



The 1968 Washington Riots in History and Memory

Author(s): Dana Lanier Schaffer

Source: *Washington History*, Fall/Winter, 2003/2004, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall/Winter, 2003/2004), pp. 4-33

Published by: Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/40073603>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Historical Society of Washington, D.C. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Washington History*

JSTOR



On the afternoon of April 5, 1968, riots rocked the city of Washington for the second day in a row. Smoke and flames could be seen across the city, as in this aerial photo of 14th Street, N.W. All Washington Post images are © 1968, The Washington Post, photo by Ben Gilbert, reprinted with permission.

The 1968 Washington Riots in History and Memory

Dana Lanier Schaffer

On the early evening of Thursday, April 4, 1968, the usual crowds bustled along the intersection of 14th and U streets, N.W., in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, D.C., a thriving African-American community that had seen the heyday of Duke Ellington's "Black Broadway" and served as the city's unofficial center of black leadership. At 7:15 p.m. that evening, radio broadcasts began to announce that Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot in Memphis, and crowds of people began to gather in the streets. By 8:15 p.m., word spread that King had died, and the throngs grew even larger. Stokely Carmichael, the leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), proceeded along 14th Street requesting that businesses close and remain closed until King's funeral as a show of respect for the slain leader. However, as the mood shifted from sorrow to anger, and from mourning to violence, the crowds that had been gathering behind Carmichael quickly grew unruly, shattering win-

dows at the People's Drug Store at the corner of 14th and U streets. Despite Carmichael's and other SNCC leaders' efforts to regain control of these growing crowds, mob violence escalated and law enforcement struggled to maintain order. By 10:25 p.m., the earliest reports of looting reached police radios as rioters broke into Sam's Pawnbrokers and Rhodes Five-and-Ten at 14th and T streets, N.W. Shortly thereafter, the first fire call alerted officials of a vehicle fire set at Barry-Pate-Addison Chevrolet at 14th and Belmont streets.¹

These acts sparked the riots that ravaged Washington for 12 days and altered its history for decades to come. Violence quickly spread to other African-American areas around Seventh Street, N.W., and H Street, N.E., and rioters soon destroyed commercial districts that had once teemed with movie theaters, car dealerships, white-owned high-end department stores, and numerous other shops and restaurants. Although authorities called in federal troops to restore order and assist municipal law enforcement, the Washington riots resulted in 13 deaths and \$24 million in insured property damage, a physical devasta-

Dana Lanier Schaffer is a Masters degree candidate in American and Public History at American University.

tion more extensive than in any other riot-stricken city across the country and one from which the neighborhoods have never fully recovered.² In the intervening 35 years, residents of these neighborhoods dealt with the consequences of the Washington riots and attempted to make sense of what happened before, during, and after April 1968.

People who lived in Washington during that month remember the riots as they do many major historical events—they recall where they were when they heard the news of King’s assassination, what they did, how they felt, and what people around them said. This is particularly true for Washington’s African Americans, many of whom experienced a profound sense of loss—not only of King, but of hope, of patience, and, after the riots, of the physical fabric of many of their long-established and vibrant communities. Collective or historical memory refers to the ways that people and communities construct a sense of the past.³ Oral interviews of members of Washington’s black community reveal that, for them, the collective memory of the causes and consequences of the riots remains an important part of its identity and consciousness, and offers a new way of understanding the riots and their place in the city’s history.

Oral interviews with current residents of these neighborhoods reveal that, then and now, African Americans saw the riots as part of a broader history.⁴ The civil unrest of April 1968 was not simply a reaction to King’s death, although his assassination provided the spark. Instead, African Americans described a widespread resentment towards generations of political, civil, and especially economic injustice—the latter of which neither the civil rights movement nor the federal government had yet to effectively address. Today, members of Washington’s black community also continue to see and feel the legacy of the riots as they deal with and attempt to influence economic development and revitalization issues in these neighborhoods.

Oral interviews also reveal that Washington’s African-American community was actually a mix of interrelated communities with sometimes competing identities, goals, beliefs, values, and

reactions. While generally united by the common experience of racial injustice, each group’s distinct sense of identity led to varying levels of participation in and reactions to this urban unrest. Feeling marginalized during an era of great turmoil, some blacks used destructive violence as both an outlet for their frustration and a political statement demanding change. Others responded to the increasing destruction with determined community activism, while still others stood by in disbelief or disapproval. This variety of experiences before and during the riots continued as African Americans attempted to assess the damage and determine how to move forward in the aftermath. In some ways, the riots brought these communities together and, in others, they wrought irreparable damage. Moreover, the riots reverberated throughout the city of Washington, drawing on existing or creating new alliances while at the same time creating new rifts between city residents. The events of April 1968, then, left an indelible mark on all Washingtonians.

Neither the riots nor the racial tensions leading up to the violence occurred in a vacuum. Washington, like other cities across the country, had witnessed increasing white flight from its urban center following the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) decision, which integrated schools and overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine.⁵ On the other hand, although Congress had passed a series of laws protecting African-American civil and voting rights through the early and mid-1960s, blacks still saw the inequality around them in housing discrimination, discrepancies in salary, and in other civil rights violations. Combined with the shift from the non-violent civil rights activism of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to the more aggressive Black Power Movement advocated by Stokely Carmichael of SNCC, feelings of racial inequity led to the “Long Hot Summers” between 1964 and 1968, in which violence and turmoil rocked American cities. From August 11 to August 21, 1965, the Watts area of Los Angeles saw unprecedented rioting in which 34 people died, and officials arrested nearly 4,000 criminals for looting, fighting, and other illegal activities.⁶ The violence continued

through the summer of 1967 in dozens of other cities, including Newark, New Jersey, where 26 people lost their lives, and in Detroit, Michigan, where 43 people died and 5,000 were injured during race riots.⁷

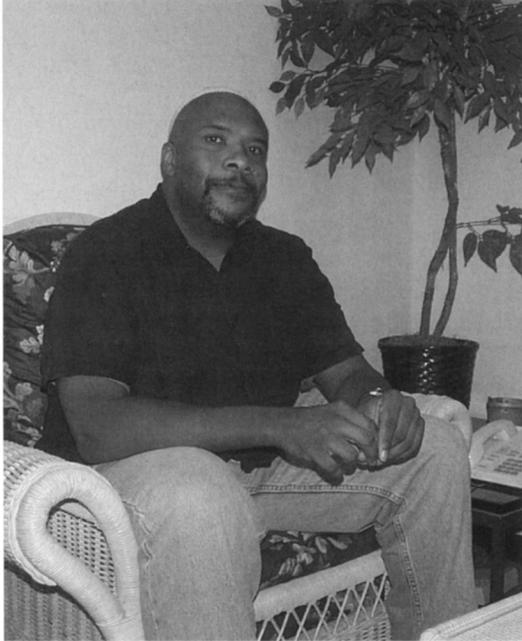
Until April 1968, Washington, D.C., had avoided the urban violence that had plagued so many other American cities during the tumultuous 1960s. Perhaps Washington's position as the nation's capital initially helped to stave off this aggression. Due to the presence of the federal government as a mainstay for employment, Washington lacked the industrial employment that often led to racial conflict between workers in other cities like Detroit. Further, job opportunities for blacks in the federal government created a large middle-class African-American population in the District. According to the 1960 census, 22,000 non-white families in Washington, D.C., had incomes greater than \$8,000, while 10,800 non-white families had incomes greater than \$10,000—a substantial amount for the time.⁸ In addition, blacks made up the majority of the city's population, outnumbering whites by nearly 10 percent in 1960.⁹ The combination of the large black population and a relatively contented middle class bolstered by the leadership of an African-American mayor perpetuated the belief of African Americans in other cities that Washington's blacks had a better quality of life and greater employment opportunities than in other areas of the country. As a result, many militant civil rights groups felt that Washington's African-American middle class was too complacent to aggressively work toward civil rights progress.¹⁰

Despite the nickname "Chocolate City," in actuality, the District remained rife with racial tensions due to growing economic discrepancies between whites and blacks. Washington did boast a large middle-class black population, but the income differential between whites and blacks steadily widened in the 1950s and 1960s.¹¹ In 1960, the census reflected a white median annual income of \$7,692 while that of blacks reached only \$4,800.¹² Economic discrimination not only included income disparity, but also affected African Americans' ability to obtain bank loans for the purchase of homes and businesses. Virginia

Ali, who established Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street in 1958 with her husband Ben, recalled the challenges the black couple faced when trying to open their restaurant. "It wasn't easy to get funding for things like that," Ali noted. "You know, banks were reluctant to provide funding. Even Industrial Bank [a predominantly African-American bank] was reluctant to provide funding because you don't know if this business is going to make it."¹³

African Americans also found everyday necessities difficult to obtain due to racial discrimination by white-owned stores. Frequently, businesses in lower-income neighborhoods that were often ravaged by crime charged higher prices to local African-American customers in order to compensate for elevated insurance rates.¹⁴ These high prices perpetuated a buy-on-credit policy in which vendors "quite often [used] high-pressure sales tactics, . . . and advertising and information about sales conditions [were] frequently incomplete."¹⁵ The 1968 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* reflected that retail stores specializing in installment sales in Washington charged an average of 52 percent more for furniture and appliances than other stores in the area.¹⁶ Collecting on bad debt led to the view that whites enforced unfair purchase policies on blacks, and poor blacks often felt they were "being swindled."¹⁷

In addition, the District faced significant problems with housing inequality. The April 11, 1968, Report of Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments found that 100,000 of the 600,000 area housing units in 1960 were substandard, overcrowded, or both. Further, the report concluded that a disproportionate number of blacks lived in the District "because they were constrained by racial attitudes" that prevented them from leaving impoverished areas.¹⁸ In his study of alley life in Washington, D.C., James Borchert noted that these inner-city residents also had to "confront more serious and pervasive problems than any other residents of the city" including "overcrowding, and unsanitary and unsafe housing, deadly diseases, and a much higher death rate."¹⁹ By 1961, although blacks made up 55 percent of the city's population, they were forced into



Having grown up in the middle-class Brightwood neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s, Reuben Jackson recalled the increasing white flight following the Brown decision that transformed his once-integrated neighborhood into a predominantly black area. Photo by the author, 2003.

