Public Landing in 1835
The Cincinnati Riots of 1862

by Leonard Harding

Immediately after the outbreak of the Civil War, Cincinnati, then the third largest industrial city in the nation, found itself temporarily paralyzed by a recession. It was severe enough to prompt one local observer to comment:

These are the times that try men's pockets as well as their souls. Our busy city is almost as silent as the sabbath. Immense manufactures are entirely closed. The pork merchant alone, it is said, will lose a million dollars. But so far all classes seem to stand it pretty well.²

The paralysis proved to be temporary, however, as military contracts and inflation reversed the economic slowdown, both nationally and locally. Sufficient war business filtered into Cincinnati to enable the city to regain a modicum of prosperity.³ But this “war boom”

¹United States; Bureau of the Census, 8th Census, 1860, Census Reports, Vol. 4 (Washington, 1866), xviii.
²Chauncey Giles to Mrs. Isaac Knapp, June 1, 1861, from Carrie Giles Carter, The Life of Chauncey Giles as Told in His Diary and Correspondence (Cambridge, 1920), 187.
³Louis L. Tucker, Cincinnati During the Civil War (Columbus, 1962), 21.
created an aura of economic security which proved to be false, blinding the city to the permanent damage which the conflict was causing: a general bypassing of Cincinnati by newly developing transportation and industry because of the city's proximity to the South and the destruction of the southern markets on which it formerly relied.

With war contracts helping the business firms of the city to make a relatively easy adjustment to the war, most of the residents remained oblivious to an alarming trend in the steamboat industry: river commerce was declining just as manufacturing was beginning to prosper. Local newspapers contributed to the general ignorance, for by the summer of 1862 the editors had discontinued their observations about the recession. Editorial wisdom and wit now focused on national politics, thereby giving little, if any, indication of hard times in the city. But the downtrend in river commerce persisted and jobs grew increasingly scarce on the levee. This increased discontent and resentment among the various ethnic and racial groups comprising the levee workers, thus creating an ominous climate for violence.4 The two predominant groups vying for work as roustabouts and stevedores were the Irish and the Negroes, between whom relations were strained.5

Tempers on the levee reached the breaking point on Thursday morning, July 10, 1862, when two Negroes working there became involved in an argument with one of a group of white men who had gathered on the levee. The altercation apparently grew bitter, for one of the Negroes allegedly struck a white man with a block of wood which he chanced to have in his hand. Immediately part of the group of whites chased one of the Negro stevedores aboard the steamboat Aurora.6

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4Negroes began leaving the city on Wednesday, July 9, in anticipation of trouble from the white community. Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, July 10, 1862, p. 3.
5Fights between the Irish and Negroes were fairly common. The two groups did not get along well as the Irish particularly resented being compelled, through poverty, to live with the Negroes. Occasionally one of these fights would surpass the normal bounds of a brawl and would become what the local papers described as a "war." One of these "wars" had occurred in Bucktown in June 1861, growing out of a dispute over the favors of an Irish lass. The "war" lasted two days and the mayor called out the Storer Guards to quell it. No arrests were made. For further details, see the Cincinnati Daily Commercial, June 25, 1861, p. 2.
Along the levee, the whites now began attacking all the Negro stevedores, forcing them to seek refuge on the steamboats. The violence was not entirely one-sided. Some of the white men were wounded when a small group of Negroes counterattacked. As the disturbance spread along the waterfront, the officers of the steamboats became alarmed and alerted the mayor. The fury of the mob continued; one hapless Negro "contraband of war" was surrounded and severely mauled by a group of whites. Soon thereafter the police arrived and two white men, Godfred Frank and Frank Miller, were arrested for inciting riot. There were no further disturbances that afternoon, but the general opinion of the whites was that "no d—d niggers should work on the levee."  

On Friday and Saturday, July eleventh and twelfth, only isolated incidents were recorded, but the newspapers conveyed the impression that more trouble was a distinct possibility. The episodes might simply have dwindled into oblivion at this point had the police been able to maintain effective patrols in the city. But the Civil War now intervened in the person of the Confederate raider, John Hunt Morgan.  

