



Handout - Asbury Park “Riots” Timeline

July 4th, 1970

Shortly before midnight, a group of unemployed or underemployed Black teenagers began throwing rocks and bottles at each other along Springwood Avenue, the commercial and entertainment thoroughfare on Asbury Park’s West Side. Such “rock and bottle festivals” were common among teens in the area.

After a while, the teenagers began throwing rocks and bottles at passing cars. Two Black police officers arrived on the scene around the same time two teen dances let out from a nearby community center and Catholic church. The police officers were unable to disperse the growing crowd, and called for backup, which never arrived. (It has been argued since that the primarily white Asbury Park Police force rarely ventured into the West Side, leaving the entire side of town under the oversight of 12 Black police officers.)

The two patrolmen fled from the crowd, which began breaking windows. Hours later, Police Chief Thomas S. Smith called out the entire Police Force to disperse the crowd.

At the end of the evening, there were no injuries reported and less than ten windows were broken.

July 5th

The following evening, a crowd of teenagers again congregated along Springwood Avenue. To avoid confrontation with the police, the crowd often separated and reformed. The crowd began breaking windows of businesses on the West Side and the neighboring town of Neptune. At 3 a.m., Asbury Park Mayor Joseph F. Mattice declared a state of emergency, and police forces of neighboring towns were called in to help disperse the crowd.

By 6 a.m., the crowd was mostly dispersed and the police officers were sent home. Six police officers were injured and 75% of the businesses along Springwood Avenue were damaged or looted. Twenty people accused of engaging in violent activities were arrested.

July 6th

Rev. Verner R. Matthews, a pastor and board member of the West Side Community Center, urged an end to the rioting and looting, while also stating to the press that the violence was a result of the city government’s neglect of the West Side. He argued that “the political leaders are only interested in the main source of revenue for the city - the Boardwalk.”

Meanwhile, Ermon K. Jones, the president of the local branch of the NAACP, argued that the rioting occurred due to lack of jobs and housing on the West Side. In addition, he argued that because community teenagers didn’t have a say in planning the programming at the Community Center, they felt excluded from it, and spent their time in the streets.



That evening, the Mayor enforced a 6 p.m. curfew. By the afternoon, town officials again called for reinforcements from outside the city to disperse crowds. State troopers, who were observers the previous day, were given permission to take a more direct role.

Fires started along Springwood Avenue at 3 p.m. By 4 p.m. the city cut power to the area surrounding Springwood Avenue, and pulled the police from the West Side, leaving the community literally in the dark for the rest of the evening and night.

The Central Jersey and Pennsylvania railroads eliminated their stops to Asbury Park, and police made 105 arrests. 40 people were injured.

July 7th

Ermon K. Jones held a meeting at the West Side Community Center. According to the New York Times, divisions emerged between older generations, who wanted a restoration of peace on the West Side, and younger generations, who demanded more immediate investment and jobs programs for West Side residents.

After declaring a state of emergency, Mayor Mattice made no statement on the cause of the riots, likely fearing it would only increase tension in the city. Sheriff Smith made a statement in agreement with Matthews and Jones, that "The youths on the West Side have the same beefs as youths in other municipalities - no jobs, little recreation, and poor housing." Like the youth, Smith grew up in segregated schools on the West Side, and was well known in the community.

Black leaders on the West Side presented the mayor and city council with a list of twenty-one demands, including programs for year-round improvement, the completion of an urban renewal program, and the immediate expansion of the summer job program by 100 positions. Other demands included amnesty for those arrested, the immediate removal of state police from the West Side, the establishment of a civilian police review board, rent control, and development for infrastructure and recreation.

Citing the city's inability to make such changes, Mayor Mattice only met 1 of the 21 demands - appointing a community member to the city's Board of Education. Some of those arrested during the riots were released, but not all.

Rioting began again immediately after the mayor dismissed most of the demands. The police established barricades to prevent people from entering the east side of town. As the crowd began to push over the barricades to enter the East Side, police began shooting at the crowd. Forty-six people were treated for gunshot wounds, four in critical condition.



By the end of the day, 70 people were injured and 50 people were arrested.

July 8th

No further demonstrations occurred. Mayor Mattice stated to the New York Times: “We’ve been very, very fortunate that [the riots] stayed where it has. Our business area hasn’t been affected at all,” seemingly forgetting that a large portion of Springwood Avenue, the business district on the West Side, burned down.

Timeline events taken from Daniel Weeks, “From Riot to Revolt: Asbury Park in July 1970,” *NJS: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Summer 2016.