



# Hidden History: The Whitewashing of the 1917 East St. Louis Riot

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## T I M E L I N E O F E V E N T S

### **Monday, May 28, 1917:**

- Sixty delegates of the East St. Louis Central Trades and Labor Union met with Mayor Mollman and the East St. Louis City Council at City Hall to protest African American migration into the city.
- Outside of the meeting, there were nearly 3,000 supporters of the protest.
- After the meeting was over, a rumor that an African American man had shot and killed a white man during a robbery swept through the crowd.
- White mobs proceeded to beat every African American person that they saw as they walked through the downtown district.
- Local police forces and Illinois National Guardsmen were unable to stop mobs, but they dispersed early in the morning of May 29 without killing anyone.
- Attacks by whites on African Americans continued sporadically throughout the month of June.

### **Sunday, July 1, 1917:**

- Around 9 p.m., there were reports that a black Model T Ford was shooting into the homes of African Americans in near the “Free Bridge.”
- Later in the evening, a service at the St. John American Methodist Episcopal Zion Church ended. The news of shootings in black neighborhoods spread through the crowds gathered after the service.
- Several African Americans continued to hear gunshots, which prompted them to gather together at the aforementioned church and to ring the church bell to call others to join them.

### **Monday, July 2, 1917:**

- Sergeant Samuel Coppedge, Detective Frank Wodley, and three other officers in “plainclothes” were sent in Coppedge’s unmarked black Model T Ford to the area around the church at 1:30 a.m.
- A confrontation between the policemen and a group of around 150 armed black men led to the car being shot at, wounding and eventually killing Coppedge and Wodley.
- In the early morning light, Sergeant Coppedge’s car, full of bullet holes and blood stains, was put on display outside of the police station where a crowd of white laborers developed.
- Around 9:30 a.m., the first African American victim was shot, but he was able to escape.
- Between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m., Collinsville Avenue between Broadway Avenue and Illinois Avenue was the background for severe beatings of African Americans of every age and gender.
- Around noon, streetcars were stopped and an African American family, Edward and Lena Cook and her teenage son, were severely beaten and the men were murdered.

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(left) “Colored man in front of car being mobbed. Militia looking on.” Published in the September 1917 issue of *The Crisis*.

- As the afternoon continued, the white mobs were no longer content with beating their victims; they turned to murdering as many African Americans as they could.
- The Free Bridge to St. Louis allowed passage of hundreds of African Americans to safety throughout this event, and the Municipal Lodging House was opened up to East St. Louis refugees.
- By early evening the mobs were intent on burning and destroying African American homes and businesses, often forcing their occupants into the fires. More than two hundred houses were destroyed.
- Later in the evening, the intersection of Broadway and Collinsville Avenues witnessed multiple lynchings.
- Throughout this time, Illinois National Guardsmen and local police officers did little to protect African Americans or to punish members of the white mobs.
- By midnight, local firemen and firemen from the St. Louis department tried to extinguish fires throughout the city.
- Late in the night and into the next morning, hundreds of refugees were escorted to City Hall by the Illinois militia.
- There were approximately three hundred National Guardsmen by the end of the day.

### **Tuesday, July 3, 1917:**

- Shortly after midnight, Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard, Frank S. Dickson, took charge of the militia and began to break up the remaining mobs and reinforce security at City Hall.
- In the early morning, many spectators returned home and the mobs were smaller and scattered throughout the city.
- The last large outburst of mob violence occurred in the morning near “Bloody Island.”
- Illinois Governor Frank Lowden came to tour the damage in the afternoon.
- By the evening of July 3, there were nearly one thousand National Guardsmen.

### **Wednesday, July 4, 1917:**

- Ida B. Wells-Barnett arrived in East St. Louis from Chicago to interview victims of the violence in East St. Louis and St. Louis.

### **Sunday, July 8, 1917:**

- W.E.B. DuBois and Martha Gruening left for East St. Louis from New York to investigate the violence.

### **Saturday, July 28, 1917:**

- The NAACP held a silent protest in New York with nearly eight to ten thousand African Americans.

### **Thursday, October 18, 1917**

- The House Select Committee to Investigate Conditions in Illinois and Missouri Interfering with Interstate Commerce Between These States opened hearings at the Metropolitan Building downtown in East St. Louis.

