

The University of Baltimore is launching a two-year investigation called "Baltimore'68: Riots and Rebirth," a project centered around the events that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and their effects on the development of our city. UB administration and faculty members in the law school and in the undergraduate departments of history and community studies are planning a series of projects and events to commemorate the 40th anniversary of this pivotal event. We are currently working with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Maryland Public Television and the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries to pursue funding for projects that may include conferences, a website and a library traveling exhibit.

Your potential participation in an oral history project would contribute to the very foundation of this project – the memories of Baltimoreans who lived through the riots and saw the changes that came about in response to them. Your life story can fill in the limited knowledge we learn from newspaper accounts and the television footage.

If you choose to participate in the project you would be interviewed by students from the University of Baltimore. They will ask you questions, but your memories will determine the direction of the interviews.

If you agree to serve as an oral history informant in this project, you will meet with a team of undergraduate students. The students will take a still photograph of you. In addition, if you have a photo of yourself in or around 1968, we would greatly appreciate it if we could borrow it, scan it, and return it. We would reserve the rights to reproduce those photos and use them on the website, conferences, exhibit or publications.

The students may conduct the interviews at a location of your choice, or you may meet them at the University of Baltimore Langsdale Library for your interviews. During the interviews, your recollections will be recorded in two forms: audio and video. The students will be responsible for operating the equipment. You can expect the interviews to last for a minimum of 30 minutes each.

Sometimes talking about events that occurred decades ago will unearth forgotten memories. Undoubtedly, some of those remembrances will be negative. We greatly appreciate your willingness to take the risk of exploring a potentially painful past so that your life experiences will be recorded.

After the interviews the students will transcribe your oral history. They will provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review before the transcription is published. The transcription, video and audio records will be archived in the Langsdale Library Special Collections and will be accessible to the public. Your name will be attached to these documents. The University of Baltimore may use your image and/or your words in any future documentaries, exhibits, conferences or publications. Participants in the oral history project agree to waive their confidentiality.


If at any time you are uncomfortable with participation in the study, you are free to drop out. Participation is strictly voluntary. While your participation is requested and highly valued, you are free to decide whether or not to continue participation at all times. You may decline to have your name published with your reminiscences

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at 410-837-5296. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Nix, Ph.D.
Visiting Assistant Professor
History and Community Studies
The University of Baltimore

I have read and understand the information provided above, and consent to participate in the study. I have also been given a copy of the informed consent for my records.



5-3-07
Date

The University of Baltimore is launching a two-year investigation called "Baltimore'68: Riots and Rebirth," a project centered around the events that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and their effects on the development of our city. UB administration and faculty members in the law school and in the undergraduate departments of history and community studies are planning a series of projects and events to commemorate the 40th anniversary of this pivotal event. We are currently working with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Maryland Public Television and the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries to pursue funding for projects that may include conferences, a website and a library traveling exhibit.

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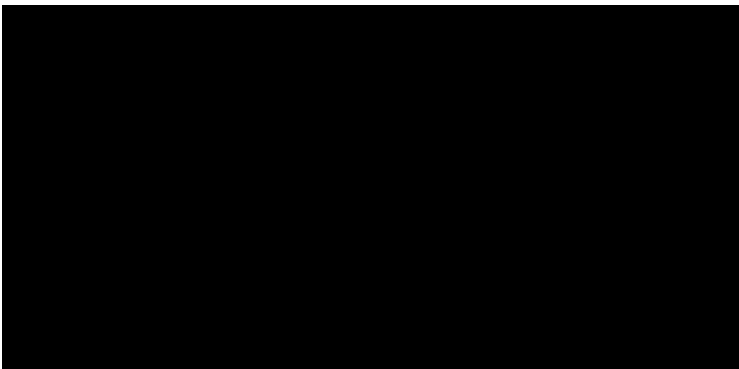
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Interview of the owners of the Lewis Furniture Store

This interview was conducted by Maria Paoletti of the University of Baltimore

Transcription provided by John J. Schwallenberg of the University of Baltimore.

Paoletti: OK, so could you please state your name.

T. Lewis: Ted Lewis.

Paoletti: And in the 1960's in the years surrounding the riots in 1968: Approximately how old were you, what was your job; and a little bit about your life: were you married, how many children did you have?

Background talking...

T. Lewis: I was married. I was owner of the business; had three children.

Paoletti: What sort of business did you own?

T. Lewis: It was a furniture and appliance store.

Paoletti: And where was that?

T. Lewis: 729 North Gay Street.

Paoletti: Alright. 729 North Gay Street. Did you live near there?

