

APPENDIX C

CAMP LOGAN 1917: BEYOND THE VEIL OF MEMORY

By Matthew Crow

Few of Houston's residents today realize that during World War I Houston had a military base just west of downtown. Camp Logan, one of sixteen auxiliary military training camps established during the era, sprawled across much of the area that is now Memorial Park, south of Washington Avenue and across the bayou from River Oaks. The camp housed and trained over 30,000 soldiers, who lived in neatly organized tents amongst the then scattered trees on the grounds. On the night of August 23, 1917, African American soldiers from Camp Logan incited by police violence earlier that day, armed themselves and marched into town in the only race riot in American history that saw more white casualties than black.

Business leaders expected the Houston economy to grow rapidly with the arrival of the military. The Houston-based American Construction Company received the contract to build the camp at a cost near one million dollars a month, according to newspaper reports at the time. Further, citizens expected the camp to generate \$60,000 a week for the local economy.¹ Knowing soldiers on leave would enter the city to spend their hard-earned pay, residents welcomed the coming military installation. Although the Chamber of Commerce assured the Army that racial tensions would not be a problem if it sent black troops to Houston, the chamber members failed to account for an unprofessional police force and culturally condoned bigotry.

When African American soldiers of the Third Battalion, Twenty-fourth Infantry Regiment (3/24th) were sent to Houston to guard the construction in 1917, they faced hostility from the start. The soldiers resisted the Jim Crow segregation of the era, particularly on streetcars. Discrimination from the white construction workers occurred almost daily, and they found similar tensions in town, courtesy of the Houston police. The clashes between police and the black troops stood in sharp contrast to the more subdued African American Houstonians. Fearing a loss of control with the locals, police officers may have "picked on soldiers to show everybody that [they were] in charge."² Colonel William Newman "ordered all of his men disarmed including the battalions military police, and stored the arms under lock and key" to minimize the hostility of local whites. Only those on guard duty had access to weapons. *The Crisis* reported, the African American troops "were supposed to call on white police officers to make arrests" if needed.³

Tensions between black soldiers and civilians were in no way limited to that time and place in Houston. Beginning with the arrival of the first black soldiers in Texas during Reconstruction through the early twentieth century, discrimination against black soldiers was rampant. In 1889 soldiers of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Regiment were accused of shooting towards the city of El Paso. In 1906 in Brownsville, racial tensions led to an incident in which other Twenty-fifth soldiers were accused of shooting up the town and shooting a bartender. Military authorities punished 167 of the soldiers with a dishonorable discharge despite the lack of any specific evidence. Additionally soldiers in San Antonio and police