**“The mob watches the law,  
and is always ready to attack it  
whenever it shows weakness.**

**Those who form mobs have seen for a  
half century that the law is weak so far  
as Negroes rights are concerned. They  
have seen that the constable,  
the sheriff, the police,  
the judge and jury have all fallen  
before the monster PREJUDICE  
when called upon to enforce the law,  
where both races are  
involved. Prejudice always  
overbalances justice in favor  
of the mob.”**

-Editorial, *St. Louis Argus*, July 12, 1917.

In the early hours of Monday, July 2, 1917, white citizens gathered at the East St. Louis police station to discuss what should be done about the African Americans who had shot and killed two detectives the night before. The detectives' bullet-riddled car was parked outside of the police station, surrounded by a crowd of about fifty white men. Hysteria overtook the crowd as they began to devise ways to confront this boiling point in the “race issue” that had been brewing for months. Should they force the black population out of town? Should they retaliate? Should the black population be “wiped out”? These ideas turned to action when the group of men gathered at the station began to “march” toward Collinsville Avenue to meet their first victim, a lone African American man who was walking the streets of the business district. He was beaten and shot, but he recovered shortly thereafter. The crowd of angry, white East St. Louisans quickly swelled to somewhere between 500 and 1,000 people as the violence escalated. By the afternoon, the violence had taken a deadly turn that would continue throughout the late evening and into the next day.<sup>1</sup> An African American family returning to St. Louis from a fishing trip outside of East St. Louis was pulled off of a streetcar. The father was beaten to death, and his head “was crushed in as if by a blow from a stone.”<sup>2</sup> His 14-year old son was shot to death. Their wife and mother was beaten until her “hair was

torn out by the roots and her scalp was partly torn off.”<sup>3</sup> She lost consciousness, and when she awoke, she found herself in the back of an ambulance on top of the bodies of her dead, mutilated husband and son (the photo that opens this article is one of the only pictures of the mob violence, and it depicts this account of violence). The violence progressed, with children as young as two years old, along with their mothers, being beaten and burned alive as the bloodthirsty revenge burned through the city. As the embers cooled, the city, region, and nation began a long process of creating narratives of the event and its causes. These narratives influenced the ways that the event is remembered or forgotten in the current era.

### **The Roots of a Riot**

By the turn of the twentieth century, East St. Louis featured large industrial centers for meat packing, zinc processing, aluminum ore processing, and iron and steel plants.<sup>4</sup> The most prominent feature of the city's booming industrial prestige was the Aluminum Ore Company. In October 1916, the Aluminum Ore Union commenced a strike when the managers at the plant refused to recognize the union as an organization. Over the following year, racial tensions in the city increased as African Americans began to replace the striking workers. Tensions mounted when National Guardsmen began protecting the African American workers to ensure the plant's successful operation for the sake of the war effort. This led to racial violence, first on May 28, 1917, when members of the East St. Louis Central Trades and Labor Union beat African American men as they walked toward the intersection of Broadway and Collinsville Avenue. The laborers eventually lost interest, and no one died that night, but as the violence subsided, the tensions grew.<sup>5</sup>

The number of deaths during the riot that began July 2 is still contested by historians, but the death toll is thought to have been somewhere between 39 and 200 African Americans.<sup>6</sup> The actual number of deaths is hard to know because many people died in burning buildings, dozens were thrown into the Mississippi River, and an unknown number of African American migrants were in the city at the time. But while the Aluminum Ore Company strike and the racial tensions associated with it provided the spark that led to the explosion of the riots, the kindling that fueled the violent slaughtering of African Americans regardless of class, age, or gender is often overlooked or downplayed in popularized narratives of the event. To discuss how and why the 1917 East St. Louis Riot was whitewashed and

forgotten in the collective consciousness of the St. Louis Metropolitan area, one must examine the newspaper coverage in the riot's immediate aftermath. After analyzing the *Daily Journal* (East St. Louis), the *Belleville News-Democrat*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, it becomes clear that the disappearance of the riot from memory is largely because of the event's "whitewashing" by the local and national media, and the exclusion of African American narratives from what white-owned papers considered to be a racial massacre.<sup>7</sup>