44 percent of the city's housing, and frequently paid more to get less.²⁰ The dilapidation of these black sections incited fear in the white community that "crime and disease would spread as ghetto walls broke down," and whites began to view residential segregation as a way to maintain stability.²¹ Therefore, to escape living near this growing poverty, whites fled to the suburbs and further increased *de facto* segregation. Inner-city neighborhoods that had once been interracial gave way to black communities where whites and blacks rarely interacted. Reuben Jackson, an African American and long-time D.C. resident, recalled the middle-class, inner-city Brightwood neighborhood, just north of Shaw, where he grew up in the late 1950s and 1960s:

So we moved to this 5322 5th [Street], NW. And we caught the tail end of—well, maybe it depends on when it started—of white flight. So I remember our neighborhood had . . . African

Americans who had moved in already and who were moving in, like us. . . . There were . . . a lot of, I remember, German-Jewish kids in our neighborhood, and they were not allowed to play with us. And you'd sort of see them across the street. . . . And, at least on our block, the Jewish kids would sort of play on one side and kind of look at us. . . . But I remember seeing these kids and there was this bizarre gulf between us. I remember that very distinctly.²²

The cultural divide extended into the workforce as well. John Jackson, an African American and member of the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Force at the time of the riots, noted the tensions prominent in the integrated police force:

You know, a lot of people didn't understand that back during those years there was a pretty wide cultural gap between black officers and white officers. . . . A lot of people never discussed that. But the fact of the matter was that a lot of white officers didn't want to work with black officers. But, a lot of black officers didn't want to work with white officers either. [laughs] Because from our point of view, it was because of these cultural differences. In other words, they liked to talk about different things. And if you work with somebody for eight hours [during your shift], that's more time than you spend with your wife.²³

Racial tensions in the police force stemmed not only from cultural differences, but also from job discrimination throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The NAACP filed charges against the Metropolitan Police Force in 1957 and brought to light the consistently unequal promotion policies that favored whites on the force. Although Washington technically had an integrated force, in 1957 African Americans made up only 250 of the 2,243 total men on the force, although the city's black population was 53 percent. By 1959 the Metropolitan Police Department had promoted only one African-American man to the rank of lieutenant.²⁴

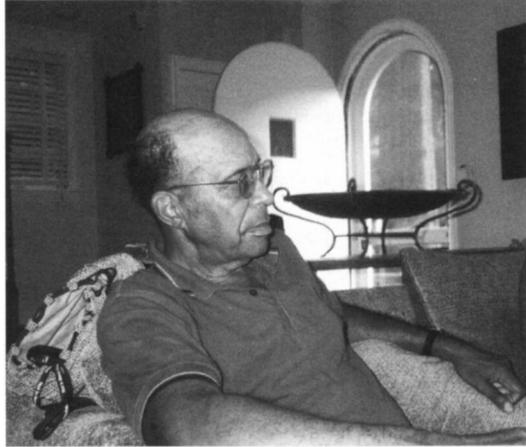
Discrimination also extended to the citizens the police were sworn to protect. John Jackson

remembered the racial profiling so common during the time:

I always taught [my son] to try to stay away from crowds . . . because that's what generally got you into trouble. Especially black kids, back during those years, and even now. If [the police] saw a bunch of black kids riding around in a car, you know, they'd automatically think they were up to no good. . . . Have you ever seen *Casablanca* [where] Captain Renault referred to these individuals as the "usual suspects?" That was black folks back in those years. We were the usual suspects. Anyway, so . . . [the Force] . . . expected you to, on a monthly basis, to pick a couple of people up and arrest them and hold them. These were facts now.²⁵

Given the economic disparity, housing discrimination, and racism rampant in both professional and social arenas, the potential for civil unrest began to spread throughout Washington, D.C., in the late 1960s. As blacks continued to experience inequality in nearly all facets of their daily lives, more African Americans saw the appeal of violent measures of civil protest. In early 1968, Senator Winston L. Prouty (R-Vermont) compiled a report revealing this shift to black militancy. Interviews of 426 African Americans and whites in the Cardozo, Southeast, and downtown neighborhoods reflected that one in five under the age of 24 favored African-American leaders more militant than Martin Luther King, Jr. Nearly half of those interviewees felt that riots served a "useful purpose." Furthermore, Prouty surmised that "militant Negroes may no longer see violence as a means to foster change, "but only as a mechanism by which to destroy society in retribution for its abuses."²⁶ "John Smith," a black militant who lived in Washington in the 1960s, echoed these sentiments when he described his own involvement with the Civil Rights Movement:

Well, I became the president of a group called the Zulus, . . . a group of about seventeen black men that wanted to be involved in a violent way, in terms of the movement. . . . Whenever we ever heard of any kind of negative thing in D.C.,



John Jackson was a police officer during the 1968 riots and recalled working with members of the National Guard and regular Army troops as part of "Operation Cabin Guard" to quell the violence that erupted following King's assassination. Photo by Leora Frances Lawlah, 2003.

[such as stores that had racist employment policies], . . . we might go in there and break the whole windows of those stores. It was the roguish element in the movement, in terms of my involvement. . . . I mean, I would involve myself in protests as well, but not on the marches on Washington nor the Poor People's Campaign. . . . And we had a group called the Zulus that was talking about revolution from a romantic point of view, because we didn't really know what war really was. . . . It was very dangerous still, because we all could have been killed like so many other black groups that were involved in those kinds of things. But we never really got, I guess, totally out of hand. We were set up to be killed if we had continued at that rate . . . [because] . . . there were a number of things we did in the city that were not legal.²⁷

To prepare for this potential violence and to avoid the mayhem that had fallen upon so many other American cities the previous summer, the city of Washington developed plans to prevent and combat urban unrest early in 1968. Anticipating that civil disturbances would likely arise during Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign in Washington, originally scheduled for April 22, Washington and federal officials

worked together to orchestrate a federally and locally influenced security plan involving the city police and the National Guard, as well as regular Army troops.²⁸ By early April 1968, the Washington, D.C., Office of Civil Defense adopted a policy similar to that used by the White House when it began to provide key officials with “Daily Intelligence Summaries” to apprise them of potentially disorderly events in the area.²⁹ Although Mayor Walter Washington had been given a direct telephone line to the Pentagon, officials planned to downplay the role of the Army and rely more upon the National Guard and local police.³⁰ Still, due to the international importance of the city as the United States capital, officials had a greater incentive to avoid the bad publicity accompanying civil unrest. To quell violence as quickly as possible and to demonstrate control of both the city and national governments, Washington established a joint plan with the federal government known as “Cabin Guard,” which set the course for the Army’s response to be more pervasive and quicker than in other cities.³¹

In order to help reduce the extensive violence experienced in previous riots such as those in Detroit and Newark, the Metropolitan Police Department also implemented special training for its officers, including lectures in mob psychology and instruction in technical procedures against snipers.³² Specifically, the Washington Police planned to implement a policy of restraint in situations that could bring about a violent confrontation between police and citizens. The force recommended that its officers should limit the use of their sirens, make arrests quickly, and maintain a “minimum number of personnel . . . to avoid potential confrontations with angered citizens.”³³

In addition to the coordinated efforts of federal and local security units, as well as the special riot training for municipal police officers, Mayor Washington planned to implement social ordinances and programs to help prevent urban violence. Specifically, city administrators provided for emergency regulations that would establish a curfew and ban the sale of alcoholic beverages, gasoline, and firearms.³⁴ A large part of Washington’s plan also included a community project, the

Summer Neighborhood Development Youth Program, which had successfully helped to reduce violence the previous summer. The program aimed to keep kids off streets by emphasizing jobs, recreation, and education. A key strategy of the program involved “employ[ing] ghetto youths who moved into tense situations at the earliest possible moment” to alleviate any disruptions.³⁵

