



## Remembering the Turmoil:

*In the wake of the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination, the AFRO looks back at past riots to better understand the plight and struggle of African-Americans*

# Two Riot-Scared communities try to recapture a glorious past

By Tiffany Ginyard  
AFRO Staff Writer

Bitter sweet memories remain vivid for those who’ve lived to tell the story of havoc wreaked on Baltimore’s streets following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Fortunately Baltimore only saw a fraction of the destruction inflicted on other cities, but for two major areas in the city, visible remnants of social and economic despair still remain.

“The social climate [before the riots] was one where there was a sense of respect and unity within communities,” says Dr. Rodney Orange Sr., chairman of the Political Action Committee and former president of the Baltimore chapter of the NAACP. “There was an understanding that we had to come together.”

***What happened was the pillars of the community started moving out – the [Black] doctors, lawyers, real estate agents and pharmacists. And it left, in my opinion, a pocket of low-income renters and less homeowners.***

But once news hit the wire of King’s assassination – threatening to nullify progress made in Blacks’ fight for justice and equality – a hurricane of anger was unleashed onto Baltimore’s through bombings, lootings, and absolute mayhem.

“I would say it was one of the saddest points in my life,” says Marion Bascom, pastor emeritus of Douglas Memorial Church. “We had looked forward to a time where there would be peace in the community, especially after 1896’s Plessy v. Fergusson [upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation] and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But when Dr. King was assassinated, people became very disheartened. They had become broken.”



Nowhere was evidence of being disheartened more visible than the Gay Street and Pennsylvania Avenue corridors. The first reports of fire and looting from Gay Street, where anarchy reigned for two days. It was an unlikely event in an unlikely neighborhood.

Once an area that reflected pride and economic stability for Blacks, especially for those who migrated here from the South after the Depression, Gay Street was a place where children could play and parents not worry, where adults sat on park benches at leisure, a place where the presence of police was felt and appreciated. There was also brimming community pride, where people could often be seen scrubbing the marble stoops of their snug row homes.

During the 1950s and early ’60s, the Gay Street corridor was also teeming with commercial activity, boasting everything from mom and pop grocers, boutiques, and laundromats to meat markets, furniture stores, beauty parlors and lounges. Now, 40 years later, there is little evidence of past grandeur on the Gay Street corridor.

“People tried to fix things up, put up another storefront, but it just didn’t work anymore,” says Rosa Pryor, author of African American Entertainment in Baltimore and AFRO columnist. “Businesses just didn’t make it after that [the riots].”

By the second day of unrest, the riots on the east side had begun to bleed into the communities to the west, mainly in the areas surrounding the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor.

Referred to by locals as “The Avenue” and nationally recognized as Baltimore’s Black Mecca of entertainment, Pennsylvania Avenue saw its heyday in the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s, especially during the prime of The Royal Theater. Frequented by some of the nation’s biggest stars – such as Billie Holiday, Redd Foxx, Aretha Franklin, Mary Lou Williams, Sarah Vaughn, and James Brown – the theater was a major venue on the “Chittlin Circuit.”

The Avenue was one of the few places in town that hosted a vivacious nightlife for African- Americans. Nightclubs had such names as the Sphinx Club, the Frolic Bar, Club Casino, Buck’s Bar, and Comedy Club Musical Bar. There were also popular soul food restaurants along with convenience and retail stores.

But business on the famed corridor took a sudden turned sour as more windows of opportunities were opened for Blacks. Desegregation opened some new doors, but closed many of the old ones.

“What happened was the pillars of the community started moving out – the [Black] doctors, lawyers, real estate agents and pharmacists,” says George Gilliam, president of the Pennsylvania Avenue Redevelopment Collaborative (PARC). “And it left, in my opinion, a pocket of low-income renters and less homeowners.”

Later, the damage of the riots of 1968 would deliver a low blow to Pennsylvania Avenue, forcing any remaining businesses to relocate.