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"Majestic Theater Blackface and Orchestra Pit," c. 1915  
(Image: The Andrew Theising Research Collection, item 45/19: "Majestic Theater Blackface and Orchestra Pit," c. 1915, the Bowen Archives of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville)



### Early Scholarship

Numerous historical examinations of the causes and events of the East St. Louis Riot were published in the last century. Elliot Rudwick's meticulously detailed study of the riot's causes and aftermath was the first to argue that part of the tension leading up to the riot stemmed from a rumored plan (a "colonization conspiracy") by Republicans to bring African Americans north to sway the 1916 elections.<sup>8</sup> He traced the use of racial prejudice by East St. Louis laborers and Democrats to sway the election back to strategies employed by Woodrow Wilson's administration across the north during his 1916 presidential campaign.

Many of the works focusing on the riot directly respond to Rudwick's original arguments, or add evidence to support his theories. Malcolm McLaughlin provides an insightful exploration of the power that leaders of organized crime had over political and economic elements of East St. Louis society prior to the riot. He also includes a comprehensive study of the class antagonisms leading up to the riot, which were related to economic, political, and cultural challenges to white superiority.<sup>9</sup> In this view, which concurs with arguments made by labor historians like David

Roediger, poor race relations in East St. Louis largely stemmed from white laborers from European locations. The social status of these European immigrants was challenged during the Progressive Era, and they used racial arguments to distinguish themselves from the new African American laborers who were competing for their jobs, their living quarters, and their place within the social hierarchy.

Charles Lumpkins disagrees with Rudwick's early interpretations of the riot. According to Lumpkins, the destruction of the African American community was encouraged by elites and corrupt politicians who were threatened by the incoming black minorities.<sup>10</sup> These newcomers were building community-based political power that threatened the Democratic majority of the city's base. Instead of insisting that the white laborers and union leaders were the ones behind the attacks, Lumpkins sees a much deeper white superiority within the city's upper echelons as the cause of the riot.

Nearly every piece of scholarship that focuses on East St. Louis is either specifically centered on the East St. Louis Riot or mentions it as a significant factor in the city's history. This article does not seek to re-examine the causes of the riot, as many others have done. Rather, it adds to the existing scholarship by focusing on how the story of the riot was told to the public, how it was whitewashed and controlled by white media outlets, and how it was ultimately lost to time, only to be remembered when other major racial killings sparked an inkling of a memory.

### Collective Memory and History

One topic that is largely ignored by the current scholars of the East St. Louis Riot is the subject of collective memory, which has been a popular topic among cultural historians in the twenty-first century. Collective memories of tragic events are often tailored to avoid guilt or suppressed over time to elude culpability, especially in the case of particularly uncomfortable histories. For example, several scholars and historians wrote an article on the interpretation of uncomfortable history in relation to the Scott Joplin house in St. Louis.<sup>11</sup> These scholars argued that public historians have a duty to recognize uncomfortable aspects of the past and communicate them to the public. Scholars can use uncomfortable histories to shed light on continued struggles that local and national communities continue to confront. The East St. Louis Riot is an event surrounded by issues of race relations, white hatred, labor tensions, and an overarching system of government corruption which has legacies that can be felt today.



Beginning in the 1980s, the historical lens of collective memory has been applied to the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. The first historian to write about the Tulsa Riot in a historical monograph was Scott Ellsworth. In *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, Ellsworth discusses the national, statewide, and local factors that contributed to the burning of the city of Greenwood, Oklahoma. Although his work seeks to reveal the causes and consequences of the riot, he offers interpretations of how the riot was remembered differently by the white and black communities of Tulsa. He termed this gap in memory between the two communities “the segregation of memory.”<sup>12</sup> The idea of the “segregation of memory” speaks to the hidden elements of racial tensions that exist in places throughout the United States where extremely violent racial outbreaks have occurred.

