

1967 Uprising

Living a mile from the epicenter of the 1967 Detroit riot —“the heart of the ghetto,” as she called it — Rosa Parks witnessed the massive police reaction that ensued when patrons celebrating the return of two men from Vietnam at an after-hours bar refused to disperse when police tried to shut down the venue. Many Detroit establishments refused to serve black people and many black business owners had difficulty securing the paperwork and capital for an official establishment. Police raids on these after-hours bars were, according to a Department of Justice report, a "chief source of complaints."

Police began arresting people and the crowd grew larger and more angry as morning dawned and the day went on. The police grew more violent and forceful as well. At the heart of the unrest, the uprising encompassed fourteen square miles. The Governor requested federal help and 2700 army paratroopers descended on the city. Law enforcement was given wide latitude to 'subdue' the uprising by any means necessary. “What really went on was a police riot,” Congressman John Conyers would later observe. The only black bookstore in Detroit, Vaughn's bookstore — frequently visited by Rosa Parks and a gathering place for young activists — was destroyed by police. Over 7000 people were arrested. And perhaps in the most egregious event, three young men were killed at the Algiers Motel; while police claimed self defense, no weapons were ever found and witnesses said the young men were deliberately murdered. At the end of five days, 43 people were dead, 30 at the hands of the police, and property damage was estimated at \$45 million with 412 buildings completely burned.

The uprising was personally devastating to the Parks family. Raymond's barber shop was looted and he was harassed by police for trying to protect his shop. While deeply saddened, Rosa Parks sought to contextualize the “rebellion” as she termed it, as “the result of resistance to change that was needed long beforehand.” Patterns of police harassment and brutality had been documented for years with no change in police practice. Parks thus located the uprising in the context of white resistance and deafness to black grievances in Detroit. Dispirited by the looting and random violence, Parks nonetheless contextualized people’s anger — marking the ways that “the establishment of white people . . . will antagonize and provoke violence. When the young people want to present themselves as human beings and come into their own as men, there is always something to cut them down.” Parks saw the entrenched pattern of discriminatory law enforcement, segregation, and job exclusion long highlighted by black people with little change forthcoming as what had laid the ground for the uprising.

Related primary source: [Interview with Ed Vaughn](#). Courtesy of Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.