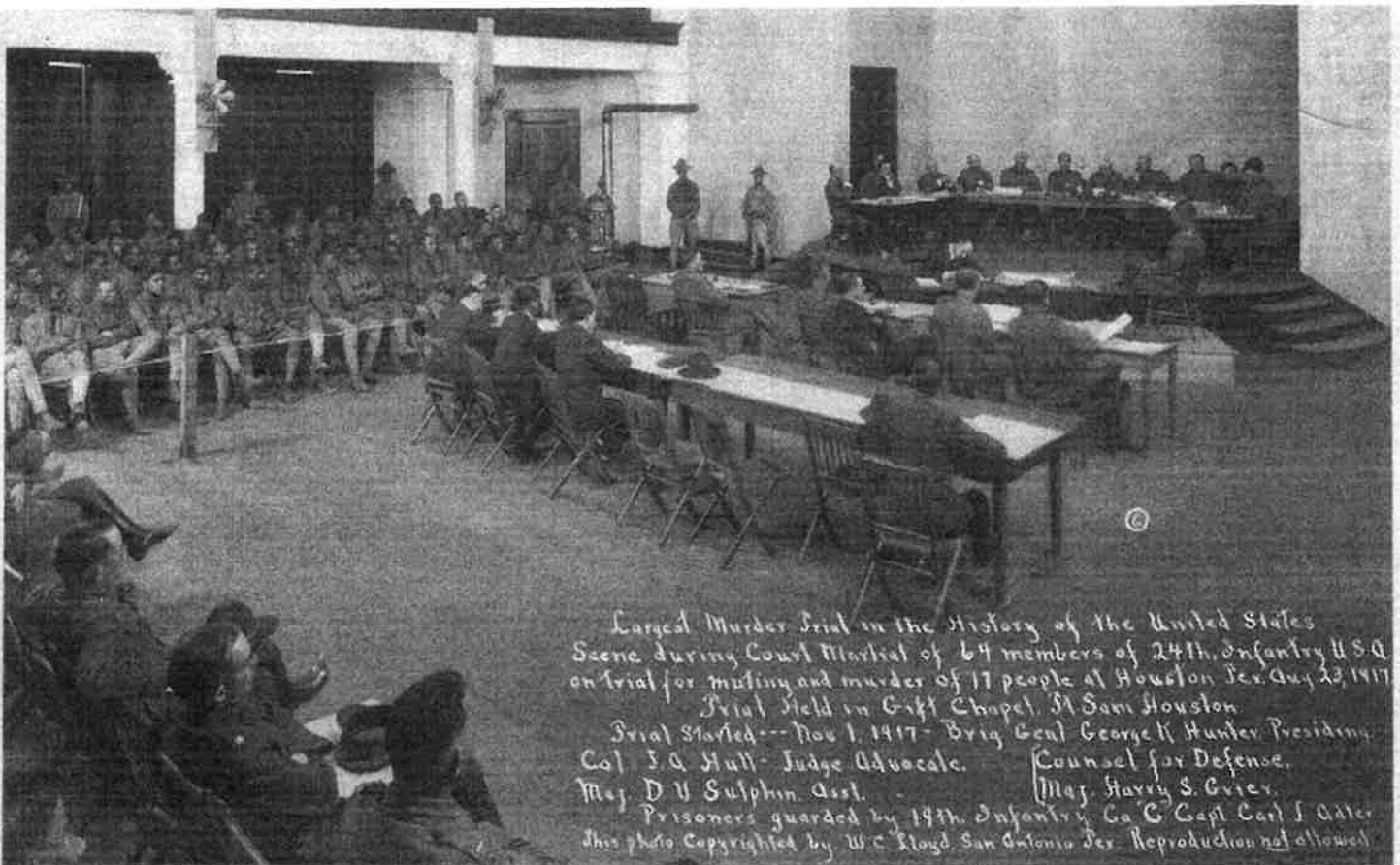


African American soldiers of the Third Battalion, Twenty-fourth Infantry often encountered conflict with Houston police as white officers attempted to undermine their authority.

Photo courtesy of the Fred. L. Vermillion Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Libraries, MSS0224-007-3.*

* This image derives from a glass plate negative, described as "gelatin dry plates." They were created by suspending light-sensitive silver salts into a gelatin binder applied to glass plates. The stability this process brought to film marked the beginning of the photographic film industry because it made photography much more accessible. Photographers no longer had to coat pieces of glass with an emulsion in a light tight tent next to the camera, then shoot the picture and develop the negative before the film dried. But the gelatin is easily scratched and vulnerable to pollutants, moisture, heat, and improper storage. Any or a combination of these conditions can cause the emulsion to shrivel, lose adhesion with the glass, and flake away. This flaking usually starts at the edge of the negative and moves toward the center. The area on the negative where the emulsion is missing prints as black.

—Joel Draut, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Libraries.



Largest Murder Trial in the History of the United States
 Scene during Court Martial of 64 members of 24th. Infantry U.S.A
 on trial for mutiny and murder of 17 people at Houston Tex. Aug 23, 1917
 Trial held in Gift Chapel, Ft Sam Houston
 Trial started --- Nov 1, 1917 - Brig Genl George K Hunter Presiding
 Col J A Hull - Judge Advocate. Counsel for Defense.
 Maj D U Sulphin, Asst. Maj Harry S. Crier.
 Prisoners guarded by 14th. Infantry Co C Capt Carl J Adler
 This photo Copyrighted by W C Floyd, San Antonio, Tex. Reproduction not allowed

The Nesbit Trial was the largest murder trial in the nation's history. It was held in Gift Chapel, Fort Sam Houston, beginning November 1, 1917. Thirteen soldiers at this trial received death sentences, and an overwhelming majority were found guilty on at least one charge.

Photo courtesy of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

period of indiscriminate firing at which point Major Snow lost all control, fleeing the camp towards town in a reported daze. Later testimony of Captain Rothrock described him as "not [being] in physical or mental shape to take command."¹³ Snow ceased being a viable actor in the events until the following morning.

