

Position Paper For Knoxville's Red Summer 1919

Posted on December 13, 2023

The videos *Knoxville's Red Summer: The Riot of 1919* and *Race Riot in Columbia, Tennessee, February 25-27, 1946: Mink Slide Black Community* examine two episodes of racial violence in Tennessee separated by more than twenty-five years. The original position paper correctly notes that the Knoxville riot followed World War I and the Columbia uprising followed World War II. It also recognizes that both events involved accusations, armed white authorities or mobs, African American self-defense, and competing public narratives about who caused the violence. The incidents should not, however, be described as morally equivalent clashes between two racial groups. In each case, segregation, unequal policing, mob action, and the vulnerability of Black communities shaped the conflict. Comparing the events reveals both continuity and change in African American political organization, legal defense, media strategy, and resistance to racial terror. (Black in Appalachia)

Knoxville and the National Red Summer of 1919

The Knoxville riot occurred on August 30 and 31, 1919, during the national period James Weldon Johnson called the Red Summer. Racial violence erupted in many American cities after World War I. Black veterans returned from military service with stronger claims to citizenship, while migration, labor competition, white supremacist politics, sensational journalism, and fear of racial change intensified conflict. Knoxville had a reputation among some observers as comparatively moderate, but segregation and racial inequality remained embedded in its institutions. The riot exposed how quickly claims of civic harmony could collapse when a Black suspect was accused of violence against a white person.

The Accusation Against Maurice Mays

The immediate trigger was the arrest of Maurice Mays, a Black man accused of murdering Bertie Lindsey, a white woman. Mays denied the accusation, and the evidence was contested. Authorities moved him away from the Knox County jail because they anticipated mob violence. A large white crowd nevertheless gathered at the jail, demanded access to Mays, and eventually broke into and looted the building. The riot therefore began not as a spontaneous conflict between equal communities but as an attempted lynching and assault on lawful custody.

The fact that Mays was absent did not end the mob's action. Weapons were taken from the jail, and violence spread toward Black neighborhoods and commercial areas. Rumor amplified fear. The riot demonstrates how an accusation could operate as a public verdict before trial and how the threat of

lynching undermined both due process and public safety.

Black Self-Defense in Knoxville

African American residents understood that the mob might attack their homes and businesses. Some armed themselves and resisted. This self-defense should not be collapsed into the language of a “race riot” that distributes blame evenly. Black Knoxville residents faced a mob that had already invaded the jail and seized weapons. Their response reflected a wider postwar pattern in which Black communities were increasingly unwilling to accept violence without resistance.

Self-defense also complicated the city’s preferred story about racial peace. If Black residents defended themselves effectively, white leaders could no longer portray them only as passive dependents. At the same time, official accounts often emphasized Black gunfire while minimizing the mob’s attempted lynching and attack on the jail. Historical interpretation requires attention to who created the initial danger and whose testimony entered the record.

Military and Police Response

Local authorities lost control and National Guard units were deployed. Gunfire occurred in and around the city, and the precise number of dead and injured remains uncertain because reports differed and some casualties may not have been recorded. The original draft states that approximately two hundred white men were arrested, but the response and arrests were more complicated than that simple figure suggests. The important point is that military force restored order after civil authorities failed to prevent mob escalation.

State intervention did not erase racial inequality. The legal system continued prosecuting Mays, who was convicted and executed in 1922 despite continuing controversy about the evidence and fairness of the proceedings. The riot and the case therefore remained connected: the mob failed to lynch Mays immediately, but the broader system still produced a disputed death sentence.

Columbia, Tennessee, in 1946

The Columbia uprising occurred in a different historical moment. World War II had intensified demands for democracy at home, and Black veterans again returned with military experience and expectations of citizenship. The local conflict began after a dispute involving James Stephenson, a Black Navy veteran, his mother Gladys, and a white shopkeeper over repair and payment for a radio. A physical confrontation followed, and arrests and negotiations did not eliminate the danger. White crowds gathered, and Black residents of the Mink Slide business district prepared to defend the community.

