

A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War

Fred Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Fred (2014) "A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.3.19

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss3/17>

Review

Johnson, Fred

Summer 2014

Ash, Stephen V. *A Massacre in Memphis: the Race Riot that Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War.* Hill and Wang, \$27.00 ISBN 978-0-8090-6797-8

Class, Race, and Riot in Reconstruction Memphis

In May 1866, as the United States struggled to heal from the trauma of its bloody Civil War (April 12, 1861 – April 9, 1865), millions of Americans, for the first time, found themselves living in a land unburdened by slavery. For most whites in Memphis, Tennessee, especially its Irish inhabitants, this was scarce cause for celebration. Being social, cultural, and religious [i.e. Catholic] outcasts, and direct competitors with despised blacks for economic opportunities, there was little inclination among the Irish to “bind up the nation’s wounds” and achieve the “just and lasting peace,” that President Abraham Lincoln had called for during his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865.¹ If anything, Memphis’ Irish residents and their largely Protestant native-born counterparts meant to do the exact opposite. Seething with hatred for the newly emancipated freedmen; enraged that slavery [and guaranteed white supremacy] had been obliterated by Northern military might; infuriated by the sight of black men wearing the uniform of the Yankee invaders; and driven by an iron-willed determination to ensure that blacks never obtained full-citizenship, white mobs descended upon blacks [and whites sympathetic to the causes of black liberty and civil rights] from May 1-3, 1866, rampaging through the streets of Memphis as they committed acts of murder, rape, arson, and pillage. By the time the “organized and bloody massacre” ended, forty-six blacks were dead “seventy-five injured, five raped, and a hundred robbed, along with four black churches, twelve schools, and ninety-one dwellings destroyed”. (180) The wanton violence of those three days proved that, although the Civil War’s shooting had ended, the conflict was far from over. For as historian, author, and Emeritus Professor Stephen V. Ash notes in his excellent account of the Memphis riot, “events in Memphis . . . demonstrated . . . that the Southerners who had rebelled against the U.S. government in 1861 were just as disloyal” and

“wholly un-reconciled to Union victory and black freedom”. (180)

As a scholar of the nineteenth-century, especially the eras of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Dr. Ash’s previous works underscore his eminence as an expert of the period. His authorial credits are bolstered by previous works like: *The Black Experience in the Civil War South* (Praeger, 2010); *Firebrand of Liberty: the Story of Two Black Regiments that Changed the Course of the Civil War* (W.W. Norton, 2008); *Nineteenth-Century America: Essays in Honor of Paul H. Bergeron* (University of Tennessee Press, 2005 [coedited with W. Todd Grace]); *A Year in the South: 1865: The True Story of Four Ordinary People Who Lived Through the Most Tumultuous Twelve Months in American History* (Harper-Collins, 2004); *Tennesseans and their History* (University of Tennessee Press, 1999 [with Paul H. Bergeron and Jeannette Keith]); *Secessionists and other Scoundrels: Selections from Parson Brownlow’s Book* (Louisiana State University Press, 1999); *When Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861 – 1865* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995); and *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860 – 1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Louisiana State University Press, 1988).²

In the “Author’s Note” of *A Massacre in Memphis*, Dr. Ash expresses his dismay that “no book length study of the Memphis riot of 1866 has been written” especially since “the riot influenced the course of” America’s “history at a critical juncture”. (xiii) His words point toward the paradox confronting freedmen at the end of the Civil War as they found themselves more despised and at risk than when enslaved. Ash is not alone in his assessment. In *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, esteemed historian Leon F. Litwack grimly observes that the “violence meted out to blacks after emancipation and during Reconstruction” was meant to underscore “the limits of black freedom” and “anticipated . . . the wave of murder and terrorism that” eventually swept “across the South.”³ As such, Stephen V. Ash is applauded for giving extensive attention to the May 1866 Memphis riot and its function as a template for white mob violence against blacks that extended deep into the twentieth century.