“And some places just never recovered whatsoever,” recounts Pryor, “Many stayed boarded up until they finally tore half of the street down.” Gilliam says that over the last 30 years the community has been trying to regain its footing.

“Now we’re back on point in trying to rebuild and revitalize The Avenue,” he says. “We now have a Main Street Program that’s working the commercial corridor, trying to get a better business mix. We’re putting in place new facades to give The Avenue the look it had in its heyday.”

Among other improvement efforts along the corridor are the renovation of the Billie Holiday Statue, on the corner of Lafayette and Pennsylvania avenues; the Royal Theater memorial; the traditional Cadillac parade; and the opening of the new night club, Choppers, a hotspot for the 30- and-over crowd.

While Gilliam remains confident that Pennsylvania Avenue is making a strong comeback, others aren’t so sure.

“The concern we had then as we have now is the lack of a continuum of economic development within the African-American community,” says Orange, the former NAACP leader. “We were hoping The Avenue Market would anchor it, but I don’t see that happening. And while I commend the restoration group on their efforts, I also don’t see the movement to secure state funds [for The Avenue] coming from the legislators that represent that area.” Rev. Bascom agrees.

“I see a mixture of despair and growth. I have more despair now than I had then, because I still see people struggling to find themselves,” he said. “I can’t say that I am terribly, terribly enthusiastic about the growth of Pennsylvania Avenue, or any other neighborhood at this point in time.”

# Clarence Mitchell III

## – King of the Streets –

## helped quell violence

Clarence Mitchell, a 28-year-old state Senator from Baltimore, was 131 miles away, working on behalf of another Black political trailblazer, when the lightning bolt of history flashed from Memphis, Tenn. and shook up the world.

“I was in Richmond, Va. on April 4th of 1968,” he recalled. “I was to speak at a voter registration rally in Richmond for then-city councilman Henry Marsh, an African-American who went on to become the first Black mayor of Richmond.” The public accommodations victories Blacks had enjoyed in Maryland had not yet trickled down to their neighbors to the South.

“In those days the civil rights bill had been passed but, you couldn’t stay in hotels – a number of the states weren’t complying – so I was staying at his (Marsh’s) home,” said Mitchell, now the patriarch of the Mitchell family, one of Baltimore’s great political dynasties. “We were watching television preparing to go to the rally when we found out on the news that Martin Luther King had been assassinated.”

Marsh and Mitchell decided to go on with the voter registration rally (which evolved into a prayer service for King) because they believed that’s what King would have wanted.

But, news of his death sent waves of shock and anger through the Black community.

“I was devastated – he was such a strong leader – but he lived the love that he preached,” Mitchell said. “He treated everybody that he associated with in the movement as though they were somebody. All the young men that were working in the movement, he called them doctor, it gave them a feeling of self-empowerment, ‘Dr. King called me doctor.’ It was a psychological thing that you thought about and you conducted yourself as though you had a doctorate.”

But, like Mitchell many young Black men and older Black men that King had touched so profoundly with his words and actions had also been devastated by his murder. In those harrowing days after his assassination most of them adhered to his principles of non-violence and civic disobedience, but others took to the streets as their rage exploded upon the nation’s cities.

“I got back to Baltimore that evening. I was driving from the White House and I went through 14th Street, I went through the Black community in D.C., and fires were breaking out,” Mitchell remembered. “Folks were battling – kicking out windows – that sort of thing. As I was driving into Baltimore, the same thing was beginning to occur there. I drove over on Pennsylvania Avenue and I drove over to East Baltimore and there were quite a few people in the streets. This was the beginning of something that was very detrimental and my concern was for the people.”

Mitchell and his uncle Parren Mitchell were among many Black elected officials who hit the streets in Baltimore trying to quell the destruction and confronting rioters face to face.

“We were out there day and night, basically talking to people trying to persuade them to stay off the streets and stop the destruction because all of the destruction was taking place in our community,” Mitchell said.

