Robert Charles Riot 

In late July 1900, as Robert Charles sat on a stoop in Central City with a friend, three police officers stopped to question them.

When Charles stood up, Patrolman August Mora grabbed him, pulling his wooden billet to beat Charles as they struggled into the street. Charles escaped Mora’s grasp, and both men pulled their guns firing three times; both were wounded. Another of the officers, Joseph Cantrelle, also shot at Charles who eluded police at the site where he was shot, but left a bloody trail that stretched to General Taylor and Carondelet. Returning home to dress his wounds and collect his rifle, Charles was cornered by police before he could escape, and met the three officers at the door with the rifle, killing Captain John Day and Patrolman Peter Lamb before easily escaping capture again. Charles’ refuge was nearby, but his whereabouts would not be discovered for days.

While Charles remained in hiding, white vigilante mobs erupted across the city. One mob formed at the 6th Precinct on Rousseau, calling for the lynching of Charles’ friend, Lenard Pierce, who was detained there for questioning. Other mobs formed at the City Morgue, the Daily-Times Building, and at Lee Circle where after a rally, they marched up St. Charles Avenue. The next night, the white mob assembled again at Lee Circle and marched uptown, this time to Washington, assaulting passing blacks along the way. The mob then turned around and headed to Tulane Avenue, stopping streetcars along the way to assault black riders.

Those few days, from July 24 to the afternoon of July 27, would see the greatest outbreak of racial violence New Orleans had seen in decades, and the biggest riot since the 1891 lynching of eleven Sicilians falsely accused of killing the chief of police. The stage was already set for a massive racial conflict: wages had collapsed in the depression of the 1890s, and without the 50/50 agreements negotiated by unions, port employers had replaced white workers with black ones as vastly less expensive and less likely to complain. White unemployment was high, particularly for the unskilled, a problem exacerbated by black migration from rural parishes and European immigration. For their part, New Orleans’ blacks, stripped of voting rights in 1898, chafed at the imposition of harsh new restrictions as Jim Crow tethered nearly every aspect of daily life.

Sources