With riot-prevention plans firmly underway, a March 26 article in the *Washington Post* reported a speech by District Public Safety Director Patrick V. Murphy claiming that “Washington’s police force can prevent any serious disorder in the city this spring and summer.”³⁶ However, Murphy had assured his Capitol Hill audience all too soon, as the city’s plan was only 80 percent complete by the time that riots occurred just nine days later on April 4.³⁷

When the riots erupted that evening, Washington’s African-American communities reacted and participated in various ways. Many people joined the crowds along 14th Street, while others remained safe in their homes. Either way, most Washingtonians likely felt the same powerful emotions that local resident Bonnie Perry experienced. Perry, an African-American woman who was 13 at the time of the riots, recalled her utter despair at the first news of King’s assassination:

That was a terrible day. I remember people being at home, adults and children. I remember crying. I remember everyone being upset in the house. And nobody could go out of the house. I sneaked out anyway. . . . I sneaked out and I saw people upset everywhere. Crying and holding one another and fussing and cussing and walking up and down the street. It was like confusion everywhere. That’s what I remember.³⁸

Perry had grown up in a lower-income family, moving from house to house and school to school. Although her mother attempted to maintain a sense of control within the household, Perry had experienced a transient and unstable youth. In April of 1968, Perry’s uncle participated in the riots, bringing home merchandise stolen from a store, and Perry wanted to take part in the action



Bonnie Perry was 13 years old during the 1968 riots and recalled sneaking out of her house at Seventh and S streets, N.W., to see what was going on. She described the despair and destruction she witnessed throughout the neighborhood. Courtesy, Bonnie Perry.

as well. But at 13, she was too young and too scared to become involved. In addition, Perry was still under the guidance of her mother, who, as Perry recalled, “was totally against that stuff. She thought it was stupid and crazy. That’s why she didn’t want us to go outside. You know she didn’t agree with any of it.”³⁹ As a result, Perry remained out of trouble during the riots, sneaking out only briefly to catch

a glimpse of the action.

Living in the Brightwood neighborhood, only a few blocks north of the riot areas on Seventh Street, Reuben Jackson and his family also remained indoors and out of harm’s way during the riots. Jackson and his father watched the smoke from the rooftop of their house:

[W]e went up [on the roof] and you could see Georgia Avenue was west of us. You could see smoke and flames on Georgia Avenue. As you look south you could see this sort of halo of smoke in the distance. . . . And I just remember thinking, “Boy, it’s not just like Watts. It’s here. It is happening here.” . . . It shook me.⁴⁰

Growing up in a middle-class family that stressed the importance of education and civic duty, Jackson had felt the racial divide in his neighborhood, but his intellectual ambitions and sense of responsibility kept him and his family from participating in the riots. Jackson understood the causes of the violence, seeing the riots as the manifestation of years of pent-up anger and resentment. In his interview, Jackson described the riots as a boiling crock pot.

It’s like the steam sort of builds up and builds up and builds up. . . . [And then] you find people in a situation where they feel they have no recourse, I mean, look out. Really. Look out. And it doesn’t matter where they are. They can be on 14th and U. They can be near the Suez Canal. They can be in Detroit. It doesn’t really matter. I think that’s what it comes down to.⁴¹

While most neighborhood residents like Reuben Jackson and his family remained in their homes to escape the violence during the civil unrest, hundreds of others rushed into the streets to collectively express their anguish over King’s death. The crowd’s grief, however, quickly turned to anger at the inequities surrounding them. Low-income black males, mostly under the age of 24, made up almost 90 percent of the nearly 20,000 rioters.⁴² John Smith had been working at his office on 14th Street that evening and was among those in the violent crowds. He recounted how he heard the news and joined in the rioting:

A friend came up and we didn’t have any TV or radio on in that center [where I was working]. . . . We knew he had been shot and that he was in the hospital, but he died around 7:00 [pm] that night. I’ll never forget it. We were up there in my office. And he came up and said, “King . . .,” well, you could hear it outside. Guns started going off outside and we said King was dead. You know, the man of peace is dead. The prince of peace is dead. Then the city started burning. I remember about 9:00 the city’s up in flames.

Did you stay in your office or did you go out?

Oh no. Be serious. Be serious. [laughing]

So what did you do?

We did all the things that helped the flames.

“We” being you and your staff?

My group, not the staff. But me and my other group.

So you met up with the Zulus?

Oh yeah. We did all the things that helped the flames. . . . Oh yeah. We did the things that probably cost some people their lives in terms of getting caught in these buildings. Um, but we did the things that kept the flames going for as long as they did. And the flames went for about



Cohen's Menswear stood along Seventh Street between L and M streets, N.W. In 1950, this area had a bustling commercial corridor teeming with shops, department stores, theaters, and restaurants. HSW

three or four days. Before the police came. And there was a lot of looting that the group did as well. We weren't free from that. We weren't no saints. Clothing stores. Liquor stores.⁴³

I mean I was sad [when I first heard the news of King's death], but not like the world was around me. The city was burning. And I'm walking through the city and the city's burning. And that's what we wanted. This was our time. . . . I mean fire was all around my house. I mean, my house almost got caught on fire where I was living at, because 7th Street, [N.W.], the whole block was burning. And it was just, we thought we were in war then. Again, simple. Simple.⁴⁴

Smith's use of the pronoun "we" is particularly telling of his own perception of the riots as a group or "community" effort, while most accounts have claimed that looters acted individually. Smith and the other members of the Zulus related to one another as a solid front against white oppression

and used the events of April 4 as an excuse to advance their own radical protests against racial discrimination. Their shared identity as a militant group who could affect change through violence empowered Smith and the Zulus to perpetuate the riots and gave them what Smith later referred to as "a false sense of manhood."⁴⁵ While most other rioters acted out individually, Smith's militant community worked together to fan the flames of the fires and wreak havoc on the inner-city neighborhoods.

Unlike Smith, many of the 7,600 men, women, and children who were arrested for violence, looting, or for violation of the city's curfew ordinance were first-time offenders or did not fit the typical profile of a rioter.⁴⁶ These individuals shared an awareness of community and solidarity within the increasing mob violence, a sense that compelled them to commit crimes they normally would not. Apparently wrapped up in the heat of the moment, Nathaniel Dodds, a 51-year-old



Fire destroyed Cohen's Menswear, and many other Seventh Street businesses, during the April 1968 riots. HSW.

working family man claimed, "I saw others taking things, and I thought of the things my kids needed. . . . People told me the police weren't arresting anybody and I thought it was all right since everybody else was doing it."⁴⁷ Community activist Stanley Mayes recalled that "no one tried to stop anyone."⁴⁸ Even children joined in the act. In one incident, police charged four youths, ranging from 11 to 17 years old, in the looting and arson of the Standard Drug Company on H Street, N.E. The fire razed the store and caused \$200,000 in damages.⁴⁹

Fath Davis Ruffins, an African American who was 14 at the time, was shocked at the violence. Living with her family in the middle-class black neighborhood of Lamond-Riggs north of the riot areas, Ruffins discussed how her family and neighbors reacted to this mob violence:

The adults I knew—my parents, their friends and stuff, neighbors—they all thought this was just deplorable, this was just terrible behavior

and sort of these kind of low-income, not upstanding black people had laid a blot almost on Martin Luther King's memory. At the same time, some of those people would say things like, "Well, people sort of deserved this." In the sense of there is economic exploitation and there are reasons that people are reacting this way.⁵⁰

Similar to Reuben Jackson, Ruffins and her family understood the aggression, but were appalled by the violence they saw and stayed out of the riot-stricken areas until law enforcement was able to regain control later that weekend.

Following the initial incidents at 14th and U streets, rioting spread in African-American neighborhoods throughout the city, including the Seventh Street, N.W., and H Street, N.E., corridors. Looting and arson were the most common acts of violence, but snipers quickly became a problem for police officers. Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Officer John Jackson remembered:



While most of the 20,000 rioters and looters were young black men, women and children, seen here running with stolen goods in makeshift crates, also participated. Courtesy, The Washington Post.

Yeah the police department never completely . . . in other words, our radio never went off the air. . . . Our dispatcher was dispatching units during the whole riots. . . . We were out there riding around. . . . And there were snipers everywhere. . . . They had us riding around four people in a car. And you could hear the sound of gunshots everywhere. And . . . they told us to stay under cover as much as we could. . . .

So we were getting calls for various things all during the riots. . . . A lot of times people would just call the police and they'd just take pot shots at you, you know.

Did it happen to you?