Mitchell says that he and his uncle were able to dissuade many of those bent on destruction because they were not strangers to their community.

“Basically, they were compliant because we had been out in the streets when there were no riots – they weren’t seeing us for the first time,” Mitchell said. The News American (a now defunct

daily newspaper), did a full page article on me calling me the king of the streets and they thought that was negative. But, it was true – I was always in the streets –I was out there accessible to the people.”

Despite a strictly-enforced 4 p.m. curfew and the presence of thousands of National Guard troops, looting continued for days.

“Once the mob mentality takes hold – there were people out there participating in the riots who weren’t even grieving for King,” Mitchell said. “They were using the riots as a means to get a refrigerator, or get a fan and it spoke to the poverty that was endemic in this city and how much we still needed to do.”

However, in an ironic twist of fate one of Baltimore’s most notorious drug kingpins helped bring law and order back to the city.

“Little Melvin (Williams) had talked to some of the guys to come together,” Mitchell said. “The hustlers of the day came from East Baltimore, they came from South Baltimore and they came from West Baltimore and they made appeals to the communities that they came from to stop the riots,” Mitchell added. “The next day the riots had stopped.”

After four days of rioting, four people had been killed, 700 injured, about 1,000 businesses had been looted or burned and 5,800 people had been arrested. It has been 40 years since the riots sparked by King’s death swept the nation. But, Mitchell sees a strong connection between the civil right martyr’s legacy and the man who weeks ago delivered one of the most important speeches on race since King’s “I Have a Dream,” speech.

“The fact is many leaders – Dr. King among them – paved the way for Barack Obama to be where he is today,” Mitchell said.

“If you look back on all those civil rights workers who registered people to vote in the South and who empowered them, you can go to county after county where Black folks control the county,” Mitchell added. “Barack Obama is now the recipient of the hard work and the commitment of the civil rights leaders of all hues from CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to the NAACP.”

Mitchell also remembers a recent experience with the Senator from Illinois that conjured up memories of the slain civil rights leader.

“I was at the rally that was held for him (Obama) at the First Mariner Arena,” Mitchell said. “This is the same feeling I had when Martin Luther King had a rally here (then the Baltimore Civic Center). This place was electrified and I had the same feeling almost 40 years later.”

Indeed, that rally where King spoke took place April 22, 1966 at the Baltimore Civic Center. Like today the promise of change was in the air when King addressed the euphoric crowd. But 40 years later, many would argue that few of the gaping wounds created by hundreds of years of U.S.-sanctioned racism have fully healed and for many the lessons of the past have been lost on subsequent generations.

“We, as a community, now take for granted the gains that were made during that time. My grandmother (Dr. Lillie Carroll Jackson), taught us eternal vigilance is the price of freedom and after we had made gains we would have to fight to keep them,” Mitchell said.

“It is important for us to stay strong – the young people of today have not learned that lesson. We don’t have an activist movement in the city today – it’s here but the leadership is not,” Mitchell added. “Over these 40 years, there’s been tremendous progress. No, we aren’t where we need to be, but we are a helluva’ long way from where we were 40 years ago.”

# After ’68 Unrest, Other Factors Complicated Recovery

By James Wright and Valencia Mohammed  
AFRO Staff Writers

“Turn the radio on. Dr. King has been shot," the Rev. Walter Fauntroy said he heard people crying out that day in April 1968. All of a sudden he began to hear glass shatter and hundreds of people shouting in the streets. As Fauntroy looked out his office window at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, he saw Stokely Carmichael, later chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), with a large group of angry youth shouting.

The combination meant trouble. Fauntroy rushed outside to reason with Carmichael but the crowd had a mind of its own.

“No, no. We are shutting this place down,” the angry crowd of youth shouted.

Fauntroy went back inside to get an update on the status of Dr. King.

About 6:30 p.m., Fauntroy received a call that Dr. King was dead.

He called for police escort to take him around the Black neighborhoods from 14<sup>th</sup> St. to Wheeler Road, S.E. to witness the mayhem firsthand.

