

SPRINGWOOD AVENUE RISING

Lessons from the 1970 Asbury Park Uprising

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Asbury Park, NJ “riot,” occurring between July 4 and July 11, 1970, resulted in 180 injuries, 167 arrests, and \$4 million in property damage. The damages were largely concentrated on Springwood Avenue, the main commercial thoroughfare of the city’s African American residential and business district called the “West Side.” Today, a group of West Side residents are planning a series of commemorative events under the name *Springwood Avenue Rising*, in light of the disorder’s 50th anniversary. Their goal is to reflect on the effects of the disorder and highlight positive changes since 1970, while reassessing the needs of the community. While residents recognize this event is a watershed moment in the city’s history, the story of the riot remains incomplete, relying on firsthand accounts and few scholarly sources.

This document asks: **How can revisiting the Asbury Park riot help current organizers assess community needs and press for reform?** Through a deep dive into police reports, newspapers, self-published memoirs and first-hand accounts, data analysis, informal conversations, and scholarly sources, the researcher found that the Asbury Park City Council failed to respond to its Black residents’ needs before and after the disorder. **Four findings are highlighted in this document:**

- 1** The **legacy of segregation** shaped Black residents’ experiences with jobs, public housing, and education.
- 2** **The term “riot” is inadequate** because it fails to account for the role of activists, protestors, peacekeepers, and bystanders on the West Side.
- 3** Community activists and organizers achieved piecemeal victories by presenting **specific, timely, and actionable demands** to City Hall in creative ways.
- 4** **Inaction and corruption** from City Hall officials stalled West Side recovery efforts and advanced the city’s decline.

Private redevelopment of the Asbury Park oceanfront has recently displaced residents and raised costs of living. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis may present additional challenges to low-income residents, by disproportionately endangering their health, halting or stalling critical municipal services, and reducing the capacity of organizers. Thus, it is imperative for the future of Asbury Park to establish an **effective channel of communication between the West Side and city officials.**

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This document was adapted from key findings in my undergraduate senior thesis, written for the department of history at Princeton University. On Saturday, July 4, 1970, two Asbury Park Police Department officers responded to a call regarding a group of Black teenagers throwing rocks and bottles at passing cars on Springwood Avenue, the West Side's primary commercial thoroughfare. As police presence and crowd size increased, violence escalated. Over the next few days, Springwood Avenue saw fires, smashed windows, looting, and injuries to residents and police. Many of the businesses that were destroyed were Black-owned, though the popular Fisch's Department Store was recently sold to a white businessman. On Monday, July 6, Mayor Joseph Mattice declared a state of emergency, instituted a curfew, and called in reinforcements from neighboring police departments and the New Jersey State Police.

On Tuesday, July 7, West Side community leaders presented a list of 21 demands to Mayor Mattice and city officials at the Monmouth Community Action Program (MCAP) headquarters on Springwood and Main. They cited residents' dissatisfaction with the lack of adequate recreational facilities and the lack of jobs on the boardwalk. City Hall did not provide definitive answers to the demands; the only action they were willing to take was the appointment of community leader Willie Hamm to the Board of Education. Later that day, a shooting incident between a crowd and New Jersey State Police troopers left 44 people with gunshot wounds, including 14 minors; none were police. State Police reports suggest that lead officers instructed troopers to fire shots over the heads of an agitated crowd, but bullets deflected from the pavement and struck civilians. After the shooting, violent incidents gradually decreased, and police withdrew from their posts on the West Side on Saturday, July 11.

In the aftermath, city officials pursued ambitious development projects on the West Side, while razing buildings, displacing residents, and excluding community participation. Some also point to corruption from city officials; Joseph Mattice was indicted in 1974 in a plot to control his seat on the Asbury Park Democratic Committee. **Thus, my thesis argues that the severe economic downturn that followed the unrest was a result of government negligence. Furthermore, the uprising enabled a new opportunity for West Side residents to directly petition City Hall.** In the following section, this document outlines key findings from the uprising and their implications for current activist practices.

RESEARCH METHODS

Constructing a historical narrative requires analyzing primary sources - firsthand accounts, artifacts, or documents created at the time under study - and building on existing research. A wealth of scholarship on unrest in large cities, the civil rights movement, and urban renewal and decline served as important models for telling the story of Asbury Park. However, there are few comprehensive accounts of this particular uprising. My thesis attempts to reconstruct the event using primary sources and situating it within a broad historical context.

