

1-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Senechal, Roberta (2009) "From In Lincoln's Shadow: The 1908 Race Riot in Springfield, Illinois," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter\\_review/vol18/iss1/8](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol18/iss1/8)

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# From *In Lincoln's Shadow*: *The 1908 Race Riot in Springfield, Illinois*

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**Roberta Senechal**

*This preface to a study of the sociological origins of the Springfield riot was written for a new edition issued to mark the riot's centennial. The study was first published in 1990 as The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot, © 2008, Roberta Senechal. Reprinted with permission of the author.*

"In Lincoln's Shadow" refers to a powerful and enduring symbolic connection between the riot and the city's most famous former resident: Abraham Lincoln. After the Civil War, northern whites generally assumed that violence against African Americans was a southern problem—and part of the South's moral inferiority. The Springfield riot shattered this assumption.

The irony surrounding the riot shocked the nation. It seemed unthinkable that African Americans might be attacked and violently driven from the Great Emancipator's hometown and final resting place, and it was front-page news—North and South—for weeks. For example, a *Washington Post* headline proclaimed, "Lincoln's City Scene of the Bitterest Race War Seen in Years," and the story continued in the same vein: "The city, which is richest in memories of the Great Emancipator, is tonight an armed camp because its citizens yesterday gave vent to the hatred of the race which Abraham Lincoln declared free and equal with all other people in this country." A Texas newspaper similarly spoke of Springfield's "war between the negroes and the white man," and reported that "As the blood red prairie sun sank tonight into the fields of waving corn that hedge about the city, where the bones of him who said: 'With charity for

all and malice toward none,' the people trembled with terror and alarm." And a Mississippi newspaper stated that, "The whites have decreed that Springfield, the home of Abraham Lincoln, who emancipated the black race from slavery, shall not be the abiding place of the negroes. The order is 'Move on,' and the negro is moving."<sup>1</sup>

The riot's details shocked the nation as well. The violence first erupted just a few blocks from the venerated Lincoln family homestead. Newsmen even reported hearing the rioters shout, "Curse the day Lincoln freed the slaves!" and "Lincoln freed you, we'll show you where you belong!"<sup>2</sup> The symbolism also extended to one of the riot's casualties, William Donnegan, an elderly black cobbler killed by a white crowd who cut his throat and hanged him to a tree outside his home. The press said that he had been a friend of Abraham Lincoln, and black ministers in New York lamented his killing "in the shadow of Lincoln's old homestead." One minister asked, "What would the emancipator of our race have thought had he witnessed the crimes of that horrible mob? Would he not have regarded his life as given in vain to see the people he freed subjected to such treatment?"<sup>3</sup>

At the time of the riot in Springfield, the city was even busy preparing to host a massive celebration on February 12, 1909, in honor of the centennial of Lincoln's birth that would feature speeches by numerous foreign as well as American dignitaries. The central event was a lavish banquet at Springfield's large State Arsenal building—which six months earlier had sheltered up to 300 black refugees, including the widow of Lincoln's friend William Donnegan. At least 700 distinguished guests and prominent speakers attended the dinner: judges and politicians from Illinois and other states; ambassadors from France and Great Britain; former presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan; and Robert Lincoln, son of Abraham Lincoln. Thirty aged Civil War veterans also "came in a body and marched gayly, with heads erect, to the strains of 'The Girl I Left Behind Me,' to the tables which had been reserved." Finally, some 3,000 female "society leaders" adorned the galleries overlooking the dining and speechmaking in the Arsenal's hall.<sup>4</sup>

But the Arsenal banquet excluded African Americans, and the press was quick to react. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* featured the issue in its headlines: "Black at Lincoln Banquet? Only Whites Are Welcome." The

*Tribune* noted, for example, that a black attorney from Chicago, Edward H. Morris, had earlier purchased the necessary \$25-per-plate ticket to attend the banquet, only to be stricken from the guest list when the Centennial organizers discovered his race. Springfield's black churches likewise tried to raise money to buy banquet tickets for their ministers, but the organizers apparently refused to have them as well. The *Tribune* observed sarcastically that, "The colored population hereabouts will be represented only by the gents who slip the soup [to the white guests]." It added that Springfield's black citizens "are thoroughly aroused over the fact that they are deprived of participation in the big doings."<sup>5</sup>