Yeah, a couple of times. . . . One night we were up on Riggs Street coming through there and people were shooting. We heard the sound

of gunshots. . . . But anyway, you could hear sounds of gun shots and we didn't take any chances being in the wrong place at the wrong time.⁵¹

The violence began to ebb in the early hours of the morning of Friday, April 5, and city officials declared the area under control. At 1:30 a.m., William R. Manning, the Superintendent of Washington, D.C., Public Schools, conferred with Mayor Washington and Director of Public Safety Patrick Murphy and prematurely decided to open city schools on Friday, encouraging teachers and administrators to offer "appropriate assemblies or programs paying tribute to Dr. King." But as disorder spread throughout the city during the day on Friday, and teachers failed to keep children in



Looters drop stolen suits and flee from Silberg's Menswear at 922 14th Street, N.W., once spotted by the police on April 5, 1968. Courtesy, United Press International.

the classroom, Manning made the decision to dismiss the schools early, starting at 1:30 p.m. on a staggered basis.⁵²

Ruffins, who attended a predominantly white private high school in the affluent upper northwest section of Washington, described the reluctance of the school staff to send her home across town through the riot areas:

I would take the [city] bus down Wisconsin Avenue to what's still Friendship Heights. . . . Then I would take a bus that would take me across town. I remember people saying to me, "Aren't you really afraid?" or "How are you going to get home?" or "What are you going to do?" And I do remember thinking they're afraid because they're white. It didn't seem to me that I was really in any great danger. Now part of this again is the invulnerability of a thirteen-year-old, fourteen-year-old. But the other part of it was that it didn't seem like anyone was going to be personally attacking me. . . . So I wasn't afraid, but I remember all these other people were really afraid . . . to send me home. And I remember

thinking to myself, "Well, where am I going to stay? Am I going to stay with you?" [I don't remember exactly how I got home,] but I got home perfectly safely.⁵³

On that Friday afternoon as Ruffins was returning home from school, with looting and violence growing out of hand and Metropolitan Police greatly outnumbered, President Lyndon Johnson called in the National Guard, the 82nd Airborne, and the 503rd Military Police Battalion, bringing Operation Cabin Guard into action. The worst of the rioting lasted until Saturday evening, when 13,600 troops, more than were used in any other riot in the nation's history, occupied the city and regained control.⁵⁴ By April 15, President Johnson and Mayor Washington terminated the state of emergency, and the city remained calm but uneasy.⁵⁵

Although most of the law enforcement called to serve that week were white, many African-American members of the police force also helped bring calm back to the city. Some of these black officers may have felt conflicted about



A Special Operations Division policeman at 9th and L streets, N.W., scans the rooftops for snipers. Courtesy, The Washington Post.

bearing arms against those protesting the very discriminatory practices from which they, too, may have suffered. Officer John Jackson had seen his share of racial discrimination, but unlike those who participated in the riots, Jackson felt a stronger pull to uphold the law than to express his frustration through violence. Jackson recalled:

No, I wasn't active [in the Civil Rights Movement]. . . . No. I wasn't involved in that particular aspect of it. But I was more or less in law enforcement. That was worlds apart from Stokely [Carmichael] and H. Rap Brown. . . . But

anyway, I was in law enforcement, and that was forbidden. . . . My wife might have been involved in some of those [protests], but I wasn't. Because I was in law enforcement and I had a house full of hungry children to feed. If I'd been involved in some of that I'd have been out the door. I would have been gone. Been history. Been looking for another job.⁵⁶

While John Jackson may have appreciated the sentiment behind the protests and supported the cause for equality, he adamantly opposed the use of violence and illegal tactics that John Smith and others like him had used during the riots. To Jackson, the responsibility of supporting a family weighed more heavily than protesting racial discrimination. In direct contrast to Smith's view of the riots as an outlet to express frustration and retaliation against white oppression, Jackson saw the riots as lawless citizens taking advantage of the grief following King's death. Jackson and the other officers on the force worked tirelessly to maintain order in the damaged neighborhoods and, with the help of the National Guard, brought calm back to the communities.

Also helping to restore order throughout the week were the city's emergency ordinances banning the sale of alcohol, gasoline, and firearms, as well as the imposition of a strict curfew that remained in place until Friday, April 12. Reuben Jackson remembered that these governmental restrictions hampered his own family's efforts to leave the city that weekend following King's assassination:

My brother was in college at the time, and we tried to go into Richmond to see him because they had some disturbances there, not like there were here. You had to go downtown to get papers to get out of the city because you couldn't cross the bridges that leave town. We were able to get whatever documents there were, but of course, you know, they searched your car to make sure you weren't bringing gasoline in and out of [the city].⁵⁷

While the ordinances certainly helped to curb some violence by more law-abiding citizens,



Soldiers used a local laundromat as a barracks during the first night of rioting. Courtesy, The Washington Post.

Smith and the Zulus, who were prepared for such instances, easily disregarded them. Regulations did little to prevent their destruction of property:

I was out all night. Three days. Yeah. Three days. . . .The curfew didn't bother us because we had passes. The curfew didn't bother us at all. . . .

But then they prohibited the sale of kerosene and that sort of thing in the District.

Yeah, but you had what you needed then.

You had it anyway?

Oh yeah. Like I said, we had two or three sticks of dynamite. But in order to trigger them we had to shoot it [with a gun], because we didn't have any sticks, to light it and throw it. You know, so you had to shoot it.⁵⁸

After the violence and looting subsided, the devastation ravaged upon the nation's capital proved greater than that of any other riot that occurred across the country following King's death.

Estimates in January 1969 calculated that Washington's \$24 million in insured damages made up almost a third of the national total for riots the previous April.⁵⁹ Looting and arson caused the most damage in the District, and District firefighters claimed that hostile crowds prevented them from dousing many of the flames.⁶⁰ The fire department later declared that "fire suppression was beyond the capability of equipment and manpower" and that, at the height of rioting, the department had received reports of 25 to 30 fires hourly.⁶¹ Fires destroying area business and homes left nearly 5,000 jobless and 2,000 homeless.⁶² In spite of the extensive damage to property and neighborhood businesses, and perhaps due to the use of restraint by Metropolitan Police, Army, and National Guard troops, only 13 people died, a low number compared to the high casualties of other urban riots. Unfortunately, most of those killed had been caught in burning buildings set on fire by the looters themselves.⁶³



Outnumbered police and troops had difficulty controlling looters on Seventh Street, N.W., which they closed to traffic. Merchants criticized city authorities for not doing more to stop the looting. Courtesy, The Washington Post.

The grief over King's death had intensified the neighborhoods' resentment of white racism and discrimination, and as a result, the looting was often selective. Specifically, Public Safety Director Patrick Murphy confirmed to reporters that rioters had avoided many African-American-owned stores and deliberately hit white-owned stores.⁶⁴ All three of the predominantly affected riot areas housed several Jewish-owned grocery, liquor, appliance, and clothing stores. Following the riots, the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington estimated that, of the 873 businesses destroyed or seriously damaged by the rioting, 400 were Jewish-owned.⁶⁵ In an interview in the *Washington Post* commemorating the twentieth anniversary of King's death, Larry Rosen, a Jewish merchant and owner of Smith's Pharmacy at 2518 14th Street, N.W., painfully described how his store was first

ransacked by looters and later completely destroyed by fire on the second night of the riots:

The next morning I went down to the store. It was a mess. . . . All the windows were smashed, the showcases were smashed, a lot of merchandise was gone. . . . It was a feeling you can't describe. . . . The store was burned the second night. I called Raymond [Flowers, an employee,] and he said, "You're gone, Doc"—that's what he said. I felt very hurt. . . . I had a lot of anger. It was like losing something, because the store was like a possession that I'd worked for. But it was more a feeling of hurt.⁶⁶

Often the damage also spread to African-American-owned businesses, but in many instances "rioters and looters spared establish-



Residents attempted to resume their lives following the riots. On Easter Sunday, April 14, 1968, a mother and daughter walked past the destroyed Seventh Street Wohlmuth Store. Courtesy, The Washington Post.

ments that were either owned by Negroes, treated Negro employees favorably, or were owned by 'White brothers.'⁶⁷ To show their solidarity with other blacks, many owners placed "soul brother" signs in their storefronts. As Ulf Hanerz noted in *Soulside*, a study of Washington, D.C., ghetto culture, riot participants, most of whom were from low-income areas, "abided quite strictly by their definition of the ghetto moral community and generally did not harm businesses with 'soul brother' or 'soul sister' signs."⁶⁸ Combined with the selectiveness of rioters targeting white-owned businesses, the black unity expressed through the "soul brother" signs demonstrated the significance of the African-American cultural and racial ties that bound the community together. In an effort to protect her business, Virginia Ali displayed a "soul brother" sign in the front window of Ben's Chili Bowl. She recalled,

We were right in the middle of it. That was scary. But you know we had this sign on the window.