The existence of a white mob was dismissed by the investigation, but the investigators were predisposed to that finding; and, in any case, the fear of a mob must have been very real. This period in American history witnessed numerous incidents of white mob violence throughout the South. Lynching was commonplace and justice was rarely, if ever, served for the victims of those crimes. Texas lagged

behind only Georgia in the number of lynchings, some by white mobs.¹⁴ This was a period of bloody race riots as well; just one month prior, the East St. Louis riot occurred in which at least forty blacks were killed and massive property damage done with "large sections of the city razed to the ground" as white mobs targeted black populations.¹⁵

At some point, Sergeant Henry reportedly led a large group of soldiers onto the road and towards Houston proper. They were encamped at what is now T. C. Jester Boulevard and Washington Avenue, and their march east crossed Buffalo Bayou at Shepherds' Dam Bridge and continued east down what is now West Dallas Street (then San Felipe Street) before dissipating just shy of downtown.

Camp Logan was constructed in 1917 as a training ground for U.S. troops in World War I.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Libraries, MSS0481-001.



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My name is H.D. Goldstein, I am embalmer for the Sid Westheimer Undertaking Company, I examined the body of Vida Henry, negro soldier, who was killed on the night of August 23rd, 1917, in riot on or near San Felipe Street in this City, His head was badly crushed with a blunt instrument, and he had a knife or bayonet wound about five inches deep ranging from the clavicle to the heart, either wound would have caused death,

Signed Henry D. Goldstein;
Sworn to and subscribed before me this the 24th day of August, 1917,
J.M. Ray, J.P. and exofficio coroner, Harris County, Texas,

My name is Lincoln Kennerly, I am in the employ of the Sid Westheimer Company as Ambulance driver, On the morning of August the 24th, 1917, we received a call to come to the corner of San Felipe Street and S.P. Crossing, saying a dead soldier had been found, On arriving there we found a negro lying dead about 1/2 mile south of that point, his head was crushed and otherwise injured, He was identified as Sargeant Vida Henry, of the 24th U.S. Infantry, by his identification plate, he had been found by a squad of the Illinois National Guards, lying by the S.P. Railway tracks and had the appearance of being dead for several hours,

Signed Lincoln Kennerly,
Sworn to and subscribed before me this the 24th day of August, 1917.
J.M. Ray, J.P. and exofficio coroner, Harris County, Texas.

NOTE WELL—INSTRUCTIONS ON THE REVERSE SIDE.
FILL IN PLAINLY WITH UNFADING INK—THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD.
Where columns are given as cause of death, the blank columns for information should be filled in fully supplied. AND should be stated EXACTLY. PARTICULARS should be given OF DEATH IN plain terms, so that it may be properly classified. Most statements of OCCUPATION is very important.

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS		MEDICAL PARTICULARS	
1 SEX Male	2 Color or Race Black	3 Single, Married, Divorced or Widowed Single	4 DATE OF DEATH Aug 23 1917
5 DATE OF BIRTH Sept 18 1890	6 AGE 27 yrs	7 OCCUPATION Sgt. Co. D. 24th Inf.	8 I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from... that I last saw him... alive on... and that death occurred, on the date stated above, <u>correctly</u> . The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows: <u>gun shot wounds</u> (Duration...)
9 BIRTHPLACE Louisiana	10 NAME OF FATHER [Blank]	11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER [Blank]	12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER [Blank]
13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER [Blank]	14 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE (Informant) <u>Charles H. E. Swann</u> (Address) <u>415 S. Brown</u>	15 LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (For Hospital, Sanatorium, Transients, or Boarding Residents) <u>unable to obtain</u>	16 PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL <u>College Park</u>
17 REG. DIST. NO. <u>22384</u>	18 REGISTRATION NO. <u>0297</u>	19 DATE OF BURIAL Aug 27 1917	20 UNDERTAKER Sid Westheimer Co.

After the initial night of violence, SGT Vida Henry was identified as the ringleader of the riot who committed suicide when it failed. However, evidence shown in the coroner's report and death certificate clearly indicates his death was a homicide. A career soldier, Henry had served his country admirably at home and abroad, reenlisting multiple times.
Photo courtesy of the Harris County Archives.

