

Harry DeVoe

Title: Rochester, New York and the “Long Hot Summer” of July 1964

Hook: Rochester, NY – The home of Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony. The birthplace of the Nineteenth century’s reform movement and the keeper of its progressive spirit. Because of the city’s history, it seemed impossible to many Rochestarians that their home shared the same problems as other urban centers. But, by the mid-twentieth century the city’s progressive spirit had dampened. The population continued to consider itself as progressive but failed to translate this self-image into action. In 1964, it became the site of violence brought on by white Rochestarians’ complacency with the status quo and their willful ignorance of the hardship faced by members of the African American community. Why should we care about the events in this relatively small Western New York city? Because it provides historians with an opportunity to study a concentrated microcosm of the pressures facing African Americans in every urban area.

Despite New York’s fairly robust Civil Rights Act, most African Americans in the state still faced discrimination. This story of violence and hardship in Rochester provides a reflection of ongoing issues that plagued the United States throughout the 1960s and ultimately foreshadowed greater conflict that would occur in the latter half of the decade. It demonstrated that despite legislation outlawing such practices, discrimination against African Americans continued to be a major problem. My name is Harry DeVoe and today, I examine how the violence in Rochester during July of 1964 fits into the national story of race and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

Intro Song: “Nowhere to Run” by Martha and the Vandellas: First Verse (0:00-1:42)

Background on National Story (Context): The summer of 1964 can be encapsulated in two dueling narratives. To many observers it seemed like a victorious time for African Americans and the Civil Rights Movement. On July 2, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, ending legalized segregation in America; a great victory for Southern activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. However, for many African Americans in Northern cities it was a ‘Long Hot Summer.’ Two weeks after LBJ signed the Civil Rights Act, a white police officer in Harlem shot and killed an African American man, James Powell, sparking what some observers would call a riot and others an uprising. These events in Harlem went on for six days before finally subsiding on July 24th. The violence in Rochester began that same day. Subsequent episodes of violence throughout northern cities would occur for the rest of the year.

I spoke with Professor Michael Flamm, the author of two books that I relied heavily upon for this podcast, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s*,

and *In the Heat of The Summer: The New York Riots of 1964 and the War on Crime*, about Harlem and the national context of Northern race relations during the 1960s. Here is an excerpt from my interview with Dr. Flamm about the immediate causes of violence in Harlem.

First Clip with Michael Flamm (MF on what caused Harlem and other riots)

Transition: Glass breaking & police siren

Background on Rochester Story (Context): When you look at the events in Rochester many similarities between them and those in Harlem become apparent. The violence in Rochester began on the night of July 24th, 1964 after the arrest of an African American man who was allegedly drunk at a neighborhood event. This combined with stories that a police dog bit a child and that the police assaulted a pregnant woman proved to be the tipping point for the Rochester's African American community. The city's entire police force responded to confront the growing crowd of protestors but were unable to contain the situation without the help of additional officials from the state police and sheriff's department. Governor Nelson Rockefeller declared a state of emergency on Saturday, July 25th and deployed the National Guard to support the policing efforts. This is important because it was the first time *EVER* that the National Guard was deployed to a Northern city to maintain order. Violence continued throughout the weekend before gradually ending on Sunday, July 26th. Almost 1,000 people were arrested as a result of these events. However, the reaction to the police was just the tip of the iceberg. The same underlying factors that Dr. Flamm discussed as causes for violence in Harlem affected Rochester's African American community.

I spoke with Professor Carvin Eison, the director of the film *July '64*, a documentary which tells the story of the unrest in Rochester, about the causes of violence and the long-term effects of these events. Here are what he identifies as the causes of the disturbance that rocked the city.

First Clip with Carvin Eison (CE on causes of riot and collective memory)

Narration (Outro): The events of Rochester in 1964 were not sudden- they resulted from long standing issues that the city's African American community faced. These problems were not unique to Rochester and as the problems continued despite the work of Civil Rights Activists, they reached a breaking point for many African American communities.

Transition: "Outside of a Small Circle of Friends" by Phil Ochs: Third Verse (1:13-1:44)

Narration (Intro): Housing in Rochester, like most Northern cities, caused major problems for African Americans. Despite the lack of legal segregation in New York State, most cities had separate districts where their African American residents lived. In Rochester, those districts were the Third and Seventh Wards. Needless to say, the conditions in which African Americans lived were much worse than their white neighbors. Listen to how Professor Eison describes it:

Second Clip with Carvin Eison (CE on Housing)

Narration: The situation of housing in Rochester mirrored that of other Northern cities. Dr. Flamm describes these national circumstances.