Somebody came out and said, 'You've got to identify your business as a black business.' So we write a big old thing and put 'soul brother' across the window.⁶⁹

But Ali also attributed rioters' sparing of the Chili Bowl to a well-established sense of community identity. The Chili Bowl, a neighborhood icon for nearly a decade by the time of the riots, provided a welcome place for members of the community to come together and socialize, discuss politics, and establish a sense of camaraderie. Open daily until 3:00 a.m., Ben's Chili Bowl always overflowed with customers from all parts of the neighborhood. When asked why she thought the restaurant was spared, Ali proudly responded:

I think it kind of had a community, the community support. There was always a group of guys that used to just come there. They'd work in the day time . . . and in the evenings around five or six o'clock they'd be in the Chili Bowl. They'd



Many African Americans demonstrated their solidarity and attempted to protect their property during the riots by displaying “Soul Brother” signs in the windows of their homes and businesses, as in this apartment building. Courtesy, The Washington Post.

sit in the back corner there and they’d talk about what’s going on all the time. And if a table needed to be cleaned and the employees were busy they’d clean it off. We had that kind of—I called it my extended family. We had that kind of a group. The players changed over the years, but we had that for many, many, many years. And of course, hanging out there, they knew most of the people. And they knew people on the street. I always put that to one of the things—that community support—that really spared the Chili Bowl. . . . And they’d have these great conversations. And when I’d be down there in the afternoons over the years, it was like being in a comedy club. You know, you’d hear

them having this heated discussion, and you’d think they’re angry with each other, because they’d have a difference of opinion, you know, about anything. I always thought that that played a major role in the Chili Bowl’s safety and in the fact that it’s a community-based place.⁷⁰

Unlike Smith, who contributed to the violence, and unlike Perry and Reuben Jackson, who stood by in disbelief, Ali and her husband, sensing the community’s need, kept Ben’s Chili Bowl running night and day. Rather than participating in the violence, Ali used the established sense of community fostered by Ben’s Chili Bowl to serve the neighborhood in need. Ali noted:



With special curfew passes obtained by SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael, neighborhood icon Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street remained opened during the riots and provided a place for community leaders to strategize. Courtesy, Robert Shurmer.

But, you know, the Chili Bowl, we didn't close. Although there was a curfew in effect.

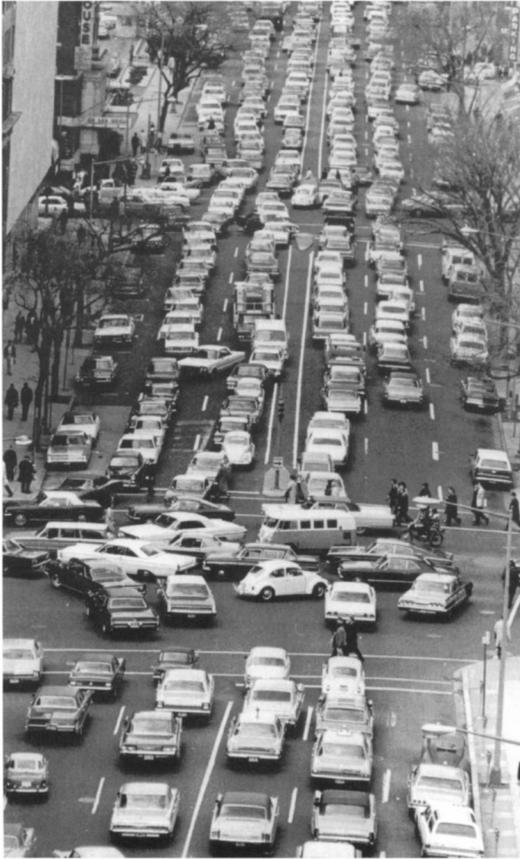
How did you arrange that?

I believe it was Stokely Carmichael. All I know is we had passes for our employees. And we were told by some officials, I don't remember whom, "Well, we need some place that we can go. Where we can meet, we can talk, we can have a cup of coffee. We can strategize. We can see how to calm this mess. It will be the Chili Bowl." And so we were open until three o'clock in the morning all of those nights where there was a curfew going on.⁷¹

In the middle of such chaos, Ali's determination to help her neighborhood withstood even the most outrageous of requests. Ali continued:

And during the height of this thing, when it was really, really bad, my manager . . . said, "Virginia, these guys are coming in here with bottles of Courvosier. Because they'd already robbed the liquor store across the street. And they just need a cheeseburger, and they would just give me any one of those bottles to pay for it. They don't have any money."⁷²

Most businesses were not as fortunate as Ben's Chili Bowl, and many of the owners blamed the extensive riot damage on inadequacies of the local and federal governments' riot plans. Initially residents criticized the delay in the governments' response to the massive rioting that occurred on Friday, April 5. Many were outraged that Johnson did not call in the National Guard troops until



Massive traffic jams on Friday, April 5, 1968, prevented the timely arrival of troops to restore order. Business owners argued that the administration's late summoning of the troops combined with police orders to restrain gun use against looters allowed for more extensive riot damage. Courtesy, The Washington Post.

late in the day, and once summoned, troops “were [further] delayed by a massive traffic jam that clogged city streets for three hours.”⁷³ In addition, the law enforcement’s policy of restraint incensed others who claimed that businesses could have been saved if police and troops had acted promptly and with greater force. Newspaper accounts reported that rioters looted without fear of retaliation. One article quoted a looter’s testimony to General Sessions Court Judge Alfred Burka, “I’ve only got a second grade education, but I’m no fool. I wouldn’t have gone into that store if I thought I was going to be picked up. But in my neighborhood everybody was looting and

the police didn’t seem to care.”⁷⁴ Store owners felt that the restraint policy condoned looting and set up their businesses as “sacrificial lambs.”

In response to this destruction, Abraham Liss, president of the Midtown Business Association, joined other white businessmen to found the “We the People” organization in May 1968 in order to combat civil disorder. Working together to advocate for the neighborhood’s white business owners, Liss’s grassroots community organization brought a suit against the District government demanding compensation for the neighborhoods’ damaged stores.⁷⁵ While the Zulus had worked as a group to incite rioting, “We the People” worked to gain restitution for what the rioters had destroyed.

Despite criticism that restraint increased the damage, many D.C. residents argued that law enforcement’s policy restored order far more quickly than if the city had been turned into a battleground.⁷⁶ In addition, others felt police and soldiers preserved property and saved lives, thereby helping to restore a sense of community to the neighborhoods. Residents of the riot-damaged areas soon realized that this very sense of community would be crucial for rebuilding the city and giving aid to the thousands of victims who remained homeless and out of work.

As a result, from efforts of individuals to those of organized groups, members of the community, both black and white, united to restore their neighborhoods. Bonnie Perry recalled a solid foundation of community involvement following the riots:

Well there were a lot of people who knew how to build things. Paint, contractors and stuff. All over the community. . . . I would see people doing these things. Those were things that could have helped out with instead of just walking around the burnt out buildings and just letting them smolder.⁷⁷

Other individuals helped their communities in small, but effective ways, displaying a sense of neighborliness and civic duty. W. Henry Green, a physician whose office at 702 S Street, N.W., had been destroyed by fire that spread from another

building, suffered the loss of his diploma, license, and other personal items. When told by officials that he would have to pay five dollars for another license to continue practicing medicine, Green commented, "I have no personal objection, but what about all the other people who will find it a hardship to pay for the new licenses, such as beauticians? I'm sending in my \$5 with a letter of protest on behalf of others in the same fix."⁷⁸ Green's independent protest demonstrated his commitment to the neighbors in his community and his goal of helping others to rebuild their lives.

Even before the riots had quieted, professional groups came together to assist others. To help serve the vastly understaffed and overworked court system, 400 lawyers volunteered their services. As mountains of paperwork needed to process defendants arrested during the riots created the biggest tie-up in administration, judges and other employees postponed other business to get through the unprecedented number of cases.⁷⁹ Doctors, too, assisted in the cause.

The Medical Committee for Human Rights, a group of volunteer doctors, set up teams of physicians in 10 police precinct stations to assist with injuries sustained during the riots. Working with the city's Health Department, the group established 22 first aid teams. While generally providing basic medical attention to minor injuries, one team was able to save the life of a police officer whose heart had stopped after receiving a severe neck injury.⁸⁰

Community religious groups also played a large role in restoring order to the neighborhoods. Catholic newspapers reported that area seminar-

ies set up centers to distribute food and clothing to victims at various churches. Many donated mattresses to furnish temporary shelters for those who had been displaced from their homes because of fire damage.⁸¹ The Office of Urban Affairs of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington and the Urban Institute of the Council of Churches coordinated "Project Share," a relief effort to raise money for riot victims.⁸² Other local ministers worked with law enforcement to initiate a "loot return" plan for rioters to bring back stolen merchandise.⁸³ By July 1968, the "loot-return" had retrieved \$85,000 worth of goods.⁸⁴ Jewish

groups also joined in the effort as the Jewish Social Service Agency provided aid and counseling to members of the community in immediate distress.⁸⁵ The Temple of Mt. Sinai hosted one of Washington's shelter centers where people could contribute food and clothing.⁸⁶

In addition to professional groups and churches, other community organizations joined together to help the youth of the neighborhoods not only to heal the physical scars of the riots, but to bind emotional wounds as

well. The mostly middle-class Negro Federation of Civic Associations created a task force of the area's black leaders who went into the public schools to "quell youthful bitterness." Edward J. MacClane, the president of the organization, saw the project as a way to "motivate the youngsters into good citizenship."⁸⁷ Within the schools, teachers and administrators devised an "Innovation Team" consisting of 15 teachers chosen to lead discussions in schools to foster morale, energy, and a sense of purpose.⁸⁸ Even writers who had lived through Los Angeles's Watts riots of



Following the riots, individuals and institutions participated in the rebuilding of their communities. Dr. W. Henry Green, seen here in front of his destroyed medical practice at 702 S Street, N.W., protested the expense required to obtain a new medical license on behalf of others who were not able to afford to buy new licenses. Courtesy, Washington Star Collection, DCPL.