Morgan's dash through the Union lines had placed the defenseless city of Lexington, Kentucky, in danger of attack. Troops from the camps around Cincinnati were immediately sent to Lexington, and the city council, recognizing the danger, added 120 policemen to the military units moving south on Sunday, July thirteenth. In retrospect, it is difficult to imagine just why the council made such an ill-advised, albeit well-meaning, decision. Cincinnati policemen were incapable of effective resistance to Morgan's veteran cavalry on their own, and their numbers were too few to provide adequate reinforcements to the military defenders of Lexington. In addition, their departure left only forty policemen to cope with the "evil spirits" which were left in the city.  

Thus the city council itself was partly responsible for the violence which followed.

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7Ibid., Daily Commercial, July 11, p. 2.
8Daily Commercial, July 12, p. 2.
9Ibid., July 14, p. 2; Daily Gazette, July 17, p. 2. This particular riot has received only scant notice from historians. The first man to include it in an account of wartime
During the evening of Sunday, July thirteenth, the rioting was renewed. A large crowd had gathered on the fringe of Bucktown, and a Negro who happened to be strolling down the street was seized and beaten. Another group of about twenty men surrounded the Fourth Street home of a Negro, pelting it with stones. The police dispersed this crowd before extensive damage could be done, but no arrests were made. Later, another Negro was attacked while walking along with his employer. The latter, a white man, tried to intervene and was "pretty roughly handled." 

Monday afternoon the mayor swore in a special force of thirty men to help quell the disturbances. That evening two colored men were attacked as they walked down Vine Street toward the levee. One escaped down an alley and the other was rescued by a group of white steamboatmen who witnessed the incident. Later in the night a band of drunken Negroes from Bucktown struck back at the whites: they invaded an Irish sector of the Thirteenth Ward, shooting out windows and breaking into one of the homes.

On Tuesday the spirit of violence grew uglier as groups of white men gathered in the town and assured each other that the "Niggers would be cleaned out." Negro residents, evidently taking the whites at their word, prepared for the worst. Many left the city, joining those who had departed previously in anticipation of violence. The mayor reacted as well, swearing in ten more special police officers to bolster his inadequate force of seventy men.

Once again, as evening approached trouble began when some
Negroes, returning from work on the levee, were attacked. Shortly thereafter the center of violence shifted to Bucktown. Around six o'clock several white men broke into the home of Dr. Hill, an elderly Negro, and began smashing the contents. Police quickly arrived and arrested one of the white men along with Dr. Hill and another Negro who was in the house at the time. From then until ten o'clock groups of whites roamed Bucktown, breaking windows and shouting their hatred. The windows of several homes and of the African Methodist Church were destroyed. A house of ill-repute in the same neighborhood suffered vandalism. At ten o'clock the marauding groups of whites coalesced into one great mob at the southeast edge of Bucktown and advanced. The residents were armed and their houses barricaded. After several volleys were fired at the advancing mob, most of the whites withdrew to the edge of Bucktown.15

Other whites, however, drifted back into the area, and it was then that the most serious incident of the week occurred. A band of whites surrounded a Negro stronghold, and by two o'clock on the morning of the fifteenth, it appeared that the building would be captured. The owner of an Irish grocery store next door to the “fort” began removing its contents lest they be destroyed by an overflow of the mob. William Burke, a relative of the grocer on his way home from work, decided to help him. While the two were thus occupied, the opposing factions exchanged shots and William Burke fell, mortally wounded in the groin. The police rushed to the scene and arrested eight white men. Two days later William Burke died.16

On Wednesday, the sixteenth, the “better element”17 of the city finally moved to end the rioting. Their primary motive was not compassion for the Negroes but fear that the property-damaging proclivities of the mobs might get out of control and spill over into the rest of the downtown area.18 Two meetings were called, one in the afternoon and one in the evening, and indignant resolutions were

15Daily Commercial, July 16, p. 2; Daily Gazette, July 16, p. 2; Catholic Telegraph, July 23, p. 236.
16Catholic Telegraph, July 23, p. 236; Daily Commercial, July 17, p. 2; Daily Gazette, July 17, p. 2; Daily Times, July 17, p. 3.
17Reid, Ohio in the War, 86.
18Daily Commercial, July 17, p. 2.
Steamboat activity around 1860
The Cincinnati Riots of 1862

passed. At the evening meeting the Winfield Rifles (75 men) presented themselves, armed and accoutred, and volunteered for guard duty. Of the one thousand citizens who it was hoped would answer an appeal of the mayor in combating violence, these men were the only ones to respond.19