### **An Ignored Reality: Cultural Racism in an Industrial City**

Blackface minstrelsy had a long history of entertaining northern, white industrial laborers. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, white audiences watched white men in blackface perform stereotypical portrayals of African Americans that allowed them to escape the realities of their changing economic and social status as they began to compete for low-skill jobs in industrial centers before the Civil War. After the war, minstrelsy became more popular and spread to the south, enabling white southerners to re-live their nostalgic dreams of a peaceful, happy, pre-war society where African Americans were not threatening and knew their place in the social hierarchy. White audiences throughout the country after the war used minstrelsy to return to this romanticized time of “racial innocence.”<sup>13</sup> East St. Louis featured blackface minstrelsy shows shortly before the racial violence occurred in 1917.

The stereotypes portrayed by black-faced performers for white audiences was transferred to the silver screen in 1915 with the release of D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*. The second half of the film features a topsy-turvy portrayal of the “antebellum slave order” to villainize the blacks in the film, who began the “destruction of civilization of white women [and] demand political and civil rights.”<sup>14</sup> The actions of the black-faced men in the film were used to incite fear in white viewers of the threat that African Americans posed to the stability of white Americans. The film ends with the white-robed Ku Klux Klan protagonists coming to save the day after black troops take over the city of Piedmont. The vilification of blacks and the heroic imagery

of the masked crusaders in white contributed to the “installation of Black inferiority into the shared national culture” of the audiences who viewed it.<sup>15</sup>

*Birth of a Nation* was popular throughout the country. In most of the northern cities where it was viewed, picketers from organizations such as the NAACP gathered at the screenings to protest the racially charged nature of the film. In February 1917, the Majestic Theater in East St. Louis showed *Birth of a Nation* twice a day for three days.<sup>16</sup> The day before the “greatest photo spectacle” was shown in the city, editors of the paper communicated their desire that “everyone may be able to see the picture.”<sup>17</sup> The power of this film as a cultural contribution to the “maintenance of race prejudice” was expressed in the testimony of R.T. Rucker, the assistant superintendent of the Aluminum Ore Company, in the Congressional Committee Investigation. Rucker explained to the committee that films like *Birth of a Nation* “inflame[d] the whites” like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “inflame[d] the negro against the whites.”<sup>18</sup> The lead investigator, Congressman Johnson, responded by praising his home state of Kentucky for having a law “prohibiting all shows which have a tendency to inflame either race.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Highlights of a Whitewashed Narrative**

Cultural analyses are often overshadowed by wide-ranging debates among historians, sociologists, and economists about whether class or race dominates historical issues and the present state of American cities like East St. Louis.<sup>20</sup> Newspaper accounts of the East St. Louis Riot from white-controlled press outlets focused on class: the fears the white community had about challenges posed to their economic longevity by the African Americans brought from the south to replace the striking laborers at the Aluminum Ore Company. This class issue was strengthened by the alleged crimes of African Americans against white citizens, which caused white East St. Louisans to fear for their safety. African Americans were often portrayed as being violent and accused of buying weapons to attack the white citizens of East St. Louis. These rumors interacted with the fear stirred up by *Birth of a Nation*, which was a visual representation of the repercussions of an unchecked racial re-ordering of the social hierarchy. The racial fear and hatred of the burgeoning African American population in the city was thus framed as a labor issue made worse by African Americans’ perceived violent nature, rather than an intensifying culture of white supremacy. The predominant narrative that came from the white-controlled media outlets and from the testimonies of white East St.

Louisians during the House Congressional Committee investigation revolved around labeling the riot as a labor dispute that was disconnected from other issues related to race relations in the Greater St. Louis Metropolitan Region. In the testimonies given during this investigation, there was no connection made between the East St. Louis riot and other riots that preceded it. There was also no mention of the overall violence that African Americans throughout the country faced at this time.

The tone of the *Daily Journal's* initial coverage of the riot as it was unfolding on the night of July 2 was inline with the characterization of African Americans as trouble-makers that had been prevalent in the months preceding the violence. The *Daily Journal* reported that the violence experienced after African Americans shot four people the night of July 1, including the two detectives who died, Samuel Coppedge and Frank Wadley, had been quelled by police and military forces. The *Journal* placed this initial blame of violence on an event that occurred on the evening of July 1, when “literally hundreds” of African Americans, who were reportedly armed and structured in “military fashion,” gathered near the African Methodist Episcopal church. The *Daily Journal* claimed that these black residents were summoned by the ringing of the church bell to rally around “four negro politicians . . . who [were] recognized as negro leaders.”<sup>21</sup> The narrative created by the *Daily Journal* as the event was still unfolding focused on the militant, aggressive actions of African Americans in the city and portrayed the violent actions of white mobs as a defensive measure to protect East St. Louis businesses and homes.