T. Lewis: No I lived up town on Pinkney Road.

Paoletti: Pinkney Road?

T. Lewis: Right. It was in 21215.

Paoletti: OK. And in terms of your day to day life, outside of work: where did you shop? Where did you do your outside of work, socializing? How did you meet new friends? Shop for clothes, food?

T. Lewis: Reisterstown Plaza is where we shopped a lot, Reisterstown Road and sometimes on Gay Street. If I was down the store I would go down to the stores on Gay Street to pick up some things and that was it.

Paoletti: Before the riots, what kind of interactions did you have with people of other races?

T. Lewis: Well I waited on them as customers. (Muffled talking to someone else in the background) We gave them furniture when they opened up the Racial Equality on Gay Street. But it was like that everyday you'd wait on customers and so on, no problems.

Paoletti: And what about outside of work?

T. Lewis: Well outside of work I'd go home and I'd have my own friends there. That was social friends.

Paoletti: And those people were mostly white?

T. Lewis: Yes

Paoletti: And what was the racial mood like, in Baltimore, before the riots? Just from what you remember.

T. Lewis: I don't think it was much of a change than normally than we had down there. There was always some kind of animosity between races; nothing really serious.

Paoletti: What do you remember about Martin Luther King's assassination? Do you remember how you heard about it?

T. Lewis: Yes it was announced on the radio and it was all over the news.

Paoletti: Did you watch it on TV or...

T. Lewis: Yes

Paoletti: How did you and how did you hear about the riots starting in other cities and Baltimore?

T. Lewis: Well we were told before the riots started here. That some of the employees or people that worked close to us there said that you'd better get out of the store because they're going to burn the place down.

Paoletti: When was this?

T. Lewis: The night the day before the day of the riots. It was like about four o'clock they start saying down they were marching down at the 500 block and they're coming up Gay Street. You might as well leave and we left.

Paoletti: And before the riots started in Baltimore, did you hear about the riots in other cities over the news or the radio?

T. Lewis: At that time, I don't think, they were just starting. There were disturbances in certain cities but nothing they didn't holler it was a riot at that time. They said there was disturbances.

Paoletti: And so, so when did, you left. I'm sorry. Continue your story about your experience. You left when you heard there were people coming up Gay Street?

T. Lewis: Yes, yes. They, one of the fellas came and said: You better get out cause they're going to come and burn up the place. On Gay Street there coming up the 500 block already. And we just got in the car and left.

Paoletti: Did you see what was happening?

T. Lewis: No. We just got in the car and we left.

Paoletti: You went home.

T. Lewis: Hmm-hmm.

Paoletti: When did you come back?

T. Lewis: Couple days later. Because they... Like two days later.

Paoletti: And what happened?

T. Lewis: They burned the building down.

Paoletti: Down to the ground?

T. Lewis: Down to the ground. They threw a fire bomb in the front window.

Paoletti: And what about the other businesses on your block?

T. Lewis: They were a lot of them, destroyed.

Paoletti: Worse than yours or were any of them left?

T. Lewis: Yes but a lot of them were like pawn shop and drug store were all busted up. Riots broke them up windows out.

Mrs. Lewis: Guttled them out gutted out the buildings.

Paoletti: And when you got home, how did you keep up on what was happening?

T. Lewis: It was on television.

Paoletti: Local news?

T. Lewis: Yes.

Paoletti: And did they show your street where your store was on the news?

T. Lewis: No but they mentioned it.

Paoletti: Hmm-hmm.

T. Lewis: I don't remember them showing it but they mentioned it.

Paoletti: What did they show on the news, where?

T. Lewis: On North Avenue they had problems. They showed North Avenue they talked about Gay Street. And we were one of the first buildings that they burnt down. The rest of them they just looted most of them.

Paoletti: Do you remember where else they showed on the news besides North Avenue?

T. Lewis: Walbrook, North Avenue, Gay Street I don't remember it's been so long ago.

Paoletti: And do you remember if they showed on the national news any of the rioting in the other cities.

T. Lewis: Yes they showed other ones.

Paoletti: Do you remember which cities?

T. Lewis: Detroit I think, I don't remember all of them you know your going back such a long time.

Paoletti: Do you, when you think about the news coverage: Do you think that it was accurate? Do you think they did a good job of portraying what was really happening?

T. Lewis: I think they did, they said what was happening. It might have been worse than what they announced; but they did announce what city, what streets were being, you know, hit and that they should stay out of the area.

Paoletti: Did you get an impression from the news about the violence and the arrests that were occurring?

T. Lewis: Well they said they were calling in the National Guard. But they weren't shooting anybody. They were just patrolling and...