During the evening meeting, trouble again broke out in Bucktown and along the levee: Negroes returning from work on the levee were chased and beaten; in Bucktown a brothel, the Shakespeare House, was found to be burning. The fire department responded quickly and managed to contain the fire in an area consisting of five Negro tenements. If there were no further incidents that night, it was because Cincinnati was, by then, practically devoid of Negro residents.20

By Thursday the situation had noticeably improved. Most of the Negroes had gone to the country and the police, with the aid of the Winfield Rifles, finally managed to patrol the streets effectively. Aroused citizens and daylight prevented any overt action by the rioters during the day, but one final night attack occurred on Thursday, the seventeenth. At nine o'clock in the evening the all-Negro crew of the steamboat Magnolia was ambushed by a band of about fifty whites; all crew members escaped. For the rest of the night and into the next morning, the streets were patrolled by the police and Winfield Rifles. After a week of disturbance, the riot dissipated and the city returned to normal, leaving negro residents to recoup their losses as best they could.21

The news media immediately began exploring the causes of the weeklong riot. That there was a labor problem at the heart of it was obvious to all, but the exact nature of this problem was unclear. All the major English-language dailies, with the exception of the Times, eagerly propounded their theories. The Gazette went out on a limb by suggesting that there was actually a shortage of labor on the levee

19Ibid.; Daily Gazette, July 17, p. 2.
20Ibid.; Catholic Telegraph, July 23, p. 236. Negroes had been leaving the city all week because of the violence.
21Daily Enquirer, July 18, p. 3; Daily Gazette, July 18, p. 2. The Negroes were not offered any type of relief from the city or from private charity.
and that the riot was simply the result of Irish meanness.\textsuperscript{22} The \textit{Gazette} did not attempt to account for the large bands of idle white men hanging about the levee prior to the riot, nor did it say exactly why these men felt that “no d — d niggers should work on the levee.”\textsuperscript{23}

The \textit{Daily Commercial} theorized that the riot was caused by Negro strike-breaking. The editors told their readers that the Irish had been striking for higher wages on the levee. The Germans had first taken the jobs vacated by the striking Irish, but had been frightened away by violence. The Negroes had then taken the jobs, but had not been similarly cowed; hence the Irish resorted to violence. This theory implied that Negro workers were newcomers to the levee, though they had in fact been working there in significant numbers for at least twenty years, and as they were an integral part of the labor force, no strike could have been possible without their consent. Nor can the \textit{Commercial’s} insistence on careful delineation of the various ethnic groups be substantiated. The very first man arrested as an instigator was Godfred Frank, and subsequent arrest lists also contained German names.

The \textit{Catholic Telegraph} and the \textit{Daily Enquirer} came closest to the truth in stating the riot had been caused by Negroes underbidding white labor on the levee. The whites, jobless and hungry, sought to retain their jobs by driving the Negroes from the levee and the city.\textsuperscript{24} Neither newspaper attempted to explain why, after years of fairly peaceful co-existence between levee workers, there was a breakdown in relations which led to violence. The \textit{Telegraph} did not, however, try to explain the violence in Bucktown as labor strife. To its editors these disturbances were two distinct affairs: the one being labor strife and the other a continuation of an old problem — Irish efforts

\textsuperscript{22}This argument, with all its agonizingly wrought reasoning, was incorporated completely and given some extra rationalization by Williston H. Lofton in his article, “Northern Labor and the Negro During the Civil War,” \textit{J. N. H.}, XXXIV (July 1949), 251–273. Whitelaw Reid and Charles F. Goss both accepted the \textit{Gazette’s} contention that the riot was due to white meanness without including the paper’s analysis.

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Daily Gazette}, July 11, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{24}The \textit{Enquirer’s} analysis was incorporated by Charles R. Wilson, “Cincinnati’s Reputation During the Civil War,” \textit{Journal of Southern History}, Vol. II (Nov. 1936), 468–479.
to drive Negro sinners from their midst (thus the destruction of two Negro brothels).

Although the *Telegraph* had an interesting point, it is doubtful that two simultaneous riots should have taken place for different reasons. While it may have been that different groups took part in each phase of the riot, there was a basic underlying economic motive for the violence: the decline of river commerce.

