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NAME CHANGE STATEMENT FROM HISTORIANS AND EXPERTS

We, a group of historians and cultural leaders, believe the name of the Atlanta Race Riot should be changed to the 1906 Atlanta Race Massacre.

In September 1906, the deadliest eruption of racial violence in Georgia history broke out on the streets of downtown Atlanta. By the time the disturbances ended four days later, at least 25 people had been killed, and hundreds of African Americans were injured and terrorized.

For more than a century, the violence of 1906 has typically been called the Atlanta Race Riot. Indeed, several historians (including some of us) have written about the event using the word riot in the titles of our books, on their pages and in the classroom.

There has been a widespread reconsideration of the word riot, and we believe the events of 1906 should now be the 1906 Atlanta Race Massacre.

Other prominent institutions agree: The Georgia Historical Society is in the process of undertaking the terminology change in all its materials, as is the Atlanta History Center.

We request this change because we, like these other institutions, believe that the word “riot” is inadequate to describe what happened in 1906. The event was more a massacre than a riot. Webster defines a riot as a “violent disorder.” The events of 1906 were certainly that, but they were also much more. They more closely resemble the definition of a massacre: “the indiscriminate, merciless killing of a number of human beings.”

We tend to think of riots in the modern sense of the word, summoning images of the urban disorders of the 1960s or the unrest that followed the Rodney King verdict of 1992. What happened in Atlanta in 1906 is not to be confused with such events. What happened in 1906 was an attack on the African-American community, not by it.

The violence was also fomented and incited, not spontaneous. In 1906, for weeks, Atlanta’s four daily newspapers ran sensationalistic and false reports about African-American men

assaulting white women. The media created a hysterical atmosphere that ignited on a Saturday evening when a mob of thousands of white people started attacking anyone with dark skin. They stabbed people, shot them, dragged them off streetcars and beat them to death. Over the next three days, the violence spread to other neighborhoods, where more people were killed.

Most newspapers at the time described the violence as a riot, although some were more specific. On the morning after, *The Atlanta Constitution* used “Reign of Terror” in one of its front-page headlines. African-American newspapers often called it a “massacre.” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, the leading Black newspaper of its time, compared the violence to the pogroms then ravaging the Jewish communities of Czarist Russia.

One distinguished observer who lived through the violence, W.E.B. Du Bois, then a professor at Atlanta University, wrote a poem about it called “A Litany of Atlanta.” It’s included in Georgia’s 8th grade Social Studies curriculum. Du Bois does not use the words “riot” or “massacre,” but he employs numerous terms that are more in the spirit of the latter: “Murder ... Black Hate ... flood of innocent blood ... clang, crack and cry of death.”

It is important to note that other attacks on African-American communities that were once referred to as race riots have been re-characterized in recent years. In Tulsa, Okla., where the Greenwood neighborhood was attacked in 1921, with hundreds of buildings destroyed and between 100 and 300 African Americans killed, local governments no longer call it the Tulsa Race Riot. On the centennial in 2021, the name was officially changed to the Tulsa Massacre.

In Wilmington, N.C., where a vigilante army of white supremacists overthrew a biracial government in 1898, killing at least 60 people, the “race riot” is now referred to more accurately as the Wilmington Insurrection or Coup. A state historical marker calls it the Wilmington Coup.

We endorse doing the same thing here in Georgia. As historians and experts who have written about 1906, we support the efforts of community leaders and organizations, in consultation with academics, to commemorate and raise awareness about the events of 1906. One of the group’s projects is to sponsor a state historical marker at Five Points, near the spot where the violence erupted, with the title: “The 1906 Atlanta Race Massacre.” We believe all sectors of society should follow this lead.

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