

The Jackson State shootings, 1970



A short account of the shooting of several black students and bystanders by police on the night of May 14/15, 1970.

In the Spring of 1970, campus communities across this country were characterized by a chorus of protests and demonstrations. The issues were the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the U.S. invasion of Cambodia; the ecology; racism and repression; and the inclusion of the experiences of women and minorities in the educational system. No institution of higher education was left untouched by confrontations and continuous calls for change.

At Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi, there was the added issue of historical racial intimidation and harassment by white motorists traveling Lynch Street, a major thoroughfare that divided the campus and linked west Jackson to downtown.

On May 14-15, 1970, Jackson State students were protesting these issues as well as the May 4, 1970 tragedy at Kent State University in Ohio. Four Kent State students -- Alison Krause, Sandra Scheuer, Jeffrey Glenn Miller and William K. Schroeder -- were killed by Ohio National Guardsmen.

According to reports, the riot began around 9:30 p.m., May 14, when rumors were spread that Fayette, Mississippi mayor Charles Evers (brother of slain Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers) and his wife had been shot and killed. Upon hearing this rumor, a small group of students rioted.

That night, several white motorists had called the Jackson Police Department to complain that a group of blacks threw rocks at them as they passed along the stretch of Lynch Street that bisected the campus. The rock throwing was later attributed by witnesses to a group of non- students.

The rioting students set several fires and overturned a dump truck that had been left on campus overnight at a sewer line construction site. Jackson firefighters dispatched to the blaze met a hostile crowd that harangued them as they worked to contain the fire. Fearing for their safety, the firemen requested police back-up.

The police, who later told the media that they had received reports of gunfire in the area around the college up to an hour-and-a-half before they responded to the call, blocked off Lynch Street and cordoned off a 30 block area around the campus. National Guardsmen, still on alert from rioting the previous night, massed on the west end of Lynch Street. Mounted on Armored Personnel Carriers, the guardsmen had been issued weapons, but no ammunition.

Seventy-five city policemen and Mississippi State Police officers armed with carbines, submachine guns, shotguns, service revolvers and some personal weapons, responded to the call. Their combined armed presence on the Lynch Street side of Stewart Hall, a men's dormitory, staved off the crowd long enough for the firemen to extinguish the blaze and leave. After the firemen left, the police and state troopers marched along Lynch Street toward Alexander Center, a women's residence, weapons at the ready. No one seems to know why.

Falling back before the approaching officers, the students congregated in a thick not in front of the dormitory. At this point, the crowd numbered 75 to 100 people. Several students allegedly shouted "obscene catcalls" while others chanted and tossed bricks at the officers, who had closed to within 100 feet of the group.

The officers deployed into a line facing the students. Someone in the crowd either threw or dropped a bottle which shattered on the asphalt with a loud pop. At the same time, an officer fell, struck by a piece of thrown debris.

Accounts disagree as to what happened next. Some students said the police advanced in a line, warned them, then opened fire. Others said the police abruptly opened fire on the crowd and the dormitory. Other witnesses reported that the students were under the control of a campus security officer when the police opened fire. Police claimed they spotted a powder flare in the Alexander West Hall third floor stairwell window and opened fire in self-defense on the dormitory only. Two local television news reporters present at the shooting agreed that a shot was fired, but were uncertain of the direction. A radio reporter claimed to have seen an arm and a pistol extending from a dormitory window.

Whatever actually occurred, the police opened fire at approximately 12:05 a.m., May 15, and continued firing for more than 30 seconds. The students scattered, some running for the trees in front of the library, but most scrambling for the Alexander Hall west end door.

There was screaming and cries of terror and pain mingled with the noise of sustained gunfire as the students struggled en masse to get through glass double doors. A few students were trampled. Others, struck by buckshot pellets or bullets, fell only to be dragged inside or left moaning in the grass.