Many religious organizations from around the city provided assistance to the riot-stricken neighborhoods. On April 7, 1968, riot victims perused donated clothing and goods collected by the Luther Place Memorial Church. Courtesy, UPI.

1965 came to D.C. to establish the community-based Washington Writers Workshop as a way for those affected by the King riots to express their frustration and anguish in a creative way.⁸⁹

Other community organizations worked alongside governmental teams to rebuild the neighborhoods. Immediately following the riots, to help those out of work due to fire damage, the Washington Urban Coalition set up five emergency job centers from April 10 to April 26, and offered 3,162 jobs.⁹⁰ By April 13, the Washington, D.C., Health and Welfare Council, a government agency, reported a total of \$112,000 in contributions by the local community for housing and clothing.⁹¹ Community support continued as Mayor Washington “encouraged citizen participation at every level of the rebuilding process” and launched the Community Reconstruction and Development Corporation 100 days after the riots to initiate the rebuilding efforts with a \$600,000 grant from the Ford Foundation.⁹² In addition, Walter Fauntroy, vice chairman of the D.C. City Council, encouraged involvement in his Model Inner City Community Organization (MICCO), begun in 1966, to

work with the Washington, D.C., Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) and ensure citizen participation in the rebuilding of the community.

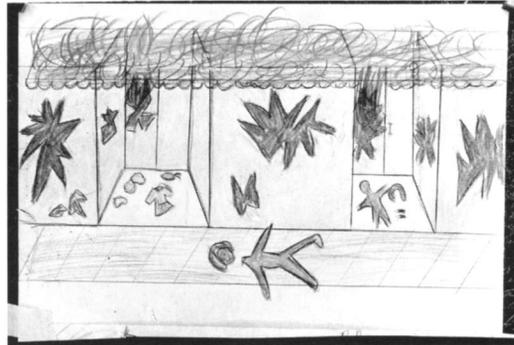
While many community efforts succeeded in recreating temporary stability for riot victims, unfortunately, not all collaborations were productive in affecting change and rebuilding the community. On April 12, shortly after the riots were under control, CHANGE, an anti-poverty organization in the Upper Cardozo area, met with neighborhood businessmen to discuss rebuilding the 14th Street corridor. The forum began as a calm discussion about residents’ expectations for revitalization, and many expressed their desire for low-income housing and black businesses to replace the now burned-out and looted liquor stores and taverns. However, with wounds from the devastation still so fresh, the discussion quickly turned into a heated debate about the causes of the riots. Ruth Webster, president of the executive board of CHANGE, asked the white businessmen to consider their own role in the violence. The looting, Webster claimed, was black retaliation against discrimination policies in white-owned stores. She rhetorically asked, “What were the

Negroes saying when they burned your stores?" Reed Scott, president of the Columbia Heights Businessmen's Association, denied that the looting was racially incited, but rather indiscriminate, noting that the Association has "several Negro businessmen whose businesses were burned out [as well]." Tempers flared and the meeting ended in near chaos, with each shouting group blaming the other for the riots. Attendees of the meeting failed to work together and create a solid plan to reconstruct the neighborhood, and the *Washington Star* even reported one member of the crowd as shouting, "We'll plan this city with gasoline."⁹³

Under the guidance of Mayor Washington, the District government tried to stabilize the community and begin restoration. Working with agencies such as the Mayor's Council on Human Relations, the National Capital Planning Commission, and the RLA, Mayor Washington sought to create a productive method to restore the community, establish more low-income housing, and lure businesses back into the neighborhoods.⁹⁴ The key to Washington's strategy for reviving the city was the direct involvement in the planning process of those in riot-affected neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the need for consensus and input by all residents stymied the revitalization process, and Mayor Washington's best intentions were hindered by bureaucratic red tape.⁹⁵

Active in rebuilding the community herself, Virginia Ali recalled the frustrations of the restoration plan:

Everybody in business in that community was supportive of this cause [of rebuilding]. . . . That much I do know. Some could help more than others. . . . So, but as far as pulling together afterwards, that was a struggle. Because we were dealing with the city. And the bureaucracy. And we just had these meetings, and we'd get these promises, "This is going to be done. That's going to be done." This is 1968. It didn't happen until the late '80s. A very long time. The neighborhood just went all the way down. So, as the middle class moves out, businesses don't reopen, and people are afraid to come into the community. Those that are not afraid are not the type you really want in there.⁹⁶



Children expressed their feelings about the riots through artwork in social and school programs sponsored by organizations like the "Innovative Team" and the Negro Federation of Civic Associations Task Force. Courtesy, Washington Star Collection, DCPL.

Residual anger and deep-seated resentment held by members of the community only contributed to the government's inability to rebuild the riot-stricken areas for nearly 30 years following the riots. The damage caused by arson and looting, as well as the failure to rebuild, triggered the out-migration of the black middle class, and spurred on the white flight that had been occurring since the 1950s, thereby increasing the racial divide. Further, as historian Fred Siegel argued in his book *The Future Once Happened Here*, not only did the riots "hasten the exodus of some of the black and remaining white middle class, but they showed that violence, or even the threat of violence paid."⁹⁷ As a result, the riots successfully catalyzed inner-city crime and drug use, providing the District with the reputation as an unsafe



Decades after the riots, boarded-up windows and empty lots revealed their long-term effects. The once grand Whitelaw Hotel, shown here in the 1980s, was left to decay for over 25 years until its renovation in 1992 when it reopened as an affordable apartment building. HSW.

urban area. Once white store owners took their businesses into the suburbs, and the boarded-up, dilapidated buildings reflected the resulting decline in real estate values, the poverty brought on by the riots further widened the economic gap between whites and blacks. Fath Davis Ruffins, who had traveled across town from school during the riots, commented on the repercussions of the urban violence:

I think [the riots] hastened white flight. It increased the sense of a significant portion of the black population in D.C., that D.C. was a black city. . . . So what the riots do is it reinforces a whole series of things like, “being in the city is unsafe.” It essentially destroys downtown, and that was clear to me even at fourteen. Who was going to go shopping downtown if there could be a riot there when you went there? The legacy of the riots are part of the reason why [the rebuilding] didn’t happen until now, or in the last five years. I remember adults saying that. I remember

older people saying, “Oh, those neighborhoods are never going to come back. They’re never going to be the same.”⁹⁸

Even 35 years later, boarded-up windows and empty parking lots reflect the long-term effects of the riots. But the neighborhoods are changing. The Shaw neighborhood has perhaps seen the most significant transformation. Rehabilitation efforts such as the Reeves Municipal Office building, now located at the intersection of 14th and U Streets, N.W., or the creation of the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage at the 12th Street YMCA, which houses the Shaw Heritage Trust and six non-profit organizations that provide services for low-income families, have helped to rejuvenate the damaged neighborhoods. Despite the tension over how long it took to construct, the extension of the green line of the Metro system, which opened in May 1991, has slowly begun to bring back businesses into the area and revitalize the community.



The Reeves Municipal Office Building at 14th and U Streets, N.W., is located near the site of the People's Drug Store where rioters threw the first rocks in 1968. The Reeves Center is one of the city's many rehabilitation efforts from the 1980s and 1990s in the Shaw neighborhood. HSW.

By the 1990s, residential, cultural, and corporate alliances helped to trigger Shaw's rebirth. In 1992, the restoration of the Whitelaw Hotel at the corner of 13th and T streets, which had once hosted the festivities of the black elite, provided subsidized, low-cost apartments to the community.⁹⁹ In 1997, muralist G. Byron Peck worked with store owner Eugenia Lucas to install the Duke Ellington Mural at 1214 U Street along the side of Lucas' memorabilia shop, Mood Indigo, one of the few businesses that had remained open throughout the subway construction of the 1980s. Peck funded the project through contributions from Mobil Oil, and Lucas gained support from local businesses.¹⁰⁰ The following year, commissioned artist Ed Hamilton unveiled his "Spirit of Freedom" sculpture in honor of African-American Civil War veterans, installed a few blocks east of the U Street Metro station. In January 1999, the memorial's Freedom Foundation Museum and Visitor's Center opened nearby.¹⁰¹ Most recently, a collaboration between the Historical Society of

Washington, D.C., and the non-profit organization Cultural Tourism D.C. created the 14-stop walking tour "City Within a City: Greater U Street Heritage Trail," which highlights the rich history of the neighborhood and has brought tourists to the area. Businesses along U Street and the Museum of the African American Civil War Memorial provide free trail guidebooks to their visitors and customers. All of these partnerships between residents, business owners, and cultural organizations have begun to transform the community.