Michael Flamm on Housing (MF on Public Housing in the North)

Narration (Outro): As I previously mentioned, New York outlawed legal discrimination. Despite this fact, most of its cities, Rochester included, had segregated neighborhoods. The existence of this de facto segregation in Rochester shows that laws alone would not be sufficient to overcome the injustice faced by African Americans in the United States.

Transition: Police Siren

Narration (Intro): Aggressive policing was the direct cause of both the outbreak of violence in Harlem and Rochester. Northern police officers treated African Americans with the same brutality as their Southern counterparts. Despite the Rochester city government and police department's efforts to address these issues by creating a police review board and by restricting the use of K-9 units in African American neighborhoods, aggressive police action against African American citizens still continued in Rochester and in almost every Northern urban center. Charles Price was the first African American to serve as an officer in the Rochester Police Department. In this interview conducted by Laura Warren Hill of the University of Rochester, Price expresses a firsthand account of the African American community's response to policing and police dogs in particular.

Charles Price Interview Clip (CP on use of Dogs)

Narration (Outro): Charles Price's recollection again illustrates the power of collective memory. According to his own investigation at the time, no K-9 unit was working the night of July 24th. However, the presence of a police dog wasn't necessary – all that was needed to spark unrest was the idea that a dog was there because attacks by dogs had happened so many times before- not just in Rochester but in almost every city nationwide. Price's account of collective memory suggests that Rochester's African American community had internalized nationwide discrimination in addition to the local issues they faced. This combination of forces led to the events of July 24 through the 26th. Both conditions at home and nationally were not improving. This frustration with a reality that failed to match the aspirational rhetoric

promising to fix the various injustices towards African Americans boiled over into violent unrest. The events in Rochester and other places seem to have developed from the simultaneous pressure of local problems that repeated themselves continually on the national level.

Transition: “A Change Is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke: Chorus

Narration (Intro): The events of Rochester in 1964 were important because they revealed that the structural issues in the country were not going to be easily solved. Despite the accomplishments of Civil Rights Activists, conditions had only marginally improved for African Americans. However, the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act in early 1964 overshadows most of these problems in the historical narrative. Instead of Rochester in 1964, historians tend to focus on the Watts Riots of August 1965 as the so-called ‘turning point’ in the Civil Rights Movement. I spoke with Dr. Flamm to discuss why historians focus on Watts rather than Rochester.

Michael Flamm on Why Historians Focus on Watts

Transition: “All Along the Watchtower” performed by Jimi Hendrix: Instrumental

Narration (Intro): The story of Rochester in July of 1964 brings up an important historiographic question: what constitutes a riot, were these actually riots or were they uprisings? I spoke with Professors Eison and Flamm on whether they consider the events in Rochester to be a riot or an uprising. This question is critical to the study of the events in Rochester and others like it because one’s definition of the event shapes their analysis of it. Those who consider Rochester to be a riot sometimes have a different outlook of the events than those who consider it an uprising or a rebellion. Let’s start with Professor Eison’s view.

Clip with Carvin Eison on Terminology

Narration: And now here’s Dr. Flamm’s perspective.

Clip with Michael Flamm on Terminology

Narration (Outro): Were the events in Rochester an uprising or were they a riot? I will leave you to decide that question for yourself.

Transition: “A Change Is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke: Intro Instrumentals

Narration: The events of July 24 through July 26 of 1964 in Rochester are important because they foreshadow a growing impatience with the nonviolent wing of the Civil Rights Movement. It also demonstrated that conditions for African Americans in the Northern United States were just as problematic as in the South. Rochester encapsulates the problems that African Americans faced in the North as well as the willful ignorance of Northern whites who were quick to criticize their Southern counterparts for their treatment of African Americans but were woefully unaware of their own problematic attitudes towards African Americans. While historians consider it a victorious year, those who lived through 1964, those who were burdened with the collective memories of police brutality, racism, housing inequality, and economic disparity, know better. I do not mean to discount the achievements of Civil Rights Activists and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 but rather wish to show, through the events in Rochester, that the current historical narrative of 1964 is flawed. Yes, that year showed progress for African American civil rights was achievable, but it also demonstrated very clear limitations on such progress. The existence of these severe problems in Rochester indicate that legislation alone was not enough to correct injustice – culture needed to change as well.

Outro Song: “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” by Bob Dylan: Last Verse (4:08-5:39)

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Interviews

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