On the evening of July 3, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published several articles covering the East St. Louis riot from the day before. Carlos F. Hurd, a staff reporter and eyewitness, described the social class of the men who were initiating the violence in an article by writing, “It was a short-sleeve gathering, and the men were mostly workingmen, except for some who had the aspect of mere loafers.”<sup>22</sup> The emphasis on class here is significant, because the lower- and working-class communities were the ones most affected by the mass immigration of African Americans from the south. The fact that the *Post-Dispatch* focused on the social class of the people who were initiating the violence lends credence to the argument that white reporters and editors were intent on portraying the event as a class-based riot. The emphasis on the class antagonisms at play in the development of the riot was a type of whitewashing designed to take the focus off of the race relations in the city of East St. Louis and the violence faced by

African Americans, regardless of class, throughout the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Nearly two days after the July violence, the East St. Louis community developed the concept of “The New East St. Louis” to create a narrative of a “bright future” for the city.<sup>24</sup> Several articles published between July 6 and July 15 spoke of segregation as the solution to the race question. In a full-page flyer, the solution was explained by announcing that “segregation of negroes was favored. The Real Estate Exchange goes on record to taking steps to eliminate, as much as possible, cause for ill feeling between white and black. It has appointed a committee to determine what territory should be set off to the colored man and to have attorneys draft a bill to be presented to the City Council.”<sup>25</sup> The forced segregation of residential areas for African American and white East St. Louisians was championed as the remedy for the racial tensions that the riots grew out of, which echoed the advice of Reverend Edgar M. Pope, the pastor of St. Mark’s Colored Baptist Church, and Booker T. Washington’s sentiments related to the “Atlanta Compromise.”<sup>26</sup> Nearly two weeks after the violence subsided, East St. Louis real estate tycoons added a new layer to the white narrative of the riot—integrated cities cause racial violence.

After the first month of initial coverage, the massacre at East St. Louis was largely forgotten by the white-owned media. The lack of continued

Top left, “Frank Smith, burned.”; Above right, “Amos Davis, age 84, shot.”; Center left, “The refugees.”; Center right, “Camp of Troop D. 1ST ILL. Calvary from Springfield.”; Bottom left, “After the Fire.”; Bottom right, “Police Headquarters, St. Louis, MO.” Published in the September 1917 issue of *The Crisis*.



coverage and connection to the larger context of racial violence created a missed opportunity for increased awareness of the plight that African Americans in the United States faced. Ultimately, this lack of connection to thousands of other acts of violence went unacknowledged, and the East St. Louis Riot was washed away from the collective consciousness of the local and national community among the white population. The whitewashing of the racial tensions of the East St. Louis community turned the riot into an isolated event to downplay the significance that the riot had for African American activists throughout the country. These accounts largely underplayed and ignored the cultural racism that was prevalent in the years and months preceding the July violence.

Throughout this article to this point, the term “race riot” has been used to reference the violence that occurred in East St. Louis on May 28 and on July 2, 1917. White-controlled narratives of the event consistently used the term “riot.” A riot implies something that needs to be quelled. The narrative created by the white press emphasized the militancy of the black community in the city. The spark that caused the July violence was traced to African Americans organizing an uprising in the city, proved for East St. Louisans by the killing of the detectives. This term is related to a response by white citizens to call for segregation to end racial problems in industrial centers. Contrarily, African American journalists and politicians referred to the event as a “massacre.” The term “massacre” implies that the victims of violence were unjustly attacked and murdered. The term also incites a stronger emotional reaction in readers that elicits a response for action to end racial violence. For the rest of this article, the term “massacre” will be used.

### **African American Counter-Narratives of Persistent Prejudice and Racial Massacre**

Contrary to the dominant narratives presented by the white-controlled media, African American media outlets and authors situated the East St. Louis massacre in the context of a national struggle for freedom from oppression. As millions of African Americans fled north in the hope of escaping Jim Crow violence in the south, they faced continued violence in their new homes and created outlets to share their struggle and to organize for change throughout the country. African American writers shed light on racial prejudice in East St. Louis that led up to the July violence. Prolific journalists and international politicians, such as Joseph and William Mitchell, Herbert T. Meadows, W.E.B. Du Bois,

Ida B. Wells, and Marcus Garvey, used the image of a massacre to connect the suffering of African Americans in St. Louis to the suffering felt in black communities at a national level.

