Statesboro, Georgia. Although they were invariably referred to as riots, they more closely resembled massacres in which white vigilantes attacked Black communities.²

Many whites were particularly upset about the supposed threat Black men posed to white women. In the winter of 1906, a play opened in Atlanta that pandered to those fears. *The Clansman*, based on a novel by Thomas Dixon of the same name, romanticized the Ku Klux Klan and its campaign of terrorism as a proper response to alleged Black criminality. Its depiction of a Black rapist brought to justice electrified audiences, as it would again in 1915 when the story became the basis for the controversial film *The Birth of a Nation*.³

¹ Burns, Rebecca. *Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot*. Cincinnati: Emmis Press, 2006.

² Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947.

³ Bauerlein, Mark. *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001.

The imperative to suppress Blacks socially and politically dominated public discourse among white Atlantans in 1906. In the weeks leading up to the massacre, two sparks lit the fuse: a rabble-rousing political campaign and a newspaper war that reeked with yellow journalism.

It was an election year, and Black disfranchisement emerged as the central issue in a closely contested Democratic primary for governor. The candidates both had ties to Atlanta's dominant newspapers. Hoke Smith was a former publisher of *The Atlanta Journal*, while Clark Howell was editor and principal owner of *The Atlanta Constitution*. Both believed that Black citizens shouldn't be allowed to vote, but Howell maintained that existing laws were adequate while Smith proposed new measures to assure disfranchisement and reinforce white supremacy. He won the primary in August.⁴

The media played a central role in whipping up public hysteria. Atlanta had four daily papers in 1906, including the long-established *Constitution* and *Journal* and two upstarts: the *Atlanta Evening News* and *The Atlanta Georgian* (part of William Randolph Hearst's empire). A weekly paper for Blacks, the *Independent*, was also published.⁵

The four dailies were waging a circulation war. Through the summer of 1906, they ran frequent stories about Black men assaulting white women, accounts that were lurid, exaggerated, or fabricated. The *Evening News* went so far as to call for the creation of a thousand-man "protective league" of private citizens. "Shall these black devils be permitted to assault and almost kill our women, and go unpunished?" the paper editorialized on the day before the massacre.⁶

The press singled out a section of saloons and brothels along Decatur Street. The feverish obsessions of the day – race, sex, drunkenness – mingled into a toxic brew. On Saturday, Sept. 22, 1906, thousands of people gathered in the middle of the city near the intersection later known as Five Points. Downtown Atlanta was usually crowded on Saturdays in those days, but this was something different; many of the white people, fomented by the newspapers' calls for action, had brought weapons. The papers carried news of four new rapes and rape attempts that afternoon, the *Evening News* issuing multiple extra editions. Each new alleged outrage further excited the crowds.

⁴ Mixon, Gregory. *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City*. Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2004.

⁵ Burns: *Rage in the Gate City*.

⁶ *Atlanta Evening News*, Sept. 21, 1906.

Around 9 p.m., a group of young men attacked a Black bicycle messenger on Decatur Street.⁷ The violence quickly escalated. Mobs started assailing anyone with dark skin. They pulled people off the streetcars that intersected around Five Points and beat and stabbed them. They invaded the Kimball House and other fine hotels and dragged Black employees into the streets. They shot bystanders and mutilated the corpses, throwing one off the Forsyth Street bridge. They barged into Black-owned barbershops such as Alonzo Herndon's establishment on Peachtree Street and assaulted the barbers who had been cutting white men's hair and shining their shoes. One lame bootblack was beaten to death.

In a gruesomely symbolic gesture, mob members laid the bodies of three of their victims at the base of the Henry Grady statue on Marietta Street, a monument to the newspaperman who had popularized the idea of a New South.⁸

Evelyn Witherspoon, a 10-year-old white girl whose family lived downtown, never forgot the horrible scene she witnessed late that night. "I knew something was going on and came to the window ... and there I saw a man strung up to the light pole. Men and boys on the street below were shooting at him until they riddled his body with bullets."⁹

The violence continued until after midnight, when the governor finally called out the state militia and a downpour dissipated the mob. But the unrest wasn't over.

