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THE 1968 TALLAHASSEE RIOTS FOLLOWING THE ASSASSINATION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Susan Hamburger

On April 4, 1968, James Earl Ray assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, in Memphis, Tennessee. In the ten days following this tragic event, riots erupted in over one hundred American cities. Up until this time, social scientists believed all rioting occurred in response to local events or dissatisfaction. This assassination proved that black awareness extended further than home boundaries. The rioting afterwards "was the first time that [Black] collective disorder was set off in response to a single, politically significant national event."¹

The King riots differed markedly from previous riots; there were no triggering police incidents, no stated purpose or goal, nor any demands. Willard A. Heaps analyzed the riots as originally a spontaneous outburst of grief and anger at King's death which turned into organized orgies of arson and thievery.² Nationwide, the riots resulted in forty-six deaths, over seven thousand injuries, more than twenty thousand arrests, and over $67 million in damages.³ One of the cities struck by rioters, Tallahassee, Florida, reported that one person was killed and fourteen injured during the period April 5–7.⁴

Tallahassee, the capital of the state, had a population of about 71,000 in 1968 of whom twenty-five per cent were Black. It is the home of two
state universities, Florida State University (all white until 1962) and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (historically Black). As was typical of many towns with a large Black population, an underlying racial prejudice fueled the current of distrust that flowed both ways between the races.

Florida State University professor Dr. Jackson LeeIce realized "it was not so much the 'rednecks' or lower classes that kept the Blacks 'in their place' and denied them equal opportunities and rights but the well-meaning, soft-spoken upper and middle classes which made up the controlling power structure of Southern Culture." Spearheaded by concerned FAMU students and activist Black church leaders, the long struggle for Black equality in Tallahassee began in 1956 with a seemingly innocuous action.

In 1956 two FAMU students, Wilhelmina Jakes Street and Carrie Fuller Patterson, sparked the eighteen-month Tallahassee bus boycott when they refused to sit in the back of the bus or disembark without a fare refund. Black city leaders organized shared-rides to provide alternative transportation for former bus riders. The police harassed, ticketed, and jailed the drivers in an attempt to break the boycott. At the end of the eighteen months, the crippled Cities Transit Company negotiated a settlement desegregating the buses.

Segregation became a prime target. The Tallahassee Council on Human Relations existed as the only desegregated group in town in the 1950s. In violation of a city ordinance on racially-mixed gatherings, the members often feared to meet together because the police cooperated with segregation.
On February 20, 1960, Blacks (mainly FAMU students) staged a sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter to protest segregated eating facilities. Civil rights activist and Black community leader Rev. Charles Kenzie Steele credited the FAMU students with support for civil rights actions. He felt that without the FAMU students there would not have been any protests or movement; "they are the militants, they are your soldiers."^7

In 1963 FAMU students picketed the whites-only Florida Theater. Students attempted to buy tickets; when the ticket seller refused they returned to the end of the line to try again, successfully disrupting business. Police arrested 257 demonstrators in one day alone.\(^8\)

Former Tallahassee Mayor Samuel E. Teague, Jr., told about a day in 1963 when fifty to seventy Ku Klux Klansmen tried to march down Tennessee Street without a permit. When the Klansmen gathered in the parking lot behind the bus station adjacent to a Black neighborhood, Frenchtown, Teague refused to allow them to march under threat of arrest. Unknown to the Klan, Teague had the National Guard on standby to back him up. The Klan eventually dispersed without incident. There was no newspaper coverage of this confrontation because Teague (who denied being an integrationist) wished to downplay racial tension and because, he said, "the KKK was too dumb to call the press in advance."^9

The Florida State Board of Control (now Board of Regents) master plan in 1964 called for the eventual abolishment of FAMU. The plan sought to phase out the university only after a majority of Florida's Black students had been enrolled in other colleges. In 1967 the Legislature discussed
phasing out FAMU or merging it with Florida State University because desegregation had made continued state support of a predominantly Black institution unnecessary. FAMU President George Gore, faculty, students, and staff vocally opposed the abolition or merger of FAMU.  

In the twelve years since the bus boycott, Blacks in Tallahassee fought for equal rights while the white power structure balked at progress. As recently as 1967, the FAMU students were threatened with the discontinuance of their eighty-four-year-old school. Into this atmosphere flashed the news of Martin Luther King's assassination.

When FAMU students heard the news of King's assassination their first reaction was sorrow, followed by anger and rage. Within hours, student protests escalated into rock and bottle throwing at passing cars, and small arms fire. The first reported casualty was a white youth with a bleeding ear whose car had been attacked by stones, bricks, and bottles thrown from the FAMU campus. Rioters firebombed Southern Mobile Home Brokers, 1804 South Monroe Street, burning two trailers at 9:00 P.M. Firemen were beaten back by bottles and bricks thrown by FAMU students until police arrived. The students dispersed but later rolled barrels into South Adams Street, and pelted passing cars. At 10:00 P.M. City Commissioner John A. Rudd was injured by shattering glass when the car in which he was a passenger with Mayor Gene Berkowitz was bombarded with bricks and soda bottles on Railroad Avenue near Gamble Street. By 10:00 P.M. Tallahassee police completed cordonning off the FAMU campus on all four sides. Around 10:00 P.M. a westward-bound group of Blacks, turned back from Wahnish
Way by the police cordon, returned to the east entrance of the University. Snipers began shooting at police with light-caliber firearms. Ordered to withhold fire except to protect life, the police barricaded themselves behind their patrol cars and paddy wagon. Police shot out street lights to mask their position. To retaliate against snipers, police lobbed tear gas canisters toward the hill entrance to the university. Police were also attacked with arrows at one point in the night. The worst tragedy occurred when someone firebombed Crow's Grocery, 1902 Lake Bradford Road, where nineteen-year-old Travis E. Crow III (an upstairs resident) died from asphyxiation at 2:30 A.M.\textsuperscript{11}

The violence continued into Friday. In the Frenchtown neighborhood across town, two furniture stores were firebombed, Home Furniture Store, 622 North Macomb Street and Waldo's Furniture Company, 624 West Fourth Avenue. One ignited firebomb of two tossed into a rear window of the Home Furniture Store was extinguished by the automatic sprinkler system. The fire department saved Waldo's. Near the FAMU campus the white-owned Econowash Launderette, 316 West Pershing Street, was broken into and demolished. After removing the front plate-glass window, the vandals used crowbars to destroy every washing machine.\textsuperscript{12}

Because of the continued rioting, FAMU President Gore closed down the university until April 15 on the instruction of Board of Regents Chancellor Robert B. Mautz; all dormitories were to be evacuated by 7:00 P.M. Friday, April 5. Also in response to the violence, Sheriff William P. Joyce closed all liquor stores Friday night; many reopened on Saturday
though. Some sporting goods stores and other ammunition outlets either were being careful to whom they sold ammunition or refused to sell any at all. Vandals and joyriders kept police busy on Saturday, but by Sunday, April 7, the town was quiet. 13

As is typical during times of unrest, rumors abounded. Thursday night a rumor spread that a white man had been shot but was rapidly disproved. Fear fueled an unfounded rumor that militant Blacks planned to attack white-owned stores downtown. Friday morning a white coach scuffled with a Black student at one-third Black Rickards High School. Exaggerating the non-disciplined confrontation into a racial fight, some students overreacted and called their parents to come pick them up. Frightened parents pulled hundreds of students out of school. The excited and restless students were allowed to leave with their parents. 14

Substantial numbers of Black students skipped school to attend memorial services for Dr. King on April 9. A solemn fifteen-block march past the state Capitol drew four hundred Black youths. Rev. Raleigh N. Gooden, pastor of St. Mary's Primitive Baptist Church, organized the walk "to keep them guided in the right direction." 15

FAMU student body president Spencer Albert believed the riots were a "spontaneous eruption brought up by King's death. It gave icing to the students' grievances." 16 The Spring 1967 discussions about FAMU merging with FSU caused tension among faculty and students all year. But not until May 7, 1977 did the Senate approve a bill requiring legislative approval before FAMU could merge with FSU. 17 FAMU students appeared to combine
their anger and rage about King's death with the possible loss of their school, escalating the violence with each passing hour. The Saturday closing of FAMU and a cooling rain apparently quenched the violence. By Sunday, with the students gone, the tension dissipated. The violence was contained within the FAMU area except for the two furniture store firebombings. The local Black communities did not seem to participate in the riots. One speculation is that the local Black activist ministers (C.K. Steele, R.N. Gooden) appealed to their constituency to follow Dr. King's nonviolent teachings and refrain from rioting. Mayor Gene Berkowitz issued a public plea Friday for citizens to "use good judgment and exercise self restraint" and to stay away from trouble spots. Another reason may be the more volatile nature of the students. Most of the FAMU administration feared the Black militants on campus as they had more influence than anyone in power. With the cordonning off of FAMU, the leadership was kept within the university area. The anger and rage of the "burn, baby, burn" mentality was effectively prevented from spilling over into the residential communities. The local Blacks expressed their sorrow and anger in private or in church.

In the aftermath of the riots, Chancellor Mautz said university authorities and local police would seek and punish the leaders. In May 1968, one FAMU student, Thomas Watts, was arrested for inciting a riot and possessing a firebomb. Arrest warrants were issued for twelve other Blacks in connection with the riots. A $2,700 reward was offered for information leading to the arrest and conviction of whoever threw the firebomb that killed Travis E. Crow III. Sheriff Joyce said on April 9, "there
is not much to go on... no tangible evidence," in the investigation of Crow's death. And yet within one month (May 5) two Black teenagers were arrested and charged with the murder of Crow. Since County Judge James C. Gwynn, acting as coroner, ruled Crow's death as homicide by arson, both James Colbert, 17, and Billy Ray Oliver, 18, were convicted of first-degree murder. Both received life sentences.

The Cabinet authorized a $100,000 massive purchase of mace, tear gas, helmets, shotguns, and other equipment for state police in reaction to the riots. They also agreed to increase the security force at FAMU from eleven to eighteen. The only positive result of the nationwide riots was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 on April 10.
NOTES


3 Ibid., p. 167.


7 Ibid.; St. Augustine Record, 6 March 1961.

8 Bradenton Herald, 31 May 1963.


10 Tallahassee Democrat, 27 October 1964; St. Petersburg Times, 7 August 1967.

11 St. Petersburg Times, 6 April 1968; Miami Herald, 6 April 1968; Tallahassee Democrat, 5 April 1968, 6 April 1968, 9 April 1968.

12 Tallahassee Democrat, 6 April 1968.

13 Ibid., 7 April 1968, 8 April 1968.

14 Ibid., 5 April 1968, 6 April 1968.

15 St. Petersburg Times, 10 April 1968.

16 Ft. Lauderdale News and Sun Sentinel, 5 May 1968.

17 Florida Flambeau, 8 May 1977.
18 Tallahassee Democrat, 6 April 1968.
19 St. Petersburg Times, 24 May 1968.
20 Ibid., 9 April 1968.
22 St. Petersburg Times, 1 May 1968.
23 Heaps, p. 168.