The East St. Louis massacre was preceded by riots that involved the massacre of African American men, women, and children by white civilians in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1866; Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898; Atlanta, Georgia, in 1906; Springfield, Illinois, in 1908; and Waco, Texas, in 1916. The majority of these racial massacres were in response to African American quests for greater freedom and equality after the Civil War. It was in this climate of race-based terror across the country that the East St. Louis Riot occurred in July of 1917. The racial violence that enveloped these cities before the 1917 East St. Louis violence was recognized in the consciousness of African Americans and expressed in newspapers, magazines, essays, and speeches immediately following the July 2 massacre.

One of the primary outlets for expressing this reality was the *St. Louis Argus*, a St. Louis-based newspaper that catered to the African American population. It was first published in 1912 by Joseph and William Mitchell with the aim of organizing the African American community, locally and nationally. The *Argus*'s primary goal was to raise political awareness of African American issues such as lynching, unequal education, and disenfranchisement. The Mitchell brothers also used the *Argus* to publicly attack organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, who were lynching hundreds of African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. While many national black newspapers followed Booker T. Washington's advice to be passive and allow race relations to be changed slowly in the political realm, the *Argus* demanded a quick end to the violence and inequality that plagued African Americans.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the *Argus*'s immediate coverage served as a call to arms for the African American community to defend itself against white violence and to continue to push for legislation banning lynching at the federal level. The *St. Louis Argus* was the only Metro East newspaper that connected this event with other horrific acts of violence occurring throughout the country.

While the white-owned media outlets traced the initial outbreak of violence back to the murder of two police officers by African Americans on the evening of Sunday, July 1, the *St. Louis Argus* reported that the initial catalyst in the violence of Monday, July 2, began when an automobile driven by white men began shooting into an African American neighborhood.<sup>28</sup> This account of the initial violence



completely changed the story of the riot, as it was understood by the white communities, locally and nationally. The *Argus* acknowledged that two police officers were shot and killed on the evening of July 2 by African-Americans. However, the fact that they were shot because they were mistaken as the men who had begun shooting at African American homes that evening is not discussed in any other St. Louis–area paper.

The coverage of the massacre by the *St. Louis Argus* was supported by reports from people who were not living in East St. Louis, but who came to investigate the aftermath of the violence and to communicate its truth, as they saw it, to the national African American community. For instance, the NAACP sent Martha Gruening and W.E.B. Du Bois to East St. Louis as special investigators. The September 1917 issue of *The Crisis* published a 19-page exposé, titled “The Massacre of East St. Louis,” that featured the images and firsthand experiences they discovered. The images they presented in *The Crisis* told a story of destruction by fire through photographs of burning buildings and scorched ruins. *The Crisis* also featured images of survivors of the violence that told a story of suffering regardless of age or gender, and of desperation for support.

They set the scene for the massacre by discussing “joy riders” who shot into the homes of African Americans on a block of Market Street, which led to the shooting of two detectives who were wearing “plain clothes” and driving through this same neighborhood.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Ida B. Wells conducted her own investigation as a representative for the Negro League of Chicago. She focused on personal accounts, which created an emotional representation of the massacre. In her narrative of the massacre and its aftermath, Wells presented the experiences of four women who escaped their burning homes by crossing the “Free Bridge.” to St. Louis. Wells followed them as they returned to the wreckage of their shattered community to gather what little broken trinkets and burnt memorabilia they could find. She shared stories of brutal beatings and murders that these women told her. She highlighted the inaction of local police and national military authorities throughout her writings on the massacre. She called for a Congressional investigation and for a national focus on racial violence. While the East St. Louis paper the *Daily Journal* advocated enforced segregation of communities, Wells demanded an integrated response through a federal anti-lynching bill. Congressman Leonidas Dyer of St. Louis introduced such a bill in 1918 in response to the violence in East St. Louis.<sup>30</sup>