Over the next three days, skirmishes broke out across the city and vigilantes roamed freely. On Sunday, a mob of whites tried to invade the Dark Town neighborhood east of downtown, and a Black man was lynched in East Point, south of the city. On Monday and Tuesday, bloody confrontations occurred in Brownsville, a Black community on the south side that was home to Clark College and Gammon Theological Seminary.

As it was getting dark on Monday, a posse of a 10 police officers and armed private citizens marched into Brownsville, where they believed people were stockpiling weapons and planning a counteroffensive. A gun battle ensued. Among the dead were James Heard, a 30-year-old Fulton County police officer, and George Wilder, a disabled

⁷ *The Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 23, 1906.

— Bauerlein: *Negrophobia*.

⁸ Godshalk, David Ford. *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

⁹ Kuhn, Clifford M., and Harlon E. Joye and E. Bernard West. *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1990. Oral history of Evelyn Witherspoon: Conducted by Clifford M. Kuhn, March 13, 1979. Accessed May 25, 2022 at Digital Library of Georgia: <https://ohms.libs.uga.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=dlg/livat/ahc-637-148-002.xml>

70-year-old resident who fled slavery during the Civil War and enlisted in the U.S. Army, On Wilder's tombstone in South-View Cemetery, he is identified with the middle name he adopted because of his military service – Union – and a hand-written epitaph:

*A soldier of the Civil War,
was killed in the riot¹⁰*

Several Atlantans who were prominent or would later become so left accounts of the massacre.

Margaret Mitchell, who would go on to write *Gone With the Wind*, was 5 years old and living with her family east of the central city. When her father was warned of the disturbances and urged to defend his home, she overheard the adults talking and went to fetch an ornamental sword.¹¹

Walter White, who would lead the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for a quarter of a century, was 13 years old and living on Houston Street on the east side. He witnessed some of the rioting on the first night as he accompanied his postal worker father on his rounds. On the second night, the two of them sat in the front parlor of their house with guns waiting for the mob they had been warned would try to ravage their neighborhood. "Son, the father said, "don't shoot until the first person puts his foot on the lawn and then — don't you miss."¹²

W.E.B. Du Bois, a 38-year-old professor at Atlanta University, was in Alabama on a research project when he received word of the violence. Fearing for the safety of his wife and their daughter, he boarded a train for Atlanta and sat with a double-barrel shotgun on the steps of the dormitory where they lived.¹³ He wrote an emotional poem about the massacre titled "A Litany of Atlanta," subtitled "Done at Atlanta, on the Day of Death, 1906":

"A city lay in travail, God our Lord, and from her loins sprang twin Murder and Black Hate. Red was the midnight; clang, crack and cry of death and fury filled the air and trembled underneath the stars when church spires pointed silently to

¹⁰ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Sept. 17, 2006

— U.S. Army pension records of George Union Wilder, 1890-1907. National Archives and Records Administration, requested and received September 2006.

¹¹ Pyron, Darden Asbury. *Southern Daughter: The Life of Margaret Mitchell*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

¹² White, Walter. *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White*. New York: Viking Press, 1948.

¹³ Lewis, David Levering. *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race*. New York: Henry Holt, 1993.

Thee. And all this was to sate the greed of greedy men who hide behind the veil of vengeance!"¹⁴

The massacre shocked Atlantans. As the violence abated, white and Black leaders met together to discuss ways to avert such calamities in the future, perhaps the first time in the city's history they had huddled like that. Civic leaders took up a collection to bury the victims and care for their families. The Chamber of Commerce conducted an inquiry, as did a Fulton County grand jury, and they blamed irresponsible newspapers (especially the *Evening News*) for the disorders.

The massacre also embarrassed Atlanta. Publications from New York to Paris ran stories about the violence, making Atlanta sound like the front lines of a race war. "Massacre De Negres," the French weekly *Le Petit Parisien* called it. "All South Ready for War Upon Negro," blared a headline in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.¹⁵

Such attention was bad for business, as one Atlantan made plain when he spoke at the meeting of Black and white leaders. "Saturday evening at 8 o'clock, the credit of Atlanta was good for any number of millions of dollars in New York or Boston or any financial center," lawyer Charles T. Hopkins said. "Today we couldn't borrow 50 cents."¹⁶

Atlanta's white leadership was so concerned about the city's image that it ran one Black journalist out of town for speaking the truth about the massacre. J. Max Barber, editor of *The Voice*, a magazine for African Americans, was enraged when he read a letter in the *New York World* from John Temple Graves, editor of *The Atlanta Georgian*, blaming the disturbances on Black criminality. Barber fired off an anonymous letter to the *World* placing the responsibility on unscrupulous politicians, race-baiting newspapers, and *white* criminality. James English, a bank president who was also a member of the police commission, summoned him to his office and gave him a choice.