As a result of these efforts, today's city landscape is quite different from the commercial areas that existed before the riots. Luxury apartments, boutique stores, and ethnic restaurants now line the streets of this area once considered "Black Broadway." In 2003, the Shaw neighborhood has become a melting pot of many different ethnic communities, not only African Americans. The Seventh Street corridor is now nearly unrecognizable with the completion of the Washington



Fath Davis Ruffins, shown here in 1968, is pleased that the riot-stricken neighborhoods are finally recovering, but laments the length of time recovery took and that the old character of the neighborhoods is gone. Courtesy, Fath Davis Ruffins.

Convention Center, which takes up nearly eight square blocks of what was once a commercial district destroyed by the arson and looting of the riots. H Street, N.E., has been the slowest area to rebuild, in part because of a railroad overpass that was constructed that divided the street from the rest of the city. H Street businessman Anwar Saleem explained, “When they built that bridge, you didn’t have that traffic flow. People had to go around about to come down here to do business.”¹⁰² When reflecting on all of these drastic changes over time, Ruffins noted:

So I would say that it’s not just that [the neighborhoods have] recovered; [they’ve] transformed. It’s not like what was there is kind of put back. What’s happened is a whole new social environment had arisen in that context. And I’m glad to see that. But it is quite evident that the riots had a huge impact on that because that [restoration]

could have happened twenty years ago, but it didn’t.¹⁰³

So while today’s African-American communities are hopeful that this transformation will bring about prosperity and racial harmony to their neighborhoods, the scars of the civil unrest of 1968 still remain. With the passage of 35 years, those who had reacted to the riots in such varying ways now all share a sense of regret and loss. Even John Smith, who had once so adamantly fought against white oppression, expressed sincere remorse over his actions in 1968:

[I] still don’t want people to know [about my actions]. . . . And I wouldn’t want people to know I was that crazy. I wouldn’t want people to know that I was that insane then.

Do you have regrets about it?

Oh yeah. Because it wasn’t real. I mean, I thought it was real. And I see now that Carmichael wasn’t real about it. H. Rap Brown wasn’t real about it. You know, I wanted to be real. I wanted to be real. And then I’ve seen revolution after that, and I’m glad I never started one. Too much death. Too much destruction. There’s got to be a better way. Now, and I’m saying this now seriously. But it’s too painful now. . . . And so yes, I regret it, that I got involved in something that wasn’t really real. Because if it had been real, I probably would have been dead today. So yeah, . . . I just wish that maybe sometime that I had had more courage to go with Martin Luther King. Because that’s where the real courage came in at, not with what I was doing.¹⁰⁴

Bonnie Perry, who had also expressed the desire to participate in the violence, now channels her social consciousness into nonviolent protests. When asked if she would participate in the riots today, Perry responded:

Not in riots, no. Not at all. I wouldn’t. Not in looting and all that stuff. But the marching, I march even to this day. I participated in the march against the war [in Iraq] this past Saturday across from the White House. The Million Man March. I was very active in all those things. Mil-



Community partnerships between residents, business owners, and cultural organizations have begun to transform the riot-damaged neighborhoods. In 1997, Mood Indigo shop owner Eugenia Lucas, who struggled to keep her store open during the long construction of the Metro in the 1980s, commissioned artist G. Byron Peck to install the Duke Ellington Mural along the side of her store at 1214 U Street, N.W. HSW.

lion Family March. Even traveled to Philadelphia for that march. The youth march. So now, anything goes. As far as, you know, legally.¹⁰⁵

From mob aggression to social solidarity against violence, and from successful collaborations for community welfare to stymied plans for reconstruction, varying notions of community identity fostered the extremes that created the events of 1968 and their aftermath. While the Zulus' sense of group identity spurred on the violence, Ben's Chili Bowl's role as an unofficial neighborhood center where residents could discuss politics and create meaningful social connections spared the restaurant from destruction. In the wake of the devastation, local associations worked together to fight what they perceived to be the government's inadequacies at quelling the violence. At the same time, commu-

nity efforts of local organizations, including individuals and church and professional groups, joined together in an attempt to rebuild their neighborhoods, sometimes effectively, and at other times not.

Revisiting these riots through oral accounts as well as through more traditional methods has helped to paint a more vivid picture of the events of 1968, and, as oral historian Paul Thompson noted, "oral sources have an equal potential for exploring the political attitudes and personal lives of the more typical unknown activists, and equally of the unorganized, quiescent majority of the population."¹⁰⁶ It is precisely Thompson's sentiment that shaped the framework for recent interviews about the 1968 riots. Oral accounts shed light on the faceless participants and reveal what drove them to such violence, and what others did to stop them and why. Further, oral accounts help

expose individuals' reactions to the riots and how black communities coped with the event and its aftermath—both physically and psychologically.

But more important than uncovering specific facts about the events surrounding the riots, these personal testimonies demonstrate how the collective memory of the violent days in April 1968 has molded both the identity and consciousness of Washington's black community for over 35 years. While the interviewees' accounts echo much of what has already been documented about the riots, their personal stories, now shaped by the passage of time and made more complete

after years of personal introspection, reveal the multi-layered experiences of the African-American community in Washington, D.C. The riots of 1968 brought out a wide range of human emotions, from fear and anger to determination and utter despair. But despite this array of reactions, once-conflicted communities now share in their regret over such a tragic event after decades of grappling with the causes and consequences of the riots. This new feeling of commonality has now brought them together to rebuild their devastated property and to bind up their emotional wounds.

 N O T E S 

1. Ben W. Gilbert, *Ten Blocks from the White House* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Post Press, 1968), 13-23.

2. "\$24 Million Insured Loss Caused in D.C. Apr. Riots," *Washington Star*, Jan. 5, 1969; Bridget Roeber, "The Fires of April: 20 Years Later, 'An Anatomy of the Riots,'" *Washington Post*, Apr. 3, 1988. This damage value is somewhat contested, however. A *Washington Daily News* article, "Coverage Was Lacking: Merchants Stand More Riot Loss," Mar. 12, 1969, reveals that the National Capital Planning Commission's estimates were much higher by early 1969. Ronald Sarro's article "Panel to Begin D.C. Riot Probe" in *Washington Star*, May 26, 1969, reiterates this increase, noting that a "new Washington Civil Disturbance Survey report disclosed that the rioting here April 4-15, [1968] reached \$57 million, about double the previous estimates." At this time I have been unable to locate the report to corroborate these statements. Other articles in the *Washington Post* that appeared several years later still reflect the \$24 million damage estimate.

3. Michael Frisch, "American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in

Empirical Iconography," *Journal of American History* 75 (4) (Mar. 1989): 1130-31; Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *American Historical Review* 102 (5) (Dec. 1997): 1386.

4. Oral history interviews were conducted by the author between October 2002 and May 2003. The tapes and transcripts of all interviews used in this article are available at the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. Aside from journalistic accounts and official government records, very little has been written about the Washington riots. The most thorough journalistic treatment is Gilbert, *Ten Blocks from the White House*.

5. A survey of the Washington, D.C., census records of the mid-twentieth century reveals that the percentage of African Americans jumped from 35 percent of the population in 1950 to nearly 74 percent of the population in 1970.

6. "The 1965 Watts Riot," n.d., <http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/la/watts.html>, accessed Mar. 7, 2003.

7. John Howard Yoder, "Chronology of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Civil Rights," in *Chapters in the History of Religiously Rooted NonViolence: A Series of*

Working Papers of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, n.d., <http://www.nd.edu/~theo/jhy/writings/history/mlk&civrts.htm>, accessed Mar. 7, 2003.

8. Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 321.

9. United States Census, 1960. See also Fred Siegel, *The Future Once Happened Here: New York, D.C., L.A., and The Fate of America's Big Cities* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 68. Siegel cites demographer George Grier's study that the number of black families with incomes greater than \$8,000 doubled during the course of the 1960s while the number with incomes of more than \$16,000 almost tripled. Grier also reported that "by 1970 there were more black families in Washington at these higher income levels than there were white families with the same incomes in 1960."

10. Kevin Merida, "Before Chocolate City," *Washington Post Magazine*, Feb. 16, 2003, 18.

11. Green, *The Secret City*, 320.

12. *Ibid.*, 321.

13. Virginia Ali, interview by author, Feb. 13, 2003, Washington, D.C., transcript, 6.

14. Kenneth Walker, "I Just Have to Close the Store," *Washington Star*, May 6, 1977.

15. Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 160.

16. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 276.

17. Barry Kalb, "Williams Considers Handling Businessmen's Suit on Riots," *Washington Sunday Star*, May 12, 1968, sec. B-4.