As of yet, there has not been a published study of the collective memory of the East St. Louis Riot. The lack of memory of this event in the collective consciousness of the Greater St. Louis Metropolitan Region is largely due to the whitewashing of the coverage of the riot in the white-owned local newspapers and the whitewashing of the underlying culture of racism that preceded the violence. I argue that there have been three interrelated yet distinct waves of the riot’s history and significance in the century since 1917. The first wave occurred in the years immediately following the riot and emphasized the legal redress and criminal prosecution of people involved in the riot. The prosecution of African Americans during this time aligns with arguments made earlier concerning the unequal treatment of African Americans in the criminal justice system as it pertained to the investigation of this riot. The second wave occurred during the Civil Rights Movement Era and the Era of Urban Crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, when the riot was remembered as a precursor to later riots and a background for explanations of urban poverty and crime that were largely blamed on African American communities. The most recent wave of memory has focused on memorialization and community remembrance, with particular attention paid to the current state of race relations in the region after the Michael Brown shooting in 2014 and the subsequent riots that swept the city of Ferguson.

## Conclusion

The African American migrants in East St. Louis in 1917 were fighting against racial oppression like that they experienced in the Jim Crow South. When white men drove through their neighborhood firing shots, African Americans responded by shooting the next car of white men they saw, in a response that can be understood as defense and as retaliation. This act was the true turning point in the intensifying of race relations in East St. Louis, and it is the primary fact in understanding how segregated narratives were produced after the riot. In many ways, the African Americans who shot Detective Sergeant Samuel Coppedge and Detective Frank Wadley that Sunday night in July were making a statement about the violence that they were experiencing. The way that the killing of these detectives was framed became one of the most significant differences between white and black narratives of the violence in East St. Louis that day. The contradictions in narratives between white and black authors speak to a divide in the comprehension of race relations in the St. Louis Metropolitan Region that dominates ideological and cultural differences in interpretations



in our present era. Although accounts of the violence are uncomfortable to read because of the vivid descriptions of the brutality, this event needs to be discussed in classrooms to teach citizens of the region about their past, so that they can better understand the present reality they are immersed in.

## E N D N O T E S

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- <sup>1</sup> The 65th United States Congress House of Representatives created a Special Committee tasked with discovering the root causes and consequences of the July riot. This article makes references to the related transcripts of this investigation that took place in the federal courtroom of the Metropolitan Building in downtown East St. Louis beginning on October 18, 1917. The published report of the committee was released on July 15, 1918. Ben Johnson, a Democratic lawyer and Congressman from Kentucky, was the main author of this report, but other Congressmen on the Special Committee should also be credited with the evidence that was collected and interpreted. The other members of the committee who signed this document were John E. Raker (Republican from California), Martin D. Foster (Democrat from Illinois), and Henry Allen Cooper (Republican from Wisconsin). Their report's intention was to shed light on the conditions that existed prior to these deadly riots and to expose the gravity of the crimes committed by different groups during the riots. U.S. Congress, House, Special Committee to Investigate the East St. Louis Riots, *Transcripts of the Hearings of the House Select Committee that Investigated the Race Riots in East St. Louis, Illinois, 1917* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1918), microfilm edition, 251–54.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Special Committee to Investigate the East St. Louis Riots, *Report of the Special Committee Authorized by Congress to Investigate the East St. Louis Riots* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1918), 4–5.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Andrew J. Theising and Debra H. Moore, *Made in USA: East St. Louis, the Rise and Fall of an Industrial River Town* (St. Louis: Virginia Publishing, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> Elliot Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis: July 2, 1917* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 27–30; Theising and Moore, *Made in USA*, 147.
- <sup>6</sup> Harper Barnes, *Never Been a Time: The 1917 Race Riot That Sparked the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Walker & Co., 2008), 210.
- <sup>7</sup> The term “whitewashing” has an important meaning for this project as a word to explain the placing of blame for the riot on the African American influx rather than on the white population of East St. Louis who participated in the murders. The most crucial meaning of the term “whitewashing” to this project is related to the process of covering up atrocities and downplaying the significance and magnitude of the riot by the white-controlled media.
- <sup>8</sup> Rudwick, *Race Riot*, 7–16.
- <sup>9</sup> Malcolm McLaughlin, *Power, Community, and Racial Killing in East St. Louis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 178.
- <sup>10</sup> Charles L. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008).
- <sup>11</sup> Scott Joplin was a popular musician who came to St. Louis in 1901. The house that Joplin lived in while he was in St. Louis became a National Historical Landmark in 1976, but it was initially recognized as an important location on the basis of Joplin's fame. In the twenty-first century, however, scholars and museum curators have attempted to place this house in a larger framework that addresses the social history of African American migration, racial oppression, and issues related to sanitation and poverty. See: Timothy Baumann, Andrew Hurley, Valerie Altizer, and Victoria Love, “Interpreting Uncomfortable History at the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in St. Louis, Missouri,” *The Public Historian*, vol. 33, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 37–66.
- <sup>12</sup> Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 107.
- <sup>13</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 52.
- <sup>14</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning: Blacks & The Regimes of Race in American Theater & Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 102.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 126.
- <sup>16</sup> Barnes, *Never Been a Time*, 83–84.
- <sup>17</sup> “Amusements,” *The Daily Journal*, February 18, 1917.
- <sup>18</sup> U.S. Congress, *Transcripts of the Hearings*, 1860–61.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> This debate is largely situated on the view that the primary problem with predominantly black urban areas was a result of a combined effect of racism and poverty in societal structures. For more information, see Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968); Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Street-Corner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); Jennifer F. Hamer, *Abandoned in the Heartland: Work, Family, and Living in East St. Louis* (Berkeley: University of California

