



The 1917 East St. Louis Race Massacre Tour

Curated by Treasure Shields Redmond, PhD and Tandra Taylor, PhD

Land Acknowledgement

East St. Louis, Illinois occupies the ancestral, traditional and contemporary lands of the Cahokia. In particular, the city and the region it is a part of resides on land ceded in the Louisiana Purchase and the 1783 Treaty of Paris, displacing the Illini, Potawatomi, Miami, Sauk, Fox (Mesquakie), Ioway, Kickapoo, Mascouten, Piankashaw, Shawnee, Wea, and Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) and more. We recognize that the Indian tribes of Illinois are not extinct, but like many other native tribes, they were forced to move to Indian reservations in Oklahoma by the American government. We give thanks for, historic Indigenous communities in Illinois, Indigenous individuals and communities who live here now, and those who were forcibly removed from their homelands. In offering this land acknowledgement, we affirm Indigenous sovereignty, history and experiences.



– Bird man tablet from Cahokia. Illinois State Museum-CH-38

Introduction

For three days in July of 1917 white men and women attacked African Americans on the street and in streetcars, beat and shot blacks on the street indiscriminately, including women and children. Whites murdered between 39 and 150 African Americans. Another 6,000 Black people were left homeless, and the burning and vandalism cost approximately \$400,000 (\$8.46 million in 2021) in property damage. This horrendous event forced a national conversation about Race and Democracy.-- Wikipedia



During this interactive touring experience, the following questions will be answered:

- How did the African-American community arrive in East St. Louis?
- What types of jobs and services were available for African-Americans in East St. Louis?
- What events led to the race riots in 1917?
- What ethnic communities made up East St. Louis?
- What obstacles did African Americans in East St. Louis face before, during and after the race riots? How did the community overcome these obstacles?
- What was the national reaction to the 1917 East St. Louis race riot?

How did the African-American community arrive in East St. Louis?

GATHER AT THE CASINO QUEEN METRO LINK STATION

CLIMB UP TO THE EADS BRIDGE AT THE CASINO QUEEN METRO LINK STATION

“Factories began to receive increased orders from the belligerent nations. Managers . . . hired recruitment agents in the South to advertise vacancies. . . East St. Louis black workers flocked to the meatpacking plants. They had composed only 15 percent of the meatpacking workforce in 1910, but were 40 percent by 1917. Black workers also gained a foothold in unskilled labour at Malleable Iron. Even at Aluminum Ore, African Americans would compose over ten percent of the workforce by the autumn of 1917” – “Ghetto Formation and Armed Resistance in East St. Louis, Illinois” by Malcolm McLaughlin



Document C: Letter to the Editor of the *Chicago Defender*, an African American newspaper published in Chicago requesting sponsorship to the North.

- Dear Sir: I am a reader of the *Chicago Defender* I think it is one of the Most Wonderful Papers of our race printed. Sirs I am writing to see if You all will please get me a job. And Sir I can wash dishes, wash iron nursing work in groceries and dry good stores. Just any of these I can do. Sir, who so ever you get the job from please tell them to send me a ticket and I will pay them. When I get their as I have not got enough money to pay my way. I am a girl of 17 years old and in the 8 grade at Knox Academy School. But on account of not having money enough I had to stop school. Sir I will thank you all with all my heart. May God Bless you all. Please answer in return mail.
- -Lily Blythe, Port Arthur, Texas 1917

[TAP HERE TO READ MORE LETTERS](#)

Katherine Horne Kennedy and Norville Kennedy, 1917 Survivor who built a raft to bring her children to safety

–  [Podcast *The Class of 1917*, ep. “River Crosser” \(22:20\)](#)

What ethnic communities made up East St. Louis?

Tour Stop: EADS BRIDGE VIA THE CASINO QUEEN METROLINK STATION

“In St. Clair County the **Armenian** population grew to several hundred, with one count going as high as one thousand. In East St. Louis, they lived near Brady, Broadway, Converse, Division, Gaty, Kansas, Missouri, and St. Louis Avenues, and between Tenth and Nineteenth Streets.”

– Society For Orphaned Armenian Relief

“**Polish Jews** began arriving in St. Louis in the late 1800s also, for the same reasons as Catholic Poles. The Polish Jews were also escaping pogroms, acts of violence in small Jewish villages perpetrated by Russian soldiers.”

