

Civil War Anti-Negro Riots Nation's Worst

DETROIT - (NPI)--The violence that wracked this city was being billed this week as the "worst racial conflict" in American history. It wasn't. Anti-Negro riots in Detroit and New York during the Civil War were far more vicious, destructive, and deadly.

During a riot in Detroit, which started on March 6, 1863, a mob of whites marched into the city's Negro section, killed several Negroes, and left more than 200 persons homeless.

The Northern rioting during the Civil War was instigated by whites who feared that the Negroes in their midst might take away their jobs. The white rioters were edgy about fighting the Confederacy over the Negro's freedom, when they were just as sympathetic to slavery as their Southern foes.

So they took their frustrations out on their Negro neighbors, who were shocked that they, of all people, would be attacked by Northern whites fighting for their freedom.

"What have the coloured people done that they should be thus treated?" the Christian Recorder, official organ of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, asked after the Detroit riots in 1863.

"HOW LONG shall this state of things continue? For we solemnly declare that there is not a more true and loyal people to the Union than the colored people, and we hope that our city papers will come down on such conduct."

But the Detroit rioting was overshadowed by even more vicious attacks on Negroes in New York. The rioting, which began on July 13, 1863, started at the draft enrollment office, but ended up in the Negro community.

The white rioters were stirred into anger over being drafted to fight for the Negro's liberation, when they had no interest in ending slavery.

Many were Irish-American, ired over having to fight for a country of which many had not yet become citizens.

The white malcontents were especially angered by the sight of regiments of colored volunteers passing through New York. It was only the previous year that Negroes had been allowed to serve in the army.

Taking their animosities out on Negroes, they staged four of the bloodiest days of mob violence in American history. Dozens of Negroes were lynched in the streets or murdered in their homes. The Colored Orphan asylum was burned to the ground.

THE TOTAL number of Negroes killed were between 40 and 50. An equal number was maimed for life.

The rioting was a particularly damaging blow for New York's small, struggling Negro community, which numbered but a few thousand. Hundreds of Negroes were driven from their homes and chased through the streets. Some sought refuge in police stations with mixed results.

Many of the rioters were reported to have broken into stores, hotels, and saloons to get themselves drunk before going on their hate-filled orgy in the Negro sector of the city. The drunken whites murdered all the Negroes they could get their hands on, without regard to age or sex.

Three thousand Negroes were left homeless. Others were thrown into the rivers. Many saved their lives by climbing into trees or fleeing the city.

Some Negro men, however, decided they would not endure the attacks.

IN THE village of Flushing, Negroes went to the Catholic priest and announced that they would burn two Irish houses for every one of theirs and would kill two Irish men for every Negro killed by them. They found--as later generations did--that they escaped violence only when they were prepared for it.

The Brooklyn correspondent of the Christian Recorder wrote that most of the Negro residents of Brooklyn who remained in the city were armed daily for self-defense.

"Many of our people have been compelled to leave their houses and flee for refuge," the correspondent said. "The Irish have become so brutish, that it is unsafe for families to live near them, and while I write, there are many now in the stations and country hiding from violence."

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