When the order to cease fire was given and the gunfire ceased, Phillip Lafayette Gibbs, 21, a junior pre-law major and father of an 18-month-old son, lay dead 50 feet east of the west wing door of Alexander Hall. Two Double-0 buckshot pellets had punched into his head while a third pellet entered just beneath his left eye and a fourth just under his left armpit.

Across the street, behind the line of police and highway patrolmen, James Earl Green, 17, was sprawled dead in front of B. F. Roberts Dining Hall. Green, a senior at Jim Hill High School in Jackson, was walking home from work at a local grocery store when he stopped to watch the action. He was standing in front of B. F. Roberts Hall when a single buckshot blast slammed into the right side of his chest. The police later claimed that they had taken fire from the direction of B. F. Roberts Hall.

Twelve other Jackson State students were struck by gunfire, including at least one who was sitting in the dormitory lobby at the time of the shooting. Several students required treatment for hysteria and injuries from shattered glass. Injured and carried to University Hospital for treatment were Fonzie Coleman, Redd Wilson Jr., Leroy Kenter, Vernon Steve Weakley, Gloria Mayhorn, Patricia Ann Sanders, Willie Woodard, Andrea Reese, Stella Spinks, Climmie Johnson, Tuwaine Davis and Lonzie Thompson.

The five-story dormitory was riddled by gunfire. FBI investigators estimated that more than 460 rounds struck the building, shattering every window facing the street on each floor. Investigators counted at least 160 bullet holes in the outer walls of the stairwell alone -- bullet holes that can still be seen today.

The injured students, many of whom lay bleeding on the ground outside the dormitory, were transported to University Hospital within 20 minutes of the shooting. But the ambulances were not called until after the officers picked up their shell casings, a U. S. Senate probe conducted by Senators Walter Mondale and Birch Bayh later revealed.

The police and state troopers left the campus shortly after the shooting and were replaced by National Guardsmen. After the incident, Jackson authorities denied that city police took part in the fusillade. That the highway patrolmen fired was never at issue.

On June 13, 1970, then President Richard Nixon, established the president's Commission on Campus Unrest. The commission held its first meeting June 25, 1970. Subsequently, it conducted thirteen days of public hearings in Jackson, Mississippi; Kent State, Ohio; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles,

California. At the Jackson hearings, the administration, faculty, staff and students testified. There were no convictions and no arrests.

In subsequent action, the Jackson City Council voted to close Lynch Street to through traffic. Mayor Russell Davis and Commissioner Tom Kelly voted in favor of permanently closing the thoroughfare while Commissioner Ed Cates cast the only negative vote. It was during this same council meeting that the initials J. R. were added to the existing street signs, denoting J. R. Lynch Street, named for one of Mississippi's leading black statesmen who served during Reconstruction -- Congressman John R. Lynch.

Shortly after the closing of John R. Lynch Street, a plaza was constructed near Alexander Center. The Gibbs-Green Plaza is a favorite gathering spot for students and the site of many outdoor programs and activities. Just north of the plaza and directly in front of Alexander Hall is the Gibbs-Green Monument, a permanent memorial to the slain students and a tangible reminder to all students that the Jackson State Tragedy must never be forgotten.

In March 1996, a national conference was held at Jackson State University. "From Tragedy to Triumph: Perspectives on the Jackson State University Gibbs/Green Experience" examined the impact the May 1970 tragedy had upon the local, state and national communities, both African American and at

large. With major support from the Mississippi Humanities Council, the conference called for papers and involved middle and high school students, survivors of the tragedy and nationally recognized scholars. The conference opened with Tim Spofford, editor of the Albany Times, who spent several years researching the death of the two students who were slain at Jackson State. His interest and his research led to his writing *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College*. Conference materials as well as other artifacts related to the Gibbs/Green tragedy are housed in the H. T. Sampson Library Archives at Jackson State University.

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http://www.may41970.com/jackson%20State/jackson_state_may_1970.htm