– St. Louis Genealogical Society



“Historic St. Patrick’s parish was part of the Diocese of Alton until 1887 when the Diocese of Belleville was created. The first brick church (1862) was located at Illinois and Sixth Streets, East St. Louis, and served a mostly Irish congregation. Though records begin in May 1861, Catholics in the area traveled to Cahokia or St. Louis for services until their numbers were large enough to support a parish. **German** parishioners who wished to attend services in their native language successfully petitioned the bishop and established St. Henry in 1866.”

– St. Clair County Genealogical Society

In 1909, H. D. Sexton, President Southern Illinois National Bank in East St. Louis Delivered these remarks at Meeting of Commercial Club of East St. Louis, Illinois:

“Do not overlook the fact that our growth is coincident with the expansion of St. Louis. We are well named East St. Louis. We are indissolubly united with the great commercial and industrial center on the west side of the river. St. Louis has been growing the past two decades as she never grew before and we have been growing with her. State lines make us politically independent but industrially and commercially we share in the prosperity of the great city. We have become more than a collection of terminals for St. Louis. We offer all of the advantages of the distributing center that she possesses. We are nearer the fuel. We have inexhaustible water of the finest quality for manufacturing purposes but a few feet below the surface. We have cheaper sites for the factories. We have room to spread. Every bridge the spans the river is to our advantage. We may prepare to welcome the coming of tunnels. I see nothing but gain in the cultivation of the closest possible relations with St. Louis.”

– State of Illinois Museum

What types of jobs and services were available for African-Americans in East St. Louis?

Tour Stop: NATIONAL STOCKYARDS (Via 9th Ave)



“National City’s history began like many of the “symbiotic” towns that still ring East St. Louis such as Sauget (formerly Monsanto) and Alorton. Seeking to avoid paying taxes or having to follow pesky regulations, companies formed their own towns on rail lines adjacent to East St. Louis. . . Railroad barons saw the potential profits in centralizing meat packing in the middle of the country. The National Stockyards sought to consolidate that bloody industry in one convenient location, and East St. Louis offered flat, inexpensive land as well as the

aforementioned amenable politicians to make the venture a success. The St. Louis National Stockyards Company was formed in 1873, before the completion of the Eads Bridge. In 1907, the scheme solidified with the incorporation of National City; the meat packing industry now controlled its own town.”

—“Ghosts of the Stockyards: The Last Traces of National City” by Chris Naffziger



Mose Campbell, 1917 Survivor is on the photo held by his daughter, Gloria

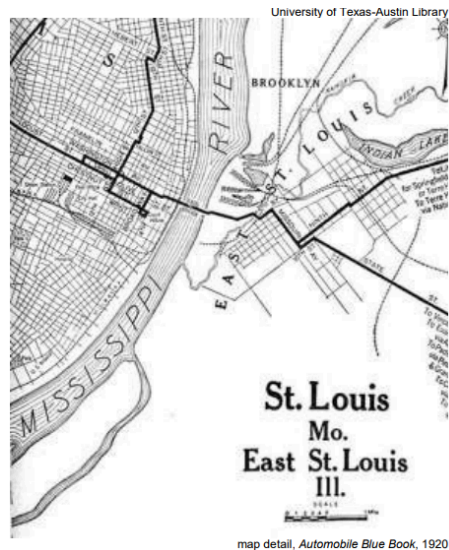
–  [Podcast *The Class of 1917*, ep. “Survivor” \(9:07\)](#)

What events led to the race riots in 1917?

Tour Stop(s): 9TH AND ST. CLAIR AVE, 621 9TH STREET (FORMER MAYOR'S HOUSE), and KATHERINE DUNHAM HOUSE

“On May 28, 1917, violence erupted when news circulated that a robber who was African American had accidentally shot a white man. The National Guard arrived and quelled the violence; although some African Americans had been severely injured, no one had been killed.

On Sunday 1 July 1917 an automobile "loaded with white men" made its way north along 20th Street in Denverside, a black district of East St. Louis, Illinois. Calvin Cotton, Dr. Thomas Hunter and Reverend Thomas Wallace, three black residents standing on a street corner as they made their way home very late after church, saw the car approach. Oddly, Cotton later recalled, the vehicle's lights were not switched on. It passed them by before turning west onto Market Street. Suddenly, the car accelerated and there was a crackle of gunfire. Running to the corner, Cotton, Hunter and Wallace saw the vehicle speeding along the street. The white passengers' revolvers were flashing as they fired from both sides of the car.