The city's blacks responded by holding their own separate centennial celebration, where Reverend L. H. Magee delivered a tribute to Lincoln that included a barbed reference to the all-white Arsenal dinner downtown: "I would rather be one of the number of the black devotees of Lincoln than toastmaster at a so-called Lincoln banquet at \$25 a plate. O consistency, thou art a jewel! How can you play Hamlet without the melancholy Dane?" Meanwhile, at the all-white Arsenal banquet, speakers praised Lincoln as the savior of the Union, a great orator, and as a man whose life exemplified America's abundant opportunities for the hard-working and virtuous to rise from humble origins. Originally the Arsenal banquet organizers did invite one African American—the popular Booker T. Washington, who was widely known, like Lincoln, as an exemplar of the "self-made man." Although Washington declined the invitation because of previous speaking engagements in New York City on Lincoln's birthday, he sent a letter (to be read aloud at the Springfield celebration) in which he invoked the shade of another Lincoln—that of the Great Emancipator. And he was probably mindful of the recent riot when he wrote, "No white man who hallows the name of Lincoln will inflict injustice upon the negro because he is a negro or because he is weak."<sup>6</sup>

During the riot in August, reformer William English Walling had rushed to Springfield, arriving by train late on the second day of the violence to interview as many people as he could—from the authorities to the common folk on the streets. He published the results of his investigation two weeks later in a scathing article called "The Race War in the North" in a popular magazine, *The Independent*, where he reported finding widespread support for the riot among Springfield's white citizens.

Springfield, he wrote, “stood for the action of the mob. She hoped the rest of the negroes might flee.”<sup>7</sup> And he noted the historical irony of the riot by featuring on his article’s first page a photograph of Lincoln’s home with the caption: “He [Lincoln] is very unpopular in Springfield just now, and the house was attacked.” The rioters’ message, he wrote, was that blacks “could not obtain shelter under the favorable traditions of Lincoln’s home town,” and he noted that “the whole awful and menacing truth” was “that a large part of the white population of Lincoln’s home . . . have initiated a permanent warfare with the negro race.”<sup>8</sup> He invoked “the spirit of the abolitionists, of Lincoln, of Lovejoy [an abolitionist printer killed by pro-slavery partisans],” and finally challenged his readers with the question: “Yet who realizes the seriousness of the situation, and what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to [the blacks’] aid?”<sup>9</sup>

Walling’s article galvanized many northern progressives into action, including several New York reformers who successfully recruited the support of Oswald Garrison Villard, a wealthy and influential grandson of well-known Boston abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. On February 12, 1909, Villard issued “The Lincoln’s Birthday Call”—at once a protest against anti-black violence and a call to action—signed by more than fifty prominent individuals. In his “Call,” Villard condemned the “lawless attacks upon the Negro . . . even in the Springfield made famous by Lincoln.” Such violence, he added, “could but shock the author of the sentiment that a ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people, should not perish from the earth.’”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the northern reformist outrage stirred by the Springfield riot led directly to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. At the time of its creation and for many years afterward, the NAACP’s major mission was to combat racial violence—in the North as well as the South. In still another irony, then, the riot “in Lincoln’s shadow” was responsible for what became the most illustrious and powerful advocate of African-American civil rights in American history.

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<sup>1</sup>*Washington Post*, 16 August 1908; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 16 August 1908; *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 17 August 1908.

<sup>2</sup>William English Walling, "The Race War in the North" *The Independent* 65 (3 September 1908), 529.

<sup>3</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 16 August 1908; *New York Times*, 24 August 1908.

<sup>4</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 February 1909.

<sup>5</sup>*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11, 13 February 1909.

<sup>6</sup>*New York Times*, 13 February 1909.

<sup>7</sup>Walling, 531.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 529–30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 22–23.