“It was awful. There was rioting in every direction, especially the Shaw neighborhood, the H Street Corridor and 14<sup>th</sup> St. Somehow, Southeast was protected from the rioting but from its breathtaking hilltops, one could see the rest of the city in flames. It was awesome,” said Fauntroy.

As the riots continued for several days, Fauntroy noted things were extremely quiet during the daylight hours. But when the sun went down, the rioting was in full swing. While firefighters fought blazes, people looted nearby stores stealing and reselling merchandise the next day in the neighborhoods. There was a report of one White man dragged from his car at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets and beaten to death by an angry mob.

Today, 40 years later, Fauntroy says Dr. King’s message of jobs, peace and justice has never been fully realized. In fact, he believes matters have gotten worse as presidents implemented policies that gave the rich more and the poor even less than before.

“The accomplishments made in the past have all been stagnated by the dramatic shift in public policy. Thus people of color, Blacks in particular, still don’t have or cannot afford healthcare,” he said. “Jobs are going to people outside the U.S., people cannot afford to buy homes and the economy is terrible.

Resources must be available to provide for the least of us.”

Is it time for another riot?

“No, I don’t think so. We’ve learned not to destroy the little that we have. But I do believe we will see more revolutions, like this presidential race where people from all races come together to affect change in human policies, Fauntroy said.

Anwar Saleem was a teenager when the riots took place.

“My friends and I spent countless hours on the streets. We watched people stealing food that were hungry and nowhere to store it. Many of us still believe that more White owners than they would admit torched their own properties for insurance and government payments,” said Saleem.

One of his friends, Vernon Marlowe, 13, walked into a looted building and never came out after it caught on fire. Despite pleas from Marlowe’s family and friends, firefighters and the police refused to search the smoldering building for his body.

The remains of Marlowe’s charred body were found two decades later in the rubbish when the structure was demolished to make room for a new government building.

Saleem, who pledged to never move from neighborhood, has become very active in the redevelopment of H Street.

“Some things got better for Blacks, but not for the majority,” said Saleem. He says that the crack epidemic of the 1980s hasn’t helped matters.



This Safeway store at the corner of 8th and C Streets, N.E. was ransacked and looted during the riots of 1968. It never reopened at that site. The store relocated at 6th and H St., N.E. and finally to Hechinger Mall at 17th and Benning Road, N.E. Photo courtesy Anwar Saleem, director of H Street, Main Street

“Black business almost came to a halt on H Street. Regular customers were too scared to come to the area with hundreds of people on drugs walking the streets,” Salem said. “H Street was the downtown Mecca for Blacks. It’s coming back but not how we envisioned it.”

He had not envisioned that Whites would come back to the city in record numbers, forcing some poor Blacks out of neighborhoods they could no longer afford.

As the chairman of the H Street, Main Street Redevelopment Project, Saleem said the remaining Black businesses are forced to compete with shopping malls and expensive designer shops, that many young buyers are accustomed.

Saleem said many people over 40 don’t shop as much as they used to because of the high cost of living.

“We must go with the times. The impulsive buying youth of today were brought up not supporting Black businesses. We’ve got to figure out a way to get more of them in our stores,” Saleem said.

Saleem said Black people like wealth too much to riot again.

“We want to live in the high-price condos,” he said. “We want to buy the expensive homes. All we need is an opportunity to achieve and we will compete with the best of them.”

Washington, D.C. at the time of the riots had a population of 780,000 and was a bout 60 percent Black. White flight to the suburbs had taken place, but the city was still the business and economic center of the region.

For example, Blacks in Prince George's County had been there for generations, as opposed to the Black flight that took place from the city in the late 1970s and 80s.

One of the city's key leaders was the Rev. Douglas Moore, a 40-year-old activist. He was working at the Redevelopment Land Agency that focused on the Shaw community.