Others were also ready: "the negroes began to shoot," Parden later stated in court, as the white gang passed through. This was probably more than the white gang had bargained for and they were lucky to escape with their lives. Their automobile was riddled with holes ; the driver, Gus Masserang, was struck in the leg by buckshot; and another disappeared but a group of armed black residents set off on foot in pursuit.



However, instead of catching the gang, they encountered an unmarked police car in an unlit street. They opened fire, killing two white detectives. It was a decisive moment. The Denverside drive-by attack had come on the heels of weeks of violence in which white thugs had beaten and harassed African Americans in the streets. For weeks, black community leaders had been demanding that the police intervene but no help came. The racist police department effectively turned a blind eye to racial violence and, after the shooting of the detectives,

any pretense of impartiality was lifted.

– “Ghetto Formation and Armed Resistance in East St. Louis, Illinois” by Malcolm McLaughlin

-  [Podcast *The Class of 1917*, ep. "Black Faces in High Places" \(9:56\)](#)

ST. LOUIS NEGROES OPPOSE GOV. LOWDEN'S CANDIDACY

Claim He Lacked Courage to Take Firm Stand During Recent East St. Louis Riot.



(Associated Negro Press.)

St. Louis, Mo., March 10.—The convention of the Tuskegee College class of 1917 at Missouri last Tuesday night, a clash between the Negro delegates and Congressman D. C. Fryer, who visited after the riot, which had followed a meeting which he had introduced to induce the delegates from the north to support Governor Frank P. Lowden of Illinois, an opposition member of the National Convention at Chicago last June.

Mr. Fryer, after having named Governor Lowden as a great man and praising him for what he had done for the people of Illinois and complimenting him for his stand for justice and fair play toward all, made a motion to instruct the delegates for Mr. Lowden.

The motion brought down a storm of protest from the Negro delegates present.

J. H. Mitchell, editor of *The Sun* of St. Louis, Mo., was asked and told the delegation how Governor Lowden had acted during the East St. Louis massacre and delays that the Negroes would not give and move to endorse Mr. Lowden.

Mr. Fryer only made motion to be voting to defend the Illinois state which was followed by some sharp questions from Mr. Mitchell. (The East St. Louis massacre had taken place when Fryer happened to visit here.) Mr. Mitchell, the most here were given a hearing for he could not be heard.

Mr. Mitchell was backed by W. H. Matthews and W. H. King.

1920

What obstacles did African Americans in East St.Louis face after the race riots? How did the community overcome these obstacles?

Tour Stop(s): 18th Street Pollock town, passing Greater New Hope → Drive to Aluminum Ore Company 2nd incident of inciting violence → Via 25th and Bond viaduct

Here is what WEB Dubois had to say:

Here is what Ida B. Wells had to say:



“So hell flamed in East St. Louis! The white men drove even black union men out of their unions and when the black men, beaten by night and assaulted, flew to arms and shot back at the marauders, five thousand rioters arose and surged like a crested stormwave, from noonday until midnight; they killed and beat and murdered; they dashed out the brains of children and stripped off the clothes of women; they drove victims into the flames and hanged the helpless to the lighting poles.”

“Gov. Lowden need not go far to find evidence of the utter failure of the major part of the forces of the Illinois National Guard to do their duty in stopping wholesale murder and arson in East St. Louis last Monday. Carlos Hurd of the Post-Dispatch staff, who was an eyewitness of the atrocities on the East Side, told a plain circumstantial story of the outrages he witnessed. The assaults and murders were cold-blooded, deliberate and incredibly brutal. They were not the mob infuriated against particular offenders. They were the work of groups of men and women who sought out and burned out the Negroes and then shot, beat, kicked and hanged them. The work was done in a spirit of flippant, relentless barbarism. Mr. Hurd described it as a man-hunt.”



“Of Work and Wealth”

The East St. Louis Massacre: The Greatest Outrage of the Century



NARCIS GURLEY, 71 NEXT BIRTHDAY. LIVED IN HER HOME 30 YEARS. AFRAID TO COME OUT TILL THE BLAZING WALLS FELL IN.

What was the national reaction to the 1917 East St.Louis race riot?

