

"An Account of the Downtown Riot"

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The crowd assembled at the Mason Temple to await the beginning of the march in behalf of the sanitation workers. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was scheduled to arrive in Memphis at 10:30 a.m. to lead the march. The crowd consisted of men, women, and children of all ages.

Due to the flight difficulties Dr. King arrived late and the march had started without him. However, upon his arrival the crowd burst into cheers. There was such a great disturbance that Dr. King had a difficult time calming the crowd. After he managed to quiet the marchers and make his way to the front, then the march was officially on its way.

The march travelled the route of Mason Avenue to Third Street and continued to Beale Street. During this time the march was quiet, calm and completely controllable while carrying their signs and posters. They even remained orderly while shouting "I am a man and...". They remained peaceful until a (102

young teenager stepped from the crowd, broke a window and yelled "Burn down this mother fucking Memphis." The crowd then burst into cheers with a large portion of it forming smaller groups.

These smaller groups started the looting and continued to break out more windows of various places on Beale Street. These actions of the crowd continued and increased to the degree that they were completely uncontrollable. These actions of the crowd brought the police into the action.

The policemen's reaction to the conduct was the immediate pushing and clubbing of individuals. During the passing of blows many innocent victims were struck while trying to flee from the violence. Moreover, the policemen tended to go a bit overboard in controlling the crowd, which resulted in injuries to many persons.

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For example, there was a man about 70 or 80 years of age on a walking cane who was trying hard to remove himself from the massive confusion when an officer struck him on the back of the head with a rifle.

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 The man could have been involved in the destructive actions prior to this instance but there was no ~~evidence~~ such actions at this time. The crowd that had turned to a furious mob sought revenge on the policemen by striking them on the head and clubbing them with sticks or what ever was available.

At this point Memphis could have been a scene from a battlefield in Vietnam. People were running over each other, screaming and hollering at each other. The most brutal incident occurred when a policeman, walking along main street, struck a young boy about 8 years old on the head with a club. The boy fell to the ground but the policeman continued clubbing the boy until a Negro struck him on the head with a brick which caused the policeman to fall. After he fell a crowd of Negro youth gave him several blows.

The march in behalf of the sanitation workers, that started out with complete control, continued this massive violence until it was finally suppressed and controlled later in the day.