Mrs. Lewis: They said the guns were not loaded with bullets.

T. Lewis: Right.

Paoletti: Do you remember what the mood was like in your neighborhood here once you got home or not?

T. Lewis: In my home? My address where I lived?

Paoletti: Where you lived your neighborhood.

T. Lewis: No.

Mrs. Lewis: It was very upsetting; it was an upsetting situation. You had a business and then you didn't have the business.

Paoletti: And were there was nothing going on of course in your home neighborhood?

T. Lewis: No.

Paoletti: How did your neighbors feel? Do you remember talking to your neighbors about it?

T. Lewis: Just how were talking probably what's happening down there.

Paoletti: And did you see the National Guard troops on TV.

T. Lewis: Yes. When we went down a couple days later they were like walking around some National Guards on the street.

Paoletti: They were still there?

T. Lewis: Yeah.

Paoletti: Ah-hum. How long did they stay?

T. Lewis: I don't know. I didn't figure out how long they're going to be there. They were there when I went down.

Mrs. Lewis: Well I think they were there guarding buildings so people wouldn't...

T. Lewis: Banks

Mrs. Lewis: They were to try to control the looting. A lot of places were being boarded up.

Paoletti: And did you both go down to the store?

T. Lewis: I went down.

Mrs. Lewis: No I didn't. I still had the children were young

T. Lewis: I went down, my brother went down. One of the employees, I think, went down.

Paoletti: How did it make you feel to see the National Guard there?

T. Lewis: How did it make me feel? Well I didn't feel...I think they didn't do enough to stop the rioting. Because they were letting people walk away with stuff while they were there. I mean they you know... Maybe they couldn't stop them. But I know they showed on television, they were walking out with television sets and things like that and the National Guard didn't do anything you know because they didn't have no guns, no bullets in their

guns and they it would be ridiculous for them to tell them to stop and there going to keep a crowd of people. How you going to stop them?

Paoletti: And did you know how many people were arrested? Did you get an impression of that at all?

T. Lewis: No I don't know.

Paoletti: And so what did you do after you went and saw that your store had been burnt down?

T. Lewis: Went home there was nothing to do.

Paoletti: Did you...were you able to...I mean how what did you do after that in terms of for business for work?

T. Lewis: Well.

Mrs. Lewis: (Unintelligible talking)... to that store over on...

T. Lewis: Belair Road.

Mrs. Lewis: Yeah.

T. Lewis: We opened up a place further up I think further up on Gay Street.

Mrs. Lewis: No that was the second store. Greenberg rented that store to us and all of the dealers that were not in the riots they loaned us gave us furniture to get us started back in business.

T. Lewis (Unintelligible)... on Belair Road

Paoletti: Which stores gave you furniture the ones from your new neighborhood were you ...?

T. Lewis: No, no. Dealers that other furniture dealers.

Son: I thought Belair Road was after the Snowstorm Riot. And the Gassinger building on Patterson Park.

T. Lewis: That's what I told your mother.

Mrs. Lewis: Ok then you opened the store at Gay and Patterson Park.

Paoletti: Gay and Patterson Park.

Mrs. Lewis: Your right.

Paoletti: And was it really difficult for you to get started up again?

T. Lewis: Yes.

Paoletti: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

T. Lewis: Well in the first place we had nothing when we moved up there. And we had to get furniture to fill up and we had to fix up the building and things like that there. And we opened up a store there. We bought the store and opened up the store there. And we were there for about I don't know how many years. How long were we up there?

Son: About twelve years and then there's another riot where they had a snowstorm and the local residents took advantage of the police inability to respond and wrecked havoc and looted and crimes of opportunity.

Paoletti: And did you have insurance on your old store?

T. Lewis: On the riot they had insurance on the buildings. But on the second one there was no insurance. Cause we were... We had an insurance man that was putting the money in his pocket telling us that the insurance was paid. And that was a complete loss. And they found out he was an alcoholic and a gambler and they put him on probation with the idea they he would pay back restitution. I never got the first nickel.

Paoletti: And how...What was that, what was that like when you first went down after the riots to see that your store had been burnt to the ground?

T. Lewis: I think I was bitter.

Mrs. Lewis: Devastated.

Paoletti: Did you, did you suspect before you went down there just from what you had seen on TV that's what you would find?

T. Lewis: Well it was announced it was on television, I think, that the building was hit. We got phone calls from people telling us that it was burnt down. I knew when they called me it was on television that they were rioting and that a furniture store on Gay Street been burnt down on the 700 Block. I knew who it belonged to. And then people called me up and told me it was our building.

Paoletti: Who called you?