The term “race riot” can obscure the underlying power relationship. Black residents were not seeking to invade a white neighborhood. They anticipated attack and attempted to protect homes and businesses in a segregated town where law enforcement could not be assumed to protect them impartially.

The Night of Violence in Columbia

As tension increased, streetlights in the Black district were shot out, creating darkness and fear. Gunfire injured several white law-enforcement officers. State highway patrol officers and other authorities then entered the district in force, conducted searches, damaged property, and arrested more than one hundred Black residents. The scale and direction of state power differed from Knoxville’s initial jail mob, but both events show how Black self-defense could be reframed as the central crime while the preceding threat received less legal attention.

The original essay says that the conflict began merely because Black civilians shot at streetlights. A more accurate account places those actions within the expected white attack and the breakdown of trust. This context does not establish that every act of gunfire was lawful. It explains why residents believed that remaining passive could be dangerous.

The Killing of William Gordon and James Johnson

After the Columbia arrests, Tennessee Highway Patrol officers transported William Gordon and James Johnson, two Black detainees, claiming that the men would identify hidden weapons. Officers reported that the detainees attempted to escape or seize weapons and were shot. The circumstances generated serious doubt and became a symbol of official violence. The original draft incorrectly states that the two men killed police officers. They were killed by officers while in custody; no police officer was killed in that episode.

This correction is important because inaccurate retelling can reproduce the official justification and erase the vulnerability of detained individuals. Historical analysis should distinguish allegation from established fact and should identify whose account is being repeated.

Legal Defense After Columbia

The Columbia cases attracted national civil-rights attention. The NAACP organized legal defense, and Thurgood Marshall participated with a team of attorneys. More than two dozen Black defendants faced charges, including attempted murder. The defense challenged the prosecution’s evidence and the racial context of the arrests. Most defendants were acquitted; two were convicted on lesser charges. (Tennessee Encyclopedia)

Columbia therefore differed from Knoxville in the development of organized legal resistance. By 1946, the NAACP had greater national capacity, experienced counsel, and a strategy connecting local cases to a broader campaign against racial injustice. Courtroom defense did not undo property damage, detention, or killings, but it prevented a mass conviction that local authorities appeared prepared to pursue.

Postwar Contexts: World War I and World War II

Both riots followed wars fought in the language of democracy. Black military service made the contradiction between American ideals and segregation more visible. Veterans had traveled, worn the uniform, and participated in national defense while remaining subject to racial exclusion at home. White anxiety about changing expectations contributed to conflict, while Black communities increasingly claimed rights in more assertive terms.

The differences between 1919 and 1946 reflect the development of the modern civil-rights movement. In 1919, community self-defense and emerging NAACP activism challenged lynching and mob violence. By 1946, national legal networks, a stronger Black press, and wartime political mobilization could transform a local case into a broader test of justice. Columbia anticipated the legal and organizational struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. (Zangrando)

The Role of Rumor and Media

Rumor was central in both events. In Knoxville, the accusation against Mays and reports about violence mobilized the mob and shaped later accounts. In Columbia, rumors of impending attack, gunfire, and Black rebellion justified a massive police response. Newspapers could inflame fear through racialized language or frame authorities as restoring order without examining how order had already failed Black citizens.

Historical videos can correct forgotten narratives, but they also select evidence and emphasize particular interpretations. A position paper should compare the films with archival and scholarly sources. Viewers should ask who is interviewed, which records are cited, whether uncertainty is acknowledged, and how visual or musical choices shape judgment.

White Mob Action and State Action

The Knoxville riot is most clearly associated with a white mob's attempted lynching and attack on the jail. Columbia involved a threatened white crowd but became especially significant for the actions of state and local law enforcement in the Black district. This distinction shows two forms of racial power. Mob violence could operate outside formal law, while police raids and prosecutions could employ legal authority in a discriminatory manner.