- Press, 2011), 8–12. For a detailed study of how scholars have reconciled the differences between studies focused on class or race, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- <sup>21</sup> “Soldiers Arrive to Preserve Order,” *Daily Journal*, July 2, 1917.
- <sup>22</sup> Carlos F. Hurd, “Post-Dispatch Man, an Eye-Witness, Describes Massacre of Negroes,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 3, 1917.
- <sup>23</sup> There were some instances of people speaking out against the claim that the riot was fueled primarily by labor unrest. For example, in response to an editorial in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, H.B. Wilkins wrote, “The influx of negroes to East St. Louis has not hurt union labor one particle, for no negroes are taking the place of strikers. They are filling places vacated by foreigners who have gone elsewhere.” H.B. Wilkins, “Letters from the People,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 6, 1917.
- <sup>24</sup> “New East St. Louis,” *Daily Journal*, July 9, 1917; “The Public Pulse,” *Daily Journal*, July 11, 1917; “What East St. Louis Wants to Know,” *Daily Journal*, July 13, 1917; “See Bright Future for East St. Louis,” *Daily Journal*, July 15, 1917; “Nothing Can Stop the Growth of Our City,” *Daily Journal*, July 15, 1917; James W. Kirk, “As the Journal Views It,” *Daily Journal*, July 6, 1917.
- <sup>25</sup> “Nothing Can Stop the Growth of our City,” *Daily Journal*, July 15, 1917.
- <sup>26</sup> In a letter that was printed in the *Daily Journal*, Rev. Pope argued that, “I would say we don’t need any segregation law, but we do need to encourage the colored people to settle in a special territory of their own in East St. Louis.” See: “Provide Settlement for Negro Influx,” *Daily Journal*, May 22, 1917; Booker T. Washington explained his philosophy of working within the system of racial segregation by encouraging African Americans to focus on education and finding employment rather than fighting Jim Crow policies and seeking additional civil liberties. He advocated for a gradual process of national inclusion for African Americans in his “Atlanta Compromise” speech at the Cotton States Exposition in 1895. See: Elizabeth Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1998), 26.
- <sup>27</sup> Edwina W. Mitchell, *The Crusading Black Journalist: Joseph Everett Mitchell* (St. Louis: Farmer Press, Inc., 1972).
- <sup>28</sup> “Negroes Did Not Start Trouble,” *St. Louis Argus*, July 6, 1917.
- <sup>29</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois and Martha Gruening, “The Massacre of East St. Louis,” *The Crisis*, vol. 14, no. 5 (September 1917), 219.
- <sup>30</sup> Avis Thomas-Lester, “A Senate Apology for History on Lynching,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/13/AR2005061301720.html>.