18. Paul Hodge, "Regional Action Urged in Riots," *Washington Post*, Apr. 12, 1968.

19. James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1980), 222.

20. Merida, "Before Chocolate City," 18.

21. Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 18.

22. Reuben Jackson, interview by author, Oct. 13, 2002, Washington, D.C., transcript, 3.

23. John Jackson, interview by author, Mar. 27, 2003, Washington, D.C., transcript, 11.

24. Green, *The Secret City*, 316.

25. John Jackson interview, 7-8.

26. Jonathan Cottin, "Senate Report Finds: Rioting 'Indorsed' Here," *Washington Daily News*, Jul. 31, 1968.

27. John Smith, interview by author, Oct. 16, 2002, Washington, D.C., transcript, 13. Name has been changed at the request of the interviewee.

28. Robert G. Kaiser and Carl Bernstein, "U.S. to Aid City if Riots Occur Here: Troops Proposed to Assist Police in Any Violence," *Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 1968, sec. A.

29. "D.C.'s Intelligence Reports," *Washington Star*, Apr. 4, 1968. Ironically this article appeared in the *Star* the very morning King was assassinated and highlighted the recent intelligence report that alerted officials to King's Poor People's Campaign scheduled to occur in Washington later that month.

30. Kaiser and Bernstein, "U.S. to Aid City if Riots Occur Here."

31. Carl Bernstein, "U.S. Guides District's Riot-Control Plan: City Officials Fear Too-Hasty Action," *Washington Post*, Mar. 2, 1968.

32. David Braaten, "Captain's Course Prepared D.C. Police for Rioting," *Washington Star*, Apr. 14, 1968.

33. Bernstein, "US Guides District's Riot-Control Plan."

34. Kaiser and Bernstein, "U.S. to Aid City if Riots Occur Here."

35. Bernstein, "US Guides District's Riot-Control Plan." According to the article "Youth Program Won Funds by Riot Role," *Washington Daily News*, Apr. 11, 1968, the Neighborhood Development Youth Program was assured \$1 million in federal funding following the 1968 riots in order to further prevent potential rioting later that summer. The program's role was recast toward restoration work rather than recreation in 1969.

36. "Force Ready for Summer, Murphy Says," *Washington Post*, Mar. 26, 1968.

37. Braaten, "Captain's Course Prepared D.C. Police for Rioting."

38. Bonnie Perry, interview by author, Oct. 17, 2002, Washington, D.C., transcript, 8.

39. *Ibid.*, 13.

40. Reuben Jackson interview, 13.

41. *Ibid.*, 20-1.

42. Gilbert, *Ten Blocks from the White House*, 227; "The Inferno and the Aftermath," *Washington Post Magazine*, Apr. 3, 1988, 22.

43. Smith interview, 21.

44. *Ibid.*, 20.

45. *Ibid.*, 27.

46. Roeber, "An Anatomy of the Riots"; Donald Hirzel, "Judge in Riot Cases Criticizes District," *Washington Star*, June 4, 1968.
47. Hirzel, "Judge in Riot Cases Criticizes District."
48. "Nation's Capital Still Recovering from 1968 Riots," CNN Interactive, Apr 4, 1998, <http://www.cnn.com/US/9804/mlk.dc.riots/>, accessed Sept. 17, 2003.
49. "4 Teen-Agers Charged in H St. Arson, Looting," *Washington Star*, May 10, 1968.
50. Fath Davis Ruffins, interview by author, Nov. 2, 2002, Washington, D.C., transcript, 20.
51. John Jackson interview, 17.
52. William R. Manning, "Chronology of Events Relating to Civil Disorder of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia," in *District of Columbia Report on Civil Disturbances, April 4-15, 1968*, Washington, D.C., Apr. 30, 1968, 1-3.
53. Ruffins interview, 17-18.
54. "The Inferno and the Aftermath," *Washington Post Magazine*, Apr. 3, 1988, 22.
55. Roeber, "An Anatomy of the Riots."
56. John Jackson interview, 11.
57. Reuben Jackson interview, 14.
58. Smith interview, 25-26.
59. "\$24 Million Insured Loss Caused in D.C. April Riots." Later reports estimate that the damage in Washington may have actually been much higher. See note 2.
60. Alfred E. Lewis and Richard Corrigan, "Hostile Bystanders Hamper Fire Fighters," *Washington Post*, Apr. 7, 1968.
61. "D.C.'s Riot Report Cites Communications Gap," *Washington Evening Star*, May 2, 1968.
62. Ronald Sarro, "Panel to Begin D.C. Riot Probe," *Washington Star*, May 26, 1969.
63. Patrice Gaines-Carter, "The Fires of April: 20 Years Later, 'For Riot Victims' Kin, the Pain Endures,'" *Washington Post*, Apr. 5, 1998.
64. "'Inexplicable Instances': Looting Was Often Selective," Riots Vertical File, pocket III, *Washingtoniana Collection*, Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library.
65. "Riot aid efforts go forward," *Jewish Week*, 18 Apr. 18, 1968, 1.
66. Jill Nelson, "Burned Into the Future," *Washington Post Magazine*, Apr. 3, 1988, 31-2.
67. "'Inexplicable Instances': Looting Was Often Selective."
68. Hannerz, *Soulside*, 174.
69. Ali interview, 15.
70. *Ibid.*, 18.
71. *Ibid.*, 15.
72. *Ibid.*
73. "An Interpretive Report: Growing Doubt: 'Why the Delay?'" *Washington Daily News*, Apr. 6, 1968.
74. "First Sentence Handed Out With Warning: 'Condoning' Looting Hit," *Washington Daily News*, June 4, 1968.
75. Winston Groom, "Merchants Weigh Suing District on Riot Losses," *Washington Star*, Apr. 18, 1968; Paul W. Valentine, "Merchants to Sue City for Riot Losses," *Washington Post*, May 10, 1968.
76. "Chaos Avoided...," *New York Times*, Apr. 17, 1968.
77. Perry interview, 12.
78. Herman Schaden, "Doctor Works On: 42 Years of Aid Goes Up in Smoke," *Washington Evening Star*, Apr. 11, 1968.
79. Russell Chandler, "Riot Arrest Setup Called Paper Maze," *Washington Star*, May 18, 1968.
80. "4 Doctors List Needs During Riot," *Washington Post*, Feb. 1, 1969.
81. Val Ann Youmans, "Diversified Activities: Seminaries Respond in Crisis," *Catholic Standard*, Apr. 11, 1968.
82. William R. MacKaye, "A View of Religion: Victims of Riot Inspired Social Action," *Washington Post*, Apr. 13, 1968.
83. David Holmberg, "'People Don't Trust Police': 'Loot-Return' Plan," *Washington Daily News*, n.d., Riots Vertical File, *Washingtonian Collection*, Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library.
84. "Riot Property Claimable," *Potomac Current*, Jul. 11, 1968.
85. "Relief for victims of the looting," *Jewish Week*, Apr. 18, 1968.
86. Margaret Crimmins, "They Came—With Food, Clothing, and Compassion," *Washington Post*, Apr. 8, 1968.
87. Michael Adams, "Voice of the City...School Plan in the Aftermath," *Washington Evening Star*, Apr. 13, 1968.
88. Anne Simpson, "D.C.'s Riots Through the Eyes of Children," *Washington Post*, Apr. 7, 1988.
89. "A New Mosaic From Broken Bricks," *Washington Post*, Apr. 14, 1968.
90. Carol Honsa, "5 Centers Find jobs for Victims of Riot," *Washington Post*, May 20, 1968.
91. Betty James, "Fund for Riot Victims Here Grows to \$112,000," *Washington Star*, Apr. 13, 1968.
92. Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 181-82.

93. Lee Flor, "Shouting Flares at Cardozo Meeting on Riot Responsibility," *Washington Star*, Apr. 13, 1968
94. Jack Eisen, "Proposals Take Shape to Rebuild Inner City," *Washington Post*, Aug. 29, 1968.
95. Wolf Von Eckardt, "Aid Application Under Review: Red Tape Threatens Revival After Riot," *Washington Post*, Apr. 24, 1968.
96. Ali interview, 19.
97. Siegel, *The Future Once Happened Here*, 67.
98. Ruffins interview, 22-4.
99. "Virtual Tour of Shaw," n.d., <http://www.www.pbs.org/ellingtonsd/vtOtherLandMarks.htm>, accessed Sept. 1, 2003.
100. "U Street/Shaw," n.d., <http://www.cultural-tourismdc.org>, accessed Sept. 1, 2003.
101. "History," <http://www.afroamcivilwar.org>, accessed Sept. 1, 2003.
102. "Nation's Capital Still Recovering from 1968 Riots."
103. Ruffins interview, 24.
104. Smith interview, 27.
105. Perry interview, 15.
106. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94.



WESCHLER'S

Auctioneers and Appraisers Since 1890

*Supporting Washington History
and The Historical Society of
Washington, D.C.*

Adam A. Weschler & Son, Inc.

909 E Street, NW

Washington, DC 20004

202.628.1281 / fax 202.628.2366

www.weschlers.com