On the national scene, the onset of the Civil War did not cause an immediate reduction of water commerce as it had of industry. A recession in water shipping occurred a year later, as the industrial sector of the economy was recovering from its setback. There was actually a rise in shipping between 1860 and 1861 for all areas (seaboard, lakes and western rivers) of water commerce. This rise was also reflected in Cincinnati as tonnage shipped through its facilities rose from 71,642 tons to 73,885 tons. In 1862 the gross tonnage nationwide of vessels on rivers fell 21 percent, reflecting the Civil War’s closing of the Mississippi River to shipping. Cincinnati likewise suffered that year as tonnage shipped from and through the city fell from 73,885 tons to 53,512 tons — a decline of 27.5 percent. Shipping in Cincinnati and on the western rivers, lakes and seaboard in total rose in 1863 and 1864 to equal and then surpass prewar totals. Thus 1862 was the trough year for the depression in water commerce, in the nation and in the city of Cincinnati.

But panics were not uncommon in the West, and sudden depressions in commerce had not resulted in violence before. The real reason for the riot could well be that steamboat trade was slipping from its pinnacle of the 1840’s, and that each year fewer men were finding work on the levee. Total shipping in Cincinnati had steadily fallen in tonnage from an all-time peak of 92,401 tons in 1856 to 71,462 tons in 1860 — a drop of 22 percent. Even with the temporary rise in shipping in 1861, total tonnage was still off 20 percent from the 1856 total. When the bottom was reached in 1862, this drop reflected a decrease

of 42 percent in tonnage shipped since 1856. Thus, in Cincinnati, 1862 was an exaggeration of the existing condition of decline in the steamboat industry, rather than an episodic fluctuation in the business cycle.26

Undoubtedly, wages were low, as reported by the Enquirer, and Negroes were willing to work for lower wages than the whites could or would accept. Therefore the situation for white men who depended on the river trade for a living was this: little work, and low wages for what work there was. Perhaps these men could remember that work had been diminishing since the mid-fifties and that Negroes had become more and more numerous on the levee. (Although this is not a cause-effect relationship, these men could have viewed it as such.) Aggravating this economic condition was the prediction of a race-baiting, demagogic press, the Cincinnati Enquirer, which warned its readers that the slaves were going to swarm into Cincinnati and supplant white labor.27

Thus to the Irish, who formed the bulk of the white, lower class workers, and who were straight-ticket Democrats (the Enquirer was the local Democratic organ), 1862 seemed not just a temporary condition but a glimpse of the future. With hot weather helping to shorten tempers and a falling river (the Ohio was in its lowest pool stage which regularly occurs in the July-August-September period) offering little hope for increased work, the time was ripe for violence. The argument between the Negroes and the whites at the outset was the only thing needed to trigger the riot that followed. The violence spread to the Negro residential area of Bucktown despite the fact that most of the Negroes who worked on the levee lived in the Fourth Ward, along the waterfront. The rioters evidently wanted to drive the Negroes from the city, to eliminate them as competitors and establish the fact that Cincinnati was not going to welcome future immigration from the South.

26Chamber of Commerce, Annual Statement (1869), 92.
As an overall attempt to frighten the Negroes from Cincinnati, the riot failed, for the Negroes returned after the violence subsided. As well as can be discerned, however, the riot was successful in eliminating the Negro stevedore as a major competitive factor on the levee. A comparison of job statistics gathered from the 1860 and 1870 census returns for Cincinnati shows that total Negro employment in the steamboat industry fell approximately 48 percent from 1860 to 1870, yet the industry as a whole did not suffer a similar decline. Negro levee workers, the original targets of the rioters, fell from a total of 196 in 1860 to only twenty-four in 1870 — a decrease of 87.8 percent. Negro wealth was also affected in that property derived from employment in river commerce in 1870 was less than it had been in 1860 — accounting for 5.6 percent of the total Negro wealth in 1870 as against 18.7 percent in 1860.28

The real tragedy of the riot was that prior to 1862, the Negroes of Cincinnati had been an integral part of the steamboat trade, and it, in turn, represented the only means of major Negro penetration of the white industrial-commercial economy. With little more than half as many Negroes employed in river commerce in 1870 as there had been in 1860, and with the railroad supplanting the steamboat as the major vehicle of commerce, the Negroes of Cincinnati lost one opportunity, at least, to break into the mainstream of economic life.

28The information on job statistics was gathered and compiled from the census returns of 1860 and 1870 for the city of Cincinnati. The information about Cincinnati steamboat trade is from the Cincinnati Board of Trade, Annual Statement (Cincinnati, 1860–1870), and from the N. S. B. Gras & Henrietta Larson, Casebook in American Business History (New York, 1939), 379.