The categories were not entirely separate. Authorities sometimes tolerated mobs, shared their assumptions, or intervened only after violence escalated. Conversely, some officials attempted to prevent lynching or restore order. Historical responsibility requires examining individual actions and institutional structure rather than assuming every official behaved identically.

Community Leadership

Black leaders in both cities had to protect residents while navigating institutions dominated by whites. Public statements sometimes avoided the label of racial riot because leaders feared retaliation or wished to preserve economic relationships. Such language should not be interpreted as proof that race was irrelevant. People speaking under unequal power may use strategic language.

By 1946, civil-rights organizations were better able to support local leadership with lawyers, publicity, fundraising, and investigation. This organizational development is one of the most important differences between the two incidents.

Justification and Moral Evaluation

The original assignment asks whether the actions of key participants were justified. The white mob's attempt to seize Mays from jail was not justified. It rejected due process and placed the entire community at risk. Black residents' decision to defend their neighborhoods arose from a credible threat, although individual uses of force must still be evaluated according to necessity and evidence. National Guard intervention to stop violence could be justified, but discriminatory arrest or excessive force could not.

In Columbia, the initial commercial dispute did not justify collective retaliation against a Black district. Community preparation for defense was understandable in the face of threatened attack and unequal protection. The large-scale raid, destruction, indiscriminate arrests, and killing of detainees demand critical scrutiny. Legal defense by the NAACP was clearly justified as an effort to secure fair process.

Which Event Produced Greater Harm?

The original essay concludes that the 1946 event produced greater havoc for the Black community. Such comparison should be made carefully because records are incomplete and different forms of harm cannot be reduced to one count. Knoxville involved an attempted lynching, jail destruction, armed conflict, deaths and injuries, displacement, and the eventual execution of Mays after a disputed trial. Columbia involved property destruction, mass arrests, custodial killings, and prosecutions.

Rather than ranking suffering, it is more useful to identify the different mechanisms. Knoxville shows

the power of a mass mob and the collapse of local authority. Columbia shows how police and prosecution could become the main instruments of racial control after the immediate crowd threat.

Historical Memory

Communities often prefer stories of gradual progress and local harmony. The Knoxville and Columbia incidents disrupt those stories. Remembering them requires more than describing “brutality” in general terms. It requires naming the accusation, the attempted lynching, the Black communities that organized defense, the officials who used force, the people killed, and the legal campaigns that followed.

Public history can include memorials, school curricula, archival preservation, oral histories, and acknowledgment by civic institutions. Honest memory does not assign inherited guilt to present residents. It creates responsibility to understand how law and violence shaped the city and how similar patterns can be prevented.

Conclusion

Knoxville’s Red Summer riot of 1919 and the Columbia uprising of 1946 emerged from different incidents but shared a structure of racial inequality, threatened white violence, Black self-defense, rumor, and contested law enforcement. Knoxville began with an attempted lynching after Maurice Mays was accused of murder; a mob invaded the jail, seized weapons, and brought violence into the city. Columbia began with a store dispute involving Black veteran James Stephenson and developed into an armed confrontation, police invasion of the Mink Slide district, mass arrests, and the killing of William Gordon and James Johnson in custody. The major difference lies in the growth of organized civil-rights defense by 1946, when the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall helped prevent mass convictions. Both events demonstrate that democratic citizenship depends not only on formal law but on whether police, courts, media, and communities apply law equally during moments of fear.

Works Cited

Black in Appalachia, director. *Knoxville’s Red Summer: The Riot of 1919*. 2019.

Tennessee Encyclopedia. “Knoxville Riot of 1919.”

Tennessee Encyclopedia. “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).”

Williams, Lee E., and Lee E. Williams II. *Anatomy of Four Race Riots: Racial Conflict in Knoxville, Elaine, Tulsa, and Chicago, 1919–1921*. University Press of Mississippi, 1972.

Zangrando, Robert L. *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950*. Temple University Press,

1980.