"I was told that the letter was a vile slander on Atlanta and that the man who wrote it would serve a sentence on a Georgia chain gang or leave the town," Barber wrote. He left and moved *The Voice* to Chicago.¹⁷

¹⁴ Du Bois, W.E.B. "A Litany of Atlanta." *The Independent*, Oct. 11, 1906. Accessed June 14, 2022. <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-b161-i375/#page/1/mode/1up>

¹⁵ Bauerlein: *Negrophobia*.

¹⁶ Baker, Ray Stannard. "Following the Color Line: A Race Riot, and After." *The American Magazine*, Vol. LXIII, No. 6, April 1907.

¹⁷ Barber, J. Max. "The Atlanta Tragedy" and "Why Mr. Barber Left Atlanta." *The Voice*, October 1906. 470-479.

He wasn't the only African American to leave Atlanta because of the massacre. Historians estimate that as many as a thousand fled the city after the violence. In their wake, Atlanta became more segregated as Blacks prudently retreated to the relative safety of their own institutions and businesses.

As governor, Hoke Smith delivered on his promise to disfranchise Blacks and secured a constitutional amendment requiring a literacy test that kept most of them from voting for the next half century. Mindful of those Decatur Street saloons, legislators swiftly passed a law banning alcoholic beverages, making Georgia the first state in the South to enact prohibition.¹⁸

For many decades, the massacre was forgotten or glossed over in civic memory. Franklin Garrett, long regarded as Atlanta's official historian, devoted only five pages to it in his two-volume, 2,072-page history of the city, *Atlanta and Environs*. What he wrote reflected the establishment view that the violence had been the result of Black ruffraff and the "tough element" of underclass whites.¹⁹ He repeated the chamber's findings that only 12 people died in the violence. Using contemporary accounts, historians later estimated that at least 25 people perished — and perhaps many more.²⁰ The number of injured and the extent of property damage was never fully tallied.

The massacre was not closely re-examined until the civil rights era of the 1960s and did not receive widespread attention until the turn of the 21st century, when four books about the tragedy were published in the span of five years. On the centennial in 2006, a group of academics and activists — the Coalition to Remember the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot — organized a year of programs about the massacre, beginning with a funeral motorcade and memorial service at George Wilder's grave in South-View.²¹ The commemoration effort has continued in the years since with ongoing events and efforts to erect historical markers.

The larger significance of the Atlanta Race Massacre lies in the belief that it shifted the way many people thought about civil rights. In the years before 1906, the nation's most prominent Black leader was Booker T. Washington, the Tuskegee, Ala., educator who

¹⁸ Dittmer, John. *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1977.

¹⁹ Garrett, Franklin M. *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events*. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1954.

²⁰ Crowe, Charles. "Racial Violence and Social Reform: Origins of the Atlanta Riot of 1906." *Journal of Negro History*, July 1968: 234-56. And: "Massacre in Atlanta, Sept. 22, 1906." *Journal of Negro History*, April 1969, 150-73.

²¹ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Sept. 22, 2006.

promoted an accommodationist strategy of progress that accepted segregation — the “Atlanta Compromise” he enunciated in a celebrated speech at the 1895 Cotton States Exposition. After an alarming rise in racial disturbances, lynchings, and political repression, many African Americans started to gravitate toward the more activist approach advocated by another educator, W.E.B. Du Bois. He was among the organizers of the Niagara Movement, which had held its first meeting the year before. That movement led to the founding in 1909 of the nation’s most enduring civil rights organization, the NAACP, which spearheaded the fight against institutional segregation.

The reaction to the Atlanta Massacre and other incidents of racial violence around the turn of the 20th century planted the seeds for the human rights revolution that would eventually change America.

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