Divided into three parts — “A City Divided,” “The Riot,” and “The Aftermath” — each section, respectively, examines the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of Memphis [especially prior to the riot]; the events during the riot; and subsequent actions by individuals and officials [municipal, state, and federal] to evade accountability and the all too rare redressing of

wrongs. Written in a style that's wonderfully accessible, with turns of phrases and renderings of description indicative of a skilled expositor, the narrative from "A City Divided" to "The Riot" shifts abruptly from past to present tense. Any disorientation from the changed point of view is soon overcome by Ash's providing the reader with a front row seat from which to witness the drama as it unfolds. The adroit manner of his [Ash's] presentation exposes the depth and nature of the virulent bigotry that sustained various mobs of assailants as they roamed through Memphis for three horrific days, committing one atrocity after another until it seemed that nothing could sate their blood lust.

Early on, Ash sets the stage, providing critical details regarding the extent of the tense, perpetually hostile, social dynamics in Memphis. In Yankee Memphis, there were northern transplants [some of whom were long-time residents] who, like many Southerners, detested blacks and doubted their capacity to thrive in freedom. Conversely, others were supportive [often with condescension] of the ex-slaves and relied upon "military force . . . to protect the freed people". (25) For Rebel Memphis, along with upsetting the social pecking order among the whites, the Civil War had brought nothing "more abhorrent . . . than emancipation". (38) In Irish Memphis, their "racism . . . was . . . vehement" and served to assert their "superiority to blacks as a way of claiming an equal place in white America." (59). Black Memphians endured all variety of insult and harassment from the city's other segments, especially the Irish dominated police force of "incompetents, drunkards, loafers, thugs, and crooks". (63) Insults and hardships notwithstanding, black Memphians "in early 1866 . . . could discern rays of light on the horizon," especially "the federal Civil Rights Act, which granted blacks citizenship and [except for voting] forbade states from treating any citizen under the law unequally". (88-89) Then, on May 1, 1866, a small group of liquor-emboldened, still in uniform, black ex-soldiers and trouble-seeking Irish policemen traded words and blows, and trouble ensued. (93-97) Rumors of allegedly belligerent blacks spread "through the city with seeming electric speed". (100) "Policemen around the city, on duty and off" made their way into the streets where they were "joined by white citizens, many hundreds of them" until the "downtown streets" were "soon thronged with white people." (100)

Ash spares no detail in recounting the grisly events of May 1-3, 1866, when hate-filled mobs attacked "nearly every black person who" crossed "their path, venting particular fury on those in uniform." (109) He makes skillful use of the facts, exposing the rioters' blood lust while simultaneously indicting the colossal

incompetence and collusion of municipal authorities. The facts also remove any doubt that Union commander Major General George Stoneman's refusal to help quell the riot amounted to a statement of indifference, if not outright consent, giving rioters further assurance that there'd be no accountability.

An extensive body of sources attests to the depth and breadth of research conducted for *A Massacre in Memphis*. It also highlights Ash's determination to ensure that the perpetrators *and* their long-observed faceless victims were subjected to the uncompromising rigor of historical scrutiny. Masterful use is made of a broad range of newspapers (mainly from the South, Midwest, and Northeast). Among the news sources there are incendiary white supremacist publications and equally shrill outlets that espoused the Radical Republican perspective. Robust primary sources [non-published and published], records from the Freedmen's Bureau, diaries, the *Report of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres* (Wash. D.C., Government Printing Office, 1866), House Reports of the 39th Congress, the papers of luminaries like Thaddeus Stevens (Library of Congress), City Directories, Historical Society papers, information from the National Archives and Records Administration (Washington, D.C.), and Census data adds significant heft to the yeoman's work performed by Dr. Ash.

A Massacre in Memphis is a powerful account illuminating how the United States, after surviving its brutal Civil War, lurched into the twentieth century as a nation still gripped by civil strife. More than merely adding to the body of knowledge, it should allow the victims of the Memphis riot to finally *rest in peace*.

¹ See the following URL: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln2.asp. This website was accessed on April 23, 2014. The Avalon Project is an online archive for documents pertaining to Law, History, and Diplomacy. The governing repository is the Lillian Goldman Law Library at Yale University.

²Information for Dr. Ash's publication record was found at: <http://history.utk.edu/peopletwo/stephen-v-ash/>. The aforementioned is the URL for the History Department at the University of Tennessee (at Knoxville). Accessed on April 25, 2014.

³James Allen et al, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. (Santa Fe [New Mexico]: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000), 13.

Fred Johnson is Associate Professor of History at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. He is currently working on two projects, one examining the Confederate government's war on United States Railroads during the Civil War, and, the other examining the history of U.S. foreign policy on the African continent since 1945