Dubbed “Shameful Shaw,” the community was full of blight. There were no training programs for Blacks, little housing, and few jobs.

Moore remembered how Blacks were not allowed to shop at the O Street Market, located at Seventh and O Streets, N.W. It was a symbol of White power, where only Blacks could work.

Moore heard about the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. while listening to WOL. He rode to the Shaw area to watch the reactions of people not expecting the riots.

“As far as the eye could see, rioters went crazy,” said Moore. “People were cussing, drinking, stealing, breaking windows.”

Some people wanted to burn the O Street Market to the ground because of it. The structure was solid. It was made of brick and mortar, similar to the Eastern Market. It burned from the inside, leaving the exterior structure intact.

Moore traveled to the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor to witness rioting from U Street to Park Road N.W. “It was an inferno stretching for blocks on both sides,’ he said.

He remembered a liquor store that had a neon gold Ebo symbol on the door that was untouched while all the other businesses on the block lit the sky with blazing flames.

Moore was also the chairman of the Black United Front organization.

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After the riots, Moore served as the District’s first elected at-large councilmember. He authored a book titled, *The Buying and Selling of the D.C. City Council*. Moore claimed that many Black elected officials sold off large lots of land owned or inhabited by Blacks to developers under the guise of urban renewal. Moore, like many District residents, asserts the practice continues today.

Will there be another riot? He disagrees with Fauntroy but on a more intellectual basis.

“I believe it’s time for another riot,” said Moore. “A riot of the mind to vote en mass on Election Day and put a decent, respectable Black man in the office of president. It’s time for a change. What we needed before the riots are the same things we need now. We can’t afford to be silent and look the other way.

Casting your vote for change is the best message we could ever send.”

While the streets were filled with rage and anger, it was often the women who kept things together-as it is now. Nadine Winter was very active in community affairs before and after the riots.

She ran an urban center for the needy called Hospitality House located at 597 Florida Ave, N.E. Winter had a weekly radio show on Thursdays.

Everyday she would cook several pots of beans to feed about 100 or more poor people.

“So many Black people were hungry, without shelter or work. Things were very bad,” she said.

Winter said there is a history of the city that hardly gets mentioned. Thousands of Black people lived in alleys without running water or electricity before the riots.

People would cook meals from an old can of lard.

“The Tyson family with 10 kids take aisle six on the lard can,” Winter would say to the crowd. A family would sit quietly and take their place in line to cook.

By the time the riot happened, Winter remembered, the looting was a means of survival.

“I saw some of my soup customers hauling things near my center. “Don’t bring that stolen stuff near my property,” Winter told the looters.

Winter said most accounts of the riots leave out the real stories about the poor.

“I kept so many records about what the lives of Black people were before and after the riots. Years ago, I tried to get Howard University and the White colleges to take the vast records of information but they felt the lives of the poor were insignificant. I was not surprised when the City Museum reduced their lives to a few paragraphs. It seemed more concerned about the plight of the Black bourgeoisie. Finally, this year, George Washington Hospital took it.”

After the riots the government gave some families places to live, furniture and appliances. “For a long time, people still had the new stoves wrapped in the paper because it was quite a surprise to receive anything from the government and they were accustomed to cooking outside out of lard cans,” Winter said.

Winter always kept herself very active in the lives of African-American families who struggled to make it out of the ghettos. Her organization was instrumental in selling 80 Housing and Urban Development homes for \$1. Winter later became one of the first elected city council members in the District.

Businesses were burned and looted. In order to survive, Black businesses put signs on the window "Black Owned" and generally they were not touched.

William Carswell, owner of Men’s Fashion Center, formerly known as the Surplus Outlet during the riots, located at 918 H St., N.E., stacked a colorful collection of brims as he reminisced about the riots.

Murray Goldkind, the original Jewish owner, was kind and respectful to Blacks. Carswell remembered that every night, Goldkind would take his inventory home and return the next morning with goods to sell.

“Nothing happened to the store. No windows were broken, no looting, nothing happened,” said Carswell.

However, Goldkind’s brother did not receive the same treatment at his store on 7<sup>th</sup> St. It was burned to a crisp.

Carswell remembered that many buildings along the H Street Corridor remained burned and closed until five years ago. He said several years ago, Whites began to buy every storefront on the corridor that had been vacant for decades. “Now we are being priced out on the area.”

Many of the businesses that were established shortly after the riots fear that the actions of the new government leaders will eventually force Black businesses to close, especially with this poor economy,” Carswell said.

The riots was an interesting event in the life of the District because the whole city did not burn. Many Black middle class areas were not affected by burning or looting but nevertheless had to abide by the law.

Janette Hoston Harris came to the District in 1962. Harris remembered quite distinctly the reaction of Black bourgeoisie to the 1968 riots in the District.

“Because the elite of the high society always felt it was better than the lower class of Blacks when the riots broke out, the Black bourgeoisie followed the cues of the Whites. They immediately migrated to areas commonly known to Whites within the District or moved to Maryland to establish the rich and well-established Princes Georges County.

Well entrenched with the higher echelon Harris said, “Many were too ashamed to discuss the riots. They were more concerned about how Whites would treat them.”

The downtown stores steeped up their practices of not allowing Blacks to try on clothes, shoes or millinery before purchased. “Riots, the Black bourgeoisie was more concerned about being able to get into a downtown store and be treated equally as Whites before and after the riots. There was no burning of homes in the areas in which they lived,” said Harris.

She was an educator who taught many of the children whose families lived in the alleys. She said many families believed that President John F. Kennedy would “take away the misery and suffering.” When Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, hopes began to diminish, the historian recalled.

Closely involved in the Civil Rights Movement, Harris remembered how the Black poor kept their focus around the platform of King. “People still believed that life was going to be better for all Blacks and there would be more opportunities to move up from their present status,” Harris remembered.

Five years later, the assassination of King made a tremendous impact on the hopes and dreams of millions of African Americans around the country.

“People lost it. Many Blacks felt there would be no end to the despair. Blacks rioted out of hopelessness. Most felt it was the end of time.”

Harris continued her work as an educator throughout the years. She later became the official city historian since the early 1990s.

When the new City Museum opened up several years ago, Harris was not called as a consultant to offer an in-depth analysis on Black life. Many residents complained the struggles of Black folks were minimized and all accomplishments related to how Whites regained power lost from the riots. The museum closed its doors two years after its first opening. It re-opened last year under new ownership but has not bothered to include the life and times of Blacks in the District.

Sitting in the dining area of her home located at 4407 16<sup>th</sup> St., N.W., Harris was reminded when she purchased her home it had a covenant that “no Blacks or Jews could ever live or own the property.” But there she stood proudly defying the racism of Whites from decades passed.

“Hopefully, someday the museum or the government will realize that it is a disservice to all humanity when the entire history is not told,” Harris said.



CONTRASTS—Children merrily skip rope as life resumes normalcy while nearby, the burned furniture store at Fifth and H Streets, N.E., is a grim reminder of the looting and burning in the city in the days right after Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. AFRO File Photo

Barbara Lett Simmons, educator remembered how Black women were concerned about the safety of their children. “Rioting was in every direction. Stores where we would shop were on fire. The smell of burning wood filled the air. Everyday it seemed another store would be on fire,” said Simmons.

Mayor Walter Washington patrolled the streets begging people to stop rioting.

“Don’t do this. Please stop. This is our neighborhood. Don’t destroy where we live I heard Mayor Washington say,” said Simmons.

Simmons agreed that many were suspicious that most of the fires were set by owners of businesses and slumlords who saw the riots as a way out of Black supported businesses. “It just didn’t make sense that we would burn up our own neighborhoods. Yet that’s how it was being reported in the news,” Simmons said.

Simmons recalled how after the riots improvements were slow but there was evidence of more Black-owned barbershops, beauty salons, and a few corner markets.