When writing about violence involving the police, it's important to read official documents "against the grain," scrutinizing the beliefs, attitudes, and intentions of the author. For my research, I conducted a systematic review of local press coverage, mainly examining the *Asbury Park Evening Press*, the Joseph F. Mattice Papers, 1929-1985 at Duke University, and New Jersey State Police records. These documents comprise the "official" archive of the Asbury Park uprising. These documents helped me break down the events of the week of July almost by the hour while offering key insights to the motivations of state actors. My "alternative archive" consists of self-published accounts, oral histories, and community-based public history projects. These helped me imagine what work, community, and activism was like for Black residents on the West Side in 1970. They also draw attention to important gaps, silences, and contradictions to the "official" archive. By combining the "official" and "alternative" archive in my thesis, I investigated how decisions by local authorities and business owners created the conditions that spurred an uprising.

KEY FINDINGS

1 The legacy of segregation shaped Black residents' experiences with jobs, public housing, and education.

De facto (unofficial) segregation has shaped African American history in Asbury Park since it was founded in 1871. Black workers initially moved to the city for jobs in its growing tourist industry, working as personal servants, cleaning hotel rooms, and maintaining the boardwalk. Though their labor supported the tourist industry, Black residents were banned from or granted limited access to the city's recreation. These migrants settled in an unincorporated neighborhood of Neptune Township called West Park, composed of makeshift dwellings and unpaved streets and lacking a centralized sewage system. This area was later annexed by Asbury Park and became what is known as the West Side. Local civil rights history has documented how groups like the Asbury Park-Neptune NAACP fought for school integration and mobilized against Ku Klux Klan activity. Self-published memoirs and community-based public history projects illustrate how Springwood Avenue became a vibrant center of Black culture on the Jersey Shore. While these represented important gains for Asbury's Black residents, the local government continued to neglect their needs. After World War II, the city opted to redevelop

Asbury Park for suburban consumers by expanding its retail industry and parking lots. Public education was inadequate, and housing projects became quickly crowded or fell into disrepair. As the West Side population increased, the amount of employers willing to hire Black workers remained the same. Because many of these issues were left unaddressed after the unrest, the effects of segregation linger into the present. As such, it's important to acknowledge how the "urban development" of Asbury Park has historically excluded the needs and interests of West Side residents.

2 The term "riot" is inadequate because it fails to account for the role of activists, protestors, peacekeepers, and bystanders on the West Side.

Press observers, government officials, and historians have often used the term "riot" to describe incidents of mass racialized violence in the 1960s. However, this term has become associated with ideas about Black criminality and aggression. In the context of the civil rights movement, the "riots" were seen as unproductive responses to racism. This disregards the roles of activists and community organizers, obscures the role of police misconduct, and invalidates the concerns of protestors. Stories about "riots" often include only two stock characters: the police and the angry mobster. However, through a "bird's eye view" of the crowd, there were clearly activists, youth organizers, peacekeepers, and bystanders on the streets. The crowd was not simply irrational, angry, or criminal; rather, their movement was tactical, political, and improvisatory. **In other words, this was an uprising.** But as the crowd protested for freedom, they confronted a heavy-handed police force, resulting in the shooting incident on Springwood and Main on July 7. After the deadly 1967 Newark uprising, the New Jersey State Police developed new strategies for handling urban unrest. These strategies were published in the New Jersey State Police's Civil Disturbance/Riot Control Manual in 1970, which updated its training regimen and crowd dispersal strategies and instructed officers on the use of equipment, surveillance, and rumor control. The manual legitimized the use of heavy-handed force and justified what could otherwise be seen as misconduct. Painting this uprising as a simple outburst of emotion enabled government officials to continue ignoring Black residents' needs as they pursued expensive redevelopment projects.

3 Community activists and organizers achieved piecemeal victories by presenting specific, timely, and actionable demands to City Hall in creative ways.