T. Lewis: I think one of the employees.

Paoletti: What happened to the employees?

T. Lewis: I don't know. (Unintelligible) ...never opened up there.

Paoletti: Did your employees did they live near the store?

T. Lewis: Yeah.

Mrs. Lewis: Yeah.

Paoletti: Were they African-American?

T. Lewis: Yes.

(Talking between the Lewis and His wife)

Paoletti: How do you think...How did that block on Gay Street change after the riots? What happened to it?

T. Lewis: It tore it down.

Paoletti: The whole block?

T. Lewis: Well they... Eventually they tore it down. The city came and put a park there.

Paoletti: And this was immediately after the riots.

T. Lewis: No it wasn't immediately after.

Mrs. Lewis: Several years

T. Lewis: A couple of years after because there was nothing hardly there. (Unintelligible)...it was a barren place.

Paoletti: How many of the businesses were destroyed?

T. Lewis: I don't remember; most of them moved out or was destroyed they didn't come back.

Paoletti: Do you remember, do you remember any other businesses in any other parts of the city that stuck out in your mind? That were, that were destroyed or that were affected, strongly affected?

T. Lewis: Well I know there was on North Avenue it was buildings that were destroyed or were, I don't know, were burned don't or were just looted out. But on North Avenue there were a lot of them. Out in the Walbrook area there was a lot of them.

Mrs. Lewis: The only place that wasn't looted or burned down was Little Italy because the Italian people came out with their guns loaded. And they did not go down to Little Italy because the black people that were doing all of this destruction knew that the Italians were there with their loaded guns.

Paoletti: Were you in touch with any other business owners at the time, were you friends with any other business owners?

T. Lewis: Yes we were friends with them. But at that time all you were interested in was your own property. You didn't start calling people up and say what or you going to do about, you know or what's going to happen to us. You were worried about straightening out your own situation. Cause all your records were burnt down; your, your stock was all gone. The building was gone.

Paoletti: And how long and how long would you say it took for you to rebuild to the point that you were at before the riots, in terms of you assets?

T. Lewis: Never, never came back. Never came back to where it was.

Mrs. Lewis: When we went back to business? Was about six months.

T. Lewis: No you went back in business there: but the point is you never gained everything back because your customers had to be... were lost a lot of them. Your accounts were lost. They could pay you for your building; they could pay you for stock: but they couldn't do anything about employees. Not the employees I mean the people that dealt with you because those were the ones that were there. There not moving all the way up to the 1700 Block of Gay Street from the 700 Block that's ten blocks up. We lost a lot of customers. So you never really gained anything back that you lost. You had to start all over again.

Paoletti: Not even to this day?

T. Lewis: Well when we moved up here we went into the appliance business no furniture and then we had a different type of business it's more with real estate companies and people have real estate and they buy. But before it was private people mostly.

Paoletti: But it took you a long time to get back.

T. Lewis: Yeah.

Mrs. Lewis: Yeah from the time the store was burned down till we opened on Gay Street was a good six months.

Paoletti: How was it for your family during that time?

Mrs. Lewis: Hard, cause you had no income.

Paoletti: How did you get by?

T. Lewis: On your assets that you had on your own money

Paoletti: Savings?

Mrs. Lewis: From Our savings.

Paoletti: Do you remember how your children perceived the incident? How old were your children?

Mrs. Lewis: Well they were young. Daryl was the oldest and he probably was He's forty seven and what's that's like forty years ago.

T. Lewis: About fifteen sixteen years.

Paoletti: So he was like six years old.

Mrs. Lewis: Pete was six our daughter if he was six our daughter was four and the youngest was two they were...

Paoletti: Did they understand?

Mrs. Lewis: No, no how would a two and four year old understand?

Paoletti: How do you think, how do you think Baltimore changed after the riots; the whole city?

T. Lewis: Well I think there's a lot of resentment anyway between races. But I think a lot of blacks have improved their education and have advanced and have become part of the society rather than oppressed from the society. We still have a large number that resent the white person they feel that they're taking advantage of them. I imagine they do at certain times; but it's not as bad as it was then. I think there was total resentment because they had less to look forward for and there's no education for most of them. Now you have doctors, you have lawyers, you have people who have advanced and they can have something to show for their time.

Paoletti: Do you think that your interactions that it affected your interactions with black people with minorities personally the way that you saw them or the way that they saw you?

T. Lewis: I would think so. I would think that over the years they've become more intertwined with the blacks as far as business went...and so on.

Paoletti: Well that's really all the questions that I have. Is there anything else?

T. Lewis: No.

Paoletti: OK.

T. Lewis: OK.