

## SITE HISTORIES

Andrew J. Theising, Ph.D.

- 1. 1535 Tudor Ave, True Light Baptist Church**  
The bell of this church rang as both warning and call to arms in 1917. The violence that erupted on July 2 was long-simmering. For months, the African American community prepared for the possibility of violence, and church bells were used as a warning to be ready. Whites harassed the South End neighborhood regularly that summer. On the night of July 1, a car of assailants drove along Market St firing shots into homes. As the church bell rang out, armