

The 1964 Jacksonville Race Riot



A group of demonstrators in 1964. Images from the [Rodney Lawrence Hurst, Sr. Papers](#)

Following Ax Handle Saturday, Jacksonville's ongoing struggles to fully accept racial integration and equality came to a head in 1964. That year, in an effort to integrate formerly all-white Lackawanna Elementary School, Iona Godfrey, an African-American civil rights worker, enrolled her six-year-old son Donald at the school. The move upset many white parents and the family became the subject of protest and threats of violence.

The threats became reality when a bomb exploded under the Godfreys' house in the historically black section of Murray Hill on February 16, 1964. A day later, several African-American ministers were arrested for attempting to register as guests in downtown's whites-only Robert Meyer Hotel. This event followed several others being arrested for staging a sit-in at Morrison's Cafeteria.

To avoid arrests, Rutledge Pearson began using hit-and-runs, in which demonstrators protested at a location and then left before the police arrived. This saved money and allowed the organization to reach more segregated businesses, including the Robert Meyer Hotel, Morrison's Cafeteria, and Leb's restaurant. It also embarrassed Mayor Haydon Burns, who was in the midst of a campaign to become governor of Florida. A segregationist running on his ability to control Jacksonville's racial conflicts, Burns deputized 496 firefighters to strengthen the city's police force to resist integration.

Things further escalated when a protester threw fire bombs and light bulbs filled with paint at a “Burns for Governor” campaign office. Burns believed he had been good to African-Americans and did not understand why they were against him. However, he could not give them equality because he believed in segregation, and he vowed to smash any attempt to integrate downtown restaurants and hotels.



The KKK marching on a downtown Jacksonville street in 1964. Images from the [Rodney Lawrence Hurst, Sr. Papers](#)

On March 23, a false newspaper report accused four black men of assaulting a white man. A protest rally with 2,000 people began at Hemming Plaza, only to be pushed out of downtown by the police. As protesters made their way into Durkeeville, a bomb scare at New Stanton High School forced evacuation, leading students to pour into the streets with protesters.

After being taunted by students, a white milk man reacted by throwing a milk carton at them. Students then attacked white photographers and clashed with police officers. Throughout town, students attacked white businesses and those owned by conservative blacks. According to Rev. G. Vincent Lewis, a student at Matthew Gilbert High School at the time, the riot got out of hand because of the way the police responded.

They used white officers to arrest black students. This further irritated the students, who lashed out at the officers. He remembered that many students tried to get arrested because it was considered a badge of courage. They ran behind police paddy wagons, trying to get arrested. “I know that this is a fact because my sister, Jacquelyn Lewis, chased a paddy wagon for about a block trying to get it to stop so the policemen could arrest her,” Lewis recounted. Once they got to the police station the children were allegedly beaten by the police.

Source: Rev. G. Vincent Lewis

To end the violence, mass arrests were made city wide and the old Maxwell C. Snyder National Guard Armory was used as a temporary jail. More than 200 people, 75 under the age of 17, were arrested. That evening, four white men searching for an African-American to attack murdered 36-year-old Johnnie Mae Chappell, a mother of ten, along US 1 north of town. This shooting resulted in continued racial clashes across the city, including buildings damaged with firebombs, protesters setting piled rags ablaze at Burns' campaign offices, and youths throwing rocks at passing cars on Interstate 95.



Demonstrators picketing outside Leb's Restaurant on West Adams Street. Images from the [Rodney Lawrence Hurst, Sr. Papers](#)

After another day of rioting that saw more than 100 African-Americans arrested, and following a group of students attacking police and fire vehicles at Mathew Gilbert High School, Martin Luther King, Jr. sent an urgent telegram offering the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's mediation services.

"I join with you in calling on the leaders of Jacksonville to bend every effort to persuade the Negro community to remain nonviolent no matter how sorely provoked."

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Pearson declined King's offer because he believed there were enough local resources in place to address the riots. The next day, at Pearson's request to local youth, the destruction ceased.

Bartley, A. (1999). The 1960 and 1964 Jacksonville Riots: How Struggle Led to Progress. The Florida Historical Quarterly, 78(1), 46-73. Retrieved May 31, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/30150542