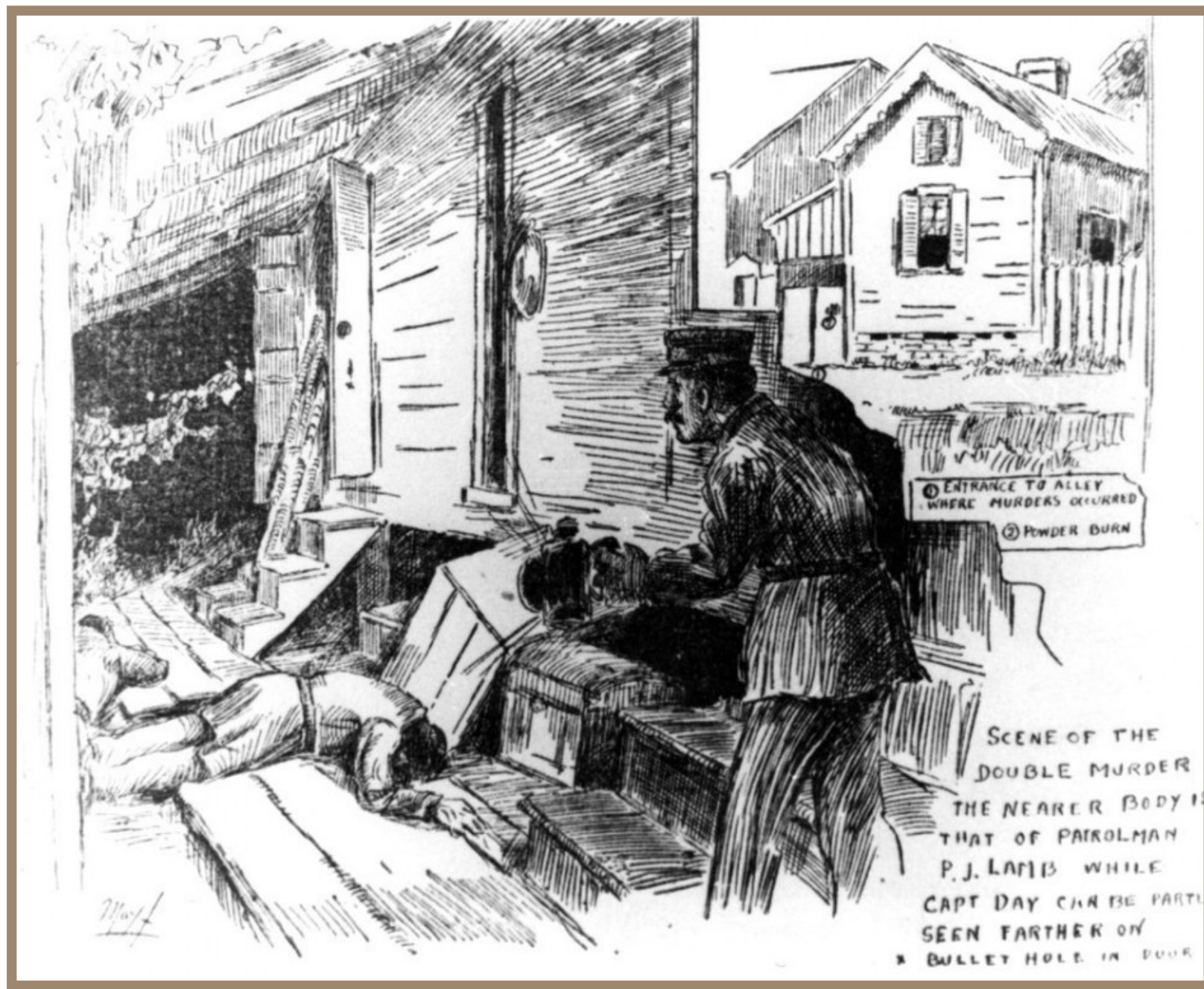


Robert Charles Riot 1900

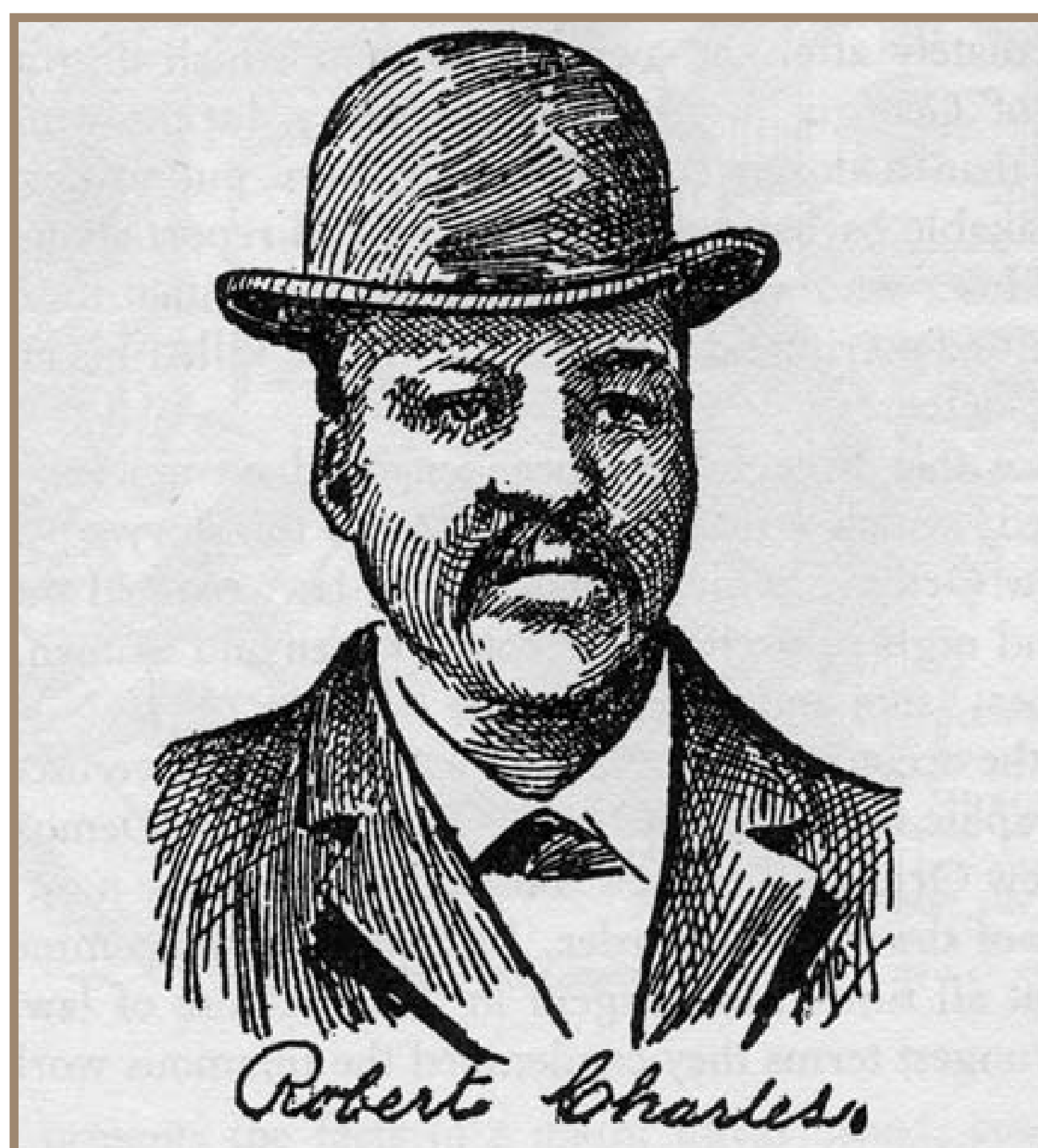
In late July 1900, as Robert Charles sat on a stoop in Central City with a friend, three police officers stopped to question them.

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.



New Orleans Times-Democrat Sketches, July 25, 1900. "Scene of the Double Murder." Source: New Orleans Times-Democrat Archives

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.