During the uprising, national media attention and fear of threatening Asbury Park's lucrative summer season offered West Side residents unprecedented attention from city officials, eager to quell the appearance of chaos as soon as possible. In its aftermath, a broad coalition of teenagers, adults, ministers, and government workers continued to use this opportunity to press the City Council for reform in creative and often successful ways. The community unified through the voice of Willie Hamm, a Rutgers University administrator, but voted together on major decisions. Just days after the July 7

shooting incident and ineffective meeting at MCAP, West Siders did not compromise their asks in anticipation of the city's responses. Rather, they articulated their grievances in a list of specific demands that required yes-or-no answers and dictated a course of action. No request - from the removal of the Asbury Park Housing Authority director to the naming of a new middle school after Malcolm X - was too big or small. They demanded that city officials met them on the West Side and not City Hall. When the City Council continued to be evasive, they planned a boycott of East Side businesses and threatened a sit-in demonstration at City Hall. Though Mayor Joseph Mattice would backtrack on many of his initial promises, organizers also brought new momentum to long-dormant urban renewal projects, represented displaced residents in court meetings, and pushed for immediate funding for a rat fumigation program in its public housing projects. When the USDA stopped trucking in emergency food supplies, West Side residents teamed up with local white clergy to distribute bags of food. As Asbury Park fell under hard times, the West Side shouldered the blame, and most of the consequences, for the events of July 4 - July 11, 1970. However, it is evident that the West Side's Black residents cared deeply about their community and the future of Asbury Park.

4 Inaction and corruption from City Hall officials stalled West Side recovery efforts and advanced the city's decline.

Local authorities employed various strategies to stall progress, ignore the claims of activists, and pursue their own interests. In response to the West Side's list of demands, they often refused to give simple yes-and-no answers. They cited dwindling state funds for the lack of adequate bus services on the West Side, and they claimed they had no legal authority to affect procedures related to the Asbury Park Housing Authority. They also claimed the city was warned not to touch damaged properties until insurance claims had been settled, allowing them to prolong recovery efforts of Springwood Avenue. This deflected responsibility to other state and federal agencies. The City Council also excluded West Side voices from the redevelopment process by omitting time for public comments on meeting agendas, frequently cancelling meetings, and convening during inconvenient workday hours and refusing to reschedule for evenings. They claimed the West Side was uncooperative; Joseph Mattice resorted to personal attacks against Willie Hamm's attitude, while Hamm called the mayor to resign. City officials also privately settled disputes instead of working them out publicly, in order to pursue redevelopment projects on the West Side that would displace current residents. Rumors swirled that public officials skimmed federal funds for local projects, slowing construction and the possibility for economic growth. Months after the uprising, Governor William T. Cahill told the press that Mattice still had not contacted the state for help in Springwood Avenue's recovery. The West Side found creative ways to take of its own, but, without support from the local government, total recovery was not possible.

IMPLICATIONS

My research demonstrates the ways in which the 1970 Asbury Park uprising can serve as a rallying point for current organizers and a model for negotiating with city officials. However, the fine details of the West Side's activism in 1970 are not easily accessible. I recommend that organizers in Asbury Park document their process by saving meeting agendas and minutes, advertisements and flyers, budgets, and important correspondences. This record, alongside the involvement of young Asbury residents, will preserve the longevity of this movement. Furthermore, I plan to produce a 5-minute podcast version of this report that will easily disseminate its key findings. This is in line with Springwood Avenue Rising's goal that community knowledge and the relationships built during the planning process last beyond the event. Meanwhile, the city should provide necessary logistical and financial support to the organizers. They should also elevate the rich work of public historians and community-driven efforts to present a more complete history of Asbury Park. Finally, East Side businesses must be involved in these efforts and take into consideration the needs of residents. As the city transitioned to more public-private partnerships in the 1980s, it is clear that the failure to develop an effective relationship with West Side residents has perpetuated the legacy of segregation and racism.

Further Research

Racism operates in more complex, subtle ways in the North than the South because segregation was often enforced through city codes, public ordinances, and by businesses rather than state law. Thus, the Jersey Shore's tourist industry is a rich site of analysis for understanding the long-term effects of segregated recreation. Further research on New Jersey should also document the outbreak of violence in neighboring Shore towns at the same time as Asbury Park.

I have provided clarity to the "uprising" narrative for this event. Though violence is a central element of this story, it is not the only one. Historians should consider activism and local relations as not only tangential to the event but critical elements. Police responses to the social upheaval of the 1960s also warrants further study of post-1967 riots.

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