Tour Stop: [750 Missouri Ave](#)



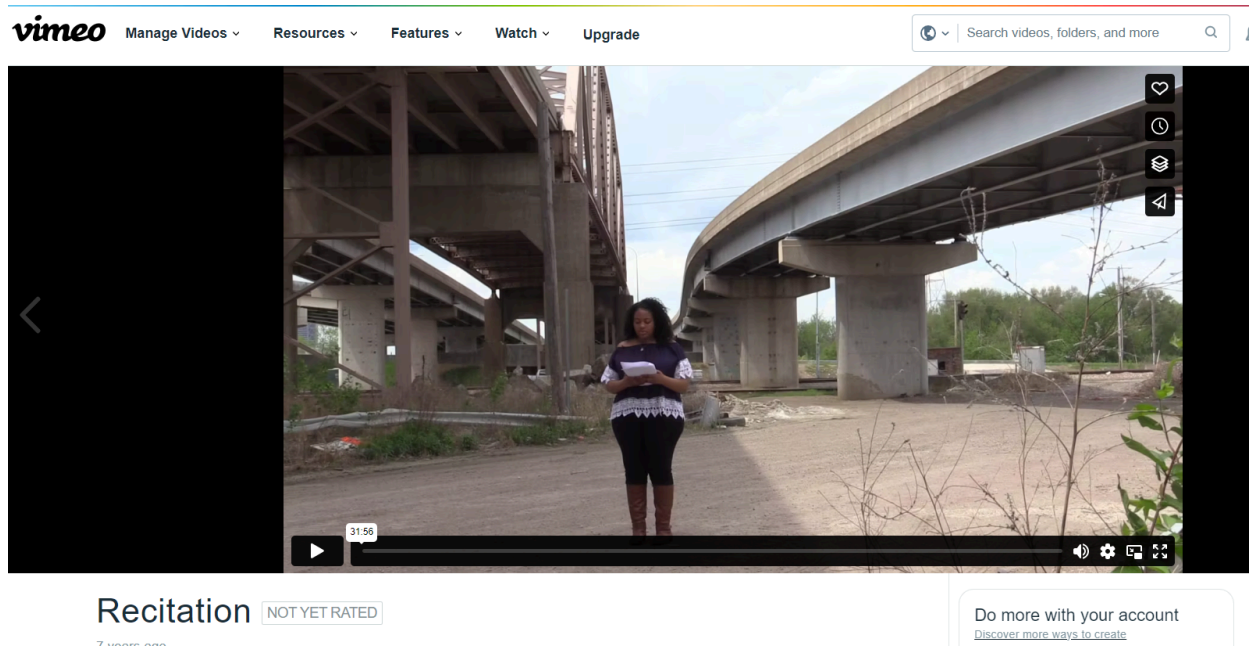
[1917 NAACP Silent Protest Parade, Fifth Avenue, New York City \(July 28, 1917\)](#)

“At the end of a July 8 meeting in Harlem to discuss the violence, Marcus Garvey, recently returned from a year-long speaking tour of the country, asked to say a few words. The crowd stood breathless as Garvey thundered condemnation. "Millions of our people in slavery gave their lives that America might live," he said. "From the labors of these people the country grew in power, until her wealth today is computed above that of any two nations. With all the service that the Negro gave he is still a despised creature in the eyes of white people, for if he were not to them despised, the whites of this country would never allow such outrages as the East St. Louis massacre. ...This is a massacre that will go down in history as one of the bloodiest outrages against mankind for which any class of people could be held guilty." Garvey's speech, and a reprint entitled "The Conspiracy of the East St. Louis Riots," would propel Garvey onto the national stage.”

–PBS, American Experience

[HEARINGS - US House of Representatives Hearings re: Riot at East St. Louis, Illinois](#)

How are the events of 1917 being remembered today?



[A ritual re-reading of the Congressional testimony from the 1917 East St. Louis Race Riot commission. Excerpts were selected by our collaborators and read in the contemporary locations to which the historical testimonies refer. In most cases, the spaces referred to in the 1917 testimony have been all but dismantled by a century of racially motivated erasure and systemic neglect.](#)

Collaborators: Katherine Miles, Rodericka Olden, Lore'al Perkins, Terraine Simmons, Alajah Vales, and Toyreale Williams

What other ways do you think the 1917 East St. Louis Race Massacre might be made accessible to students?

FEEDBACK FEEDBACK FEEDBACK FEEDBACK FEEDBACK FEEDBACK

Contact us:

Treasure Shields Redmond, PhD

Tandra Taylor, PhD