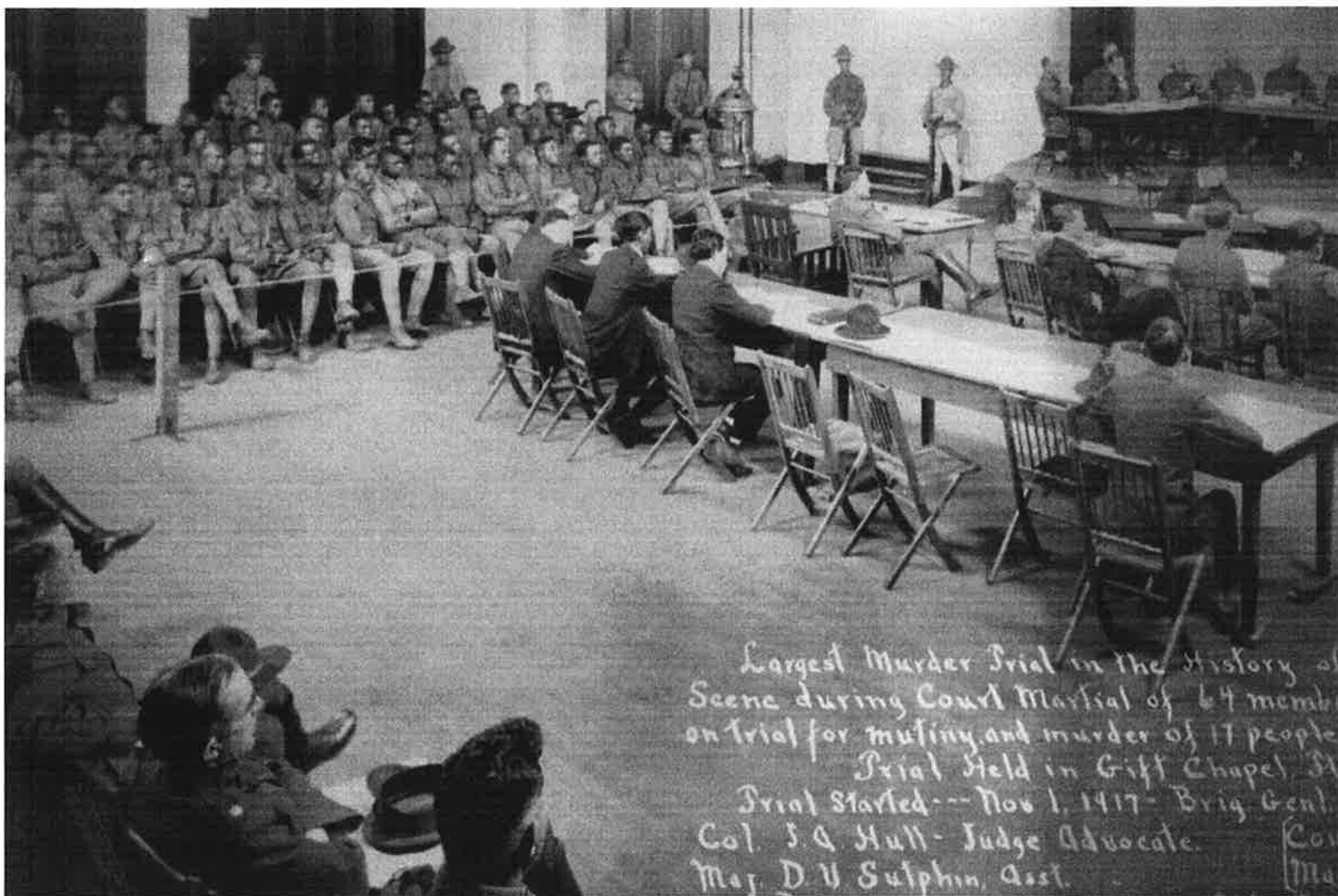
Diverse Communities

The Camp Logan 1917 'incident' haunted Houston for more than a century. Why a reckoning now?



by Monique Welch

December 22, 2023 | 4:00 am



A photo from the Camp Logan Incident trial is displayed at the Buffalo National Soldiers Museum, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023, in Houston. (Antranik Tavltian / Houston Landing)



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It's been Angela Holder's life's mission to find her great uncle Jesse ever since she was 6-years-old and spotted an oval-shaped portrait of him at her Great-Aunt Lovie's house. Her aunt explained that her brother Jesse Moore had been killed by the Army, and that the family did not know where he was buried.

"That was the only time I ever saw my Aunt Lovie sad," said Holder, who is now a history professor at Houston Community College.

Lovie would pass away a few months later, but the seed was planted and further solidified Holder's life mission. "So in my mind, at 6 years old, I said, 'I'm going to find her brother.'"