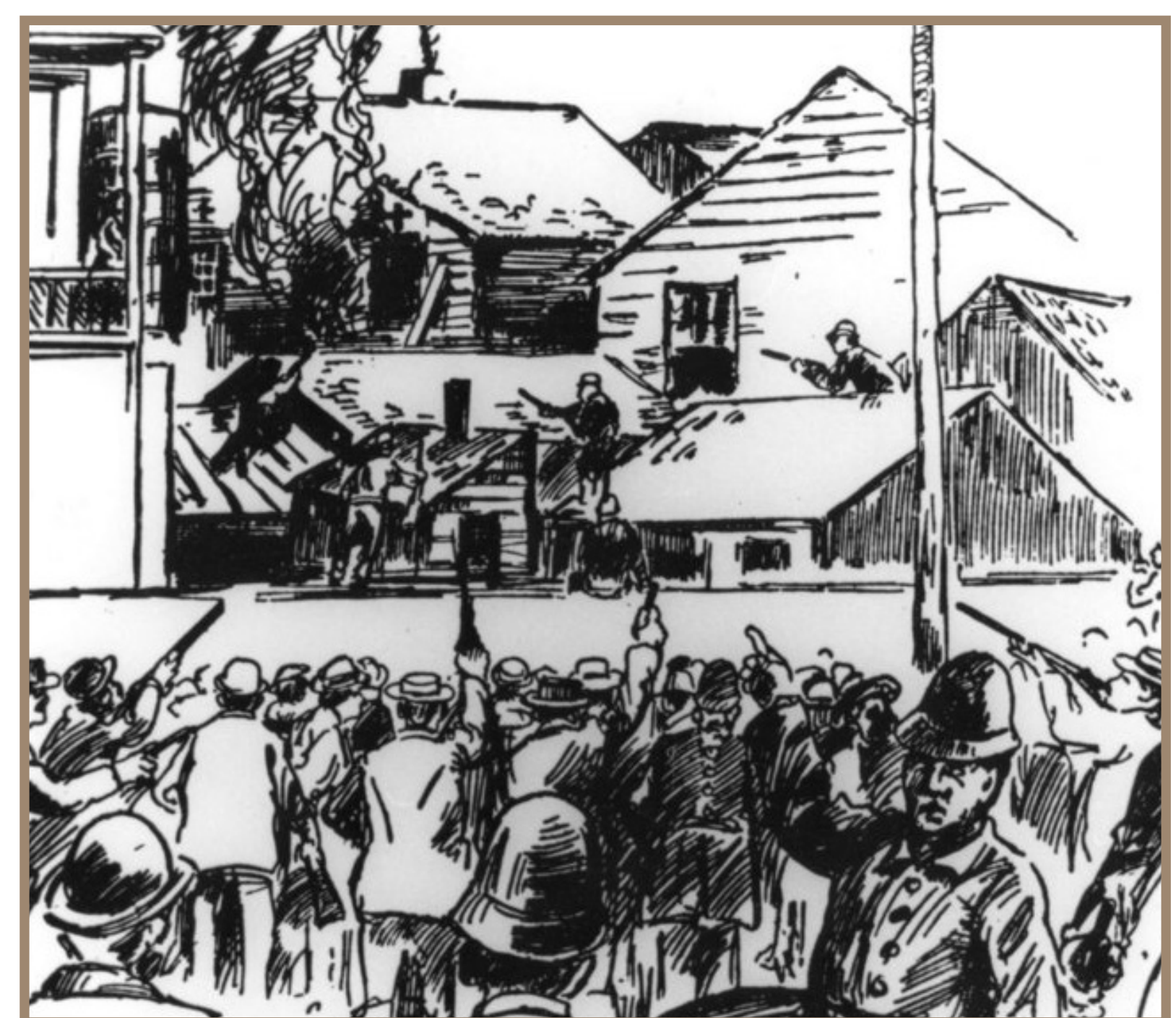


Engraving of Robert Charles. Ida B. Wells. *Mob Rule in New Orleans*. Source: Getty Images

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.

When the crowd arrived at the prison on Tulane Avenue, they were barred from entering, turning instead to Storyville and the barrooms of Franklin and Customhouse Streets. Soon the mass split into small roving bands which terrorized the streets. One group chased a black man at Canal and Villere, eventually overcoming and killing him, while another black man was killed at the French Market. Black men and women were pulled from the Clay Avenue streetcar and beaten. The police did little to stop the roving mobs or protect the city's black population; over the course of the riot, six black people would be killed, including the elderly man murdered at the French Market and an elderly woman shot in her own home, and another sixty-five were severely wounded by the mob.

By July 26, the scale of havoc, and a virtual shutdown of the port as black dockworkers stayed home, prompted Mayor Capdevielle to call for 500 civilian volunteers to help put down the riot, a number he increased to 1500 by the end of the day before asking for help from the State Militia. On July 27, Robert Charles was located at 1208–1210 Saratoga and thousands of armed whites filled the surrounding area. Charles shot two more officers before retreating to an upstairs room. He continued to exchange fire with the police and mob outside, wounding several before being smoked out and killing himself. His body was dragged through the streets by the mob which then torched the Thomy Lafon School in celebration of Charles' death.



Daily Picayune sketch. Source: William Ivy Hair. *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, p. 110. LSU Press. 2008.

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