

FROM THE ASHES: THE RISE AND FALL OF DETROIT



*"I'm a native Detroiter, so this is a way to explain my history and my city.
It's an important landscape to me. It helped to shape the landscape we have now.
I wanted to offer a human face to it for all of us - those of us who have lived there and
those who have not."*

- Dominique Morisseau

With *Detroit '67*, playwright Dominique Morisseau has written an exquisite story of determination and great disappointment. Set just a few days before the city's most violent race riot erupts and ravages the city, the play captures the social upheaval and fraught racial tensions of the 1960s. It was a time of great change, hope, violence and disparity. The war waged in Vietnam and Motown could be heard on every street corner. The efforts of the Civil Rights Movements were met with increasing racism and police brutality.

Race Relations in the U.S. in the 1960s

The mid-to-late 60s marked a change in the social, racial and political landscape of the U.S. With the Civil Rights Movement, the death of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the Nation of Islam and the Black Power Movement, black men and women gained a sense of power and autonomy unlike any they had ever experienced.

The impact of racism on individuals and communities has blighted the history of the United States. While efforts to combat racism began during slavery with the abolitionist movement, it was the Civil Rights Movement that forever changed race relations in this country. The boycotts, sit-ins, protests and marches of the 50s and 60s led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which guaranteed equal access to all public accommodations, forbade discrimination in any state program receiving federal aid and outlawed discrimination in employment and voting. It was set into motion on June 19, 1963 by President John F. Kennedy:

- **June 19, 1963** – President Kennedy submits bill H.R. 7152 to the House of Representatives.
- **November 22, 1963** – Lee Harvey Oswald assassinates President John F. Kennedy.
- **November 27, 1963** – President Lyndon B. Johnson, speaking before a Joint Session of Congress, says, "No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill for which he fought so long."
- **February 10, 1964** – The Civil Rights bill passes the House.
- **March 30, 1964 – June 10, 1964** – The Senate debates the bill for 60 working days, including seven Saturdays with many attempts to filibuster the bill. The Senate Committee on the Judiciary is not involved.
- **June 9-10, 1964** – Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia filibusters the bill for 14 hours and 13 minutes before the Senate votes 71 to 29 to cloture the bill. This vote by two-thirds or more brings all debate to an end.
- **June 19, 1964** – In a 73 to 27 vote, the Senate adopts an amended bill, which is sent back to the House.
- **July 2, 1964** – The House of Representatives adopts the Senate version of the bill 289-126 and President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the bill into law.

Unfortunately, however, the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the 1968 Fair Housing Act was not enough to curb discriminatory practices or racist attitudes. Civil Rights leaders and activists of all races who traveled

to the South to contest segregation laws and practices were met by angry mobs and police brutality. They were verbally assaulted, beaten and even killed. An already tense situation was ignited and the nation erupted.

From 1964 to 1968, race riots broke out in major cities across the United States, including Los Angeles, New Jersey, Chicago and Philadelphia. In response to the riots, police were called in to restore peace, and they used excessive force to do so. Men and women were beaten with clubs, attacked by police dogs and had fire hoses turned on them. All of this played on television and was reported in the newspapers.

Racial and Economic Disparity in Detroit

Despite a history of prosperity, technological innovations, a powerful and lasting Union Movement, and a rich influence on the arts and music scene, Detroit was not immune to the racial tensions, economic disparity and civil unrest of the late 60s. On Sunday, July 23 in 1967, when the 12th Street riot erupted in the early hours after a raid on an unlicensed after-hours bar, the fate of this once booming blue collar town took a turn for the worse.

What follows is a timeline of events:

- On Sunday evening, July 22, Detroit Police Vice Squad officers raid an afterhours “blind pig,” an unlicensed bar on the corner of 12th Street and Clairmount Avenue.
- Officers arrest 82 people celebrating the return of two black servicemen from Vietnam.
- After hearing rumors that police used excessive force during the raid, about 200 people gather outside the bar.
- 5:00 a.m.: an empty bottle is thrown into the rear window of a police car, and then a waste basket is thrown through a storefront window.



- 5:20 a.m.: additional police officers are sent to 12th Street to stop the growing violence.
- By mid-morning, looting and window-smashing spread out along 12th Street.
- By the afternoon, Detroit Congressman John Conyers climbs atop a car in the middle of 12th Street to address the crowd. He is pelted with bricks and bottles.
- 1:00 p.m.: police officers and firemen report injuries from stones, bottles, and other objects that were thrown at them.
- 3:00 p.m.: 360 police officers assemble at the Detroit Armory as rioting spread from 12th Street to other areas of the city. Fires started during the riot spread rapidly in the afternoon heat and as 25 mile per hour winds began to blow.
- At 5:30 p.m., twelve hours into the riot, Mayor Cavanaugh request assistance from the National Guard.
- 7:00 p.m.: National Guard arrives.
- 7:45 p.m.: Mayor Cavanaugh institutes a curfew between 9:00 p.m and 5:00 a.m. Seven minutes into the curfew a 16-year-old African American boy was the first gunshot victim.
- As the night wore on, there are reports of deaths by snipers and complaints of sniper fire; many from policemen who were unable to determine the origins of the gunfire.
- 2:00 a.m.: Monday morning, 800 State Police Officers and 8,000 National Guardsmen were ordered to the city by Michigan Governor George Romney. President Lyndon Johnson ordered 4,700 paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division to assist.
- The sniper attacks stop only with the end of the violence on Thursday, July 27.
- The curfew is lifted on Tuesday, August 1 and the National Guardsmen leave the city.

The 12th Street Riot was one of the most destructive and deadliest riots in U.S. history. The escalation of violence and both the police and military presence resulted in 43 deaths, 467 injured and more than 7,000 arrests. Approximately 2,500 stores were looted and the total property damage was estimated at about \$32 million. Other racially-fueled, city-wide riots followed, including the Watts riots in Los Angeles (1965) and the Chicago riots (1966). However, until the DC riots in Washington DC that happened after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King (1968), the Detroit Race Riot stood as the largest urban uprising of the 1960s. Each of these riots had a devastating effect not just on the communities themselves, but on the entire nation.