Top: Photos of soldiers convicted during the Camp Logan incident trial. Left: Angela Holder speaks about the Camp Logan exhibit at the Buffalo National Soldiers Museum. Right: A collection of historic family photos provided by Angela Holder.

“These soldiers were wrongly treated because of their race and were not given fair trials,” said Wormuth, in a Nov. 13 press release.

Hurdles to justice

In addition to the proliferation of misinformation, Haymond said there were other major hurdles over the years that delayed justice, including the passage of time.

“The farther into the past that an event falls, the harder it is, first of all, to really understand based on fact what happened,” he said, “and also the harder it is to make people care sometimes.”

The second major hurdle, Haymond added, was that the records were classified by the Army until the late 1970s. But Brenner-Beck and Haymond had an advantage as former Army soldiers and knew how to access them.

The third major hurdle was internal resistance at certain levels of the military when the advocates presented their first petition in Oct. 2020. Haymond said critics argued that if the Army granted clemency in this case, it could potentially open up a floodgate of other clemency appeals and demands for reparations, and ultimately inundate them with requests for justice restoratively and retroactively.



Getting over the hump

“We might have had the drive, we might have had the passion,” Holder said, “but we did not have the legal-speak to make the case.”



Antrank Tavilian, a descendant of Jesse Moore, who was one of the soldiers executed after the Camp Logan incident, walks over to the Camp Logan exhibit at the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum on Dec. 15 in Houston. (Antrank Tavilian / Houston Landing)

The military service certificate for Jesse Moore, who was one of the soldiers executed after the Camp Logan incident, is on display at the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum on Dec. 15 in Houston. (Antrank Tavilian / Houston Landing)

In 2018 she asked Geoffrey Corn, a former South Texas law professor, and Clyde Lemon, the Houston NAACP armed services and veterans affairs chair, to help her.

She captured their interest after posing a question: “If the Army felt that it had done the right thing, then why did they issue General Order Number Seven?”

In January 1918, just one month after the executions, the Army issued General Order No. 7 which prohibited executions, dishonorable discharges and dismissals without a review by the Judge Advocate General of the Army.

“It changed it going forward, but it didn’t help them,” said Cathy Burnett, another law professor at South Texas College of Law of Houston who worked on the case.

If the Army determined in January that what happened at Camp Logan would from then on be prohibited, then why was it OK in the first place? That question, Holder said, was the catalyst that “got the ball rolling.”

Brenner-Beck and Haymond co-authored the clemency petition, which was researched by a team of roughly 30 South Texas students and professors.

“Each of us are former soldiers ourselves, we understand the military culture from the inside out,” Haymond said of himself and Brenner-Beck. “And therefore we knew how to basically use the military process in order to get the military to produce the result.”

Brenner-Beck said although they obviously knew there were “significant injustices that were fundamentally unfair” and violated the Constitution, they understood that screaming words like “lynching” or applying modern-day standards of unfairness to the Army wouldn’t get them a hearing.

“You have to get them past that visceral reaction ... in order to then actually read what actually happened to these soldiers,” Brenner-Beck said.

She believes that was the critical part that “tipped the hand” for the Army Secretary’s decision.

“We presented it in a way that called (for) the Army to uphold their own values, and to uphold the loyalty that they owe to the soldiers as well,” Brenner-Beck said. “And that was in the petition, overtly.”



“It’s very much a Memorial Park story,” Arnold said, noting how these soldiers were sent to guard Camp Logan, a training site for soldiers who then went to battle in World War I. The park is named in honor of those soldiers who fought in the war and trained at Camp Logan.

Memorial Park Conservancy plans to continue to tell the story through its upcoming 100-acre project dubbed **Memorial Groves**. The project will honor all who served the war efforts at Camp Logan, including the 24th Infantry Regiment, with groves of trees planted and lined up in rows like soldiers. It’s part of Memorial’s Park’s \$200 million, 10-year master plan, set to be completed by 2028.

“The trees hit their prime when they’re 19, 20, 21, 22. That’s when soldiers are in their prime and it’s often when soldiers are felled,” Arnold said while driving and showing Landing reporters the land. “We interpret culture and history through the land, so we don’t build sculptures of people with statues. We use the land to tell the story.”

Hi there! I’m Monique Welch, one of Houston Landing’s Diverse Communities reporters, and I focus my reporting on Black, Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander, LGBTQ+ and People with Disabilities communities in our area. What stories do you think I should cover? You can also reach me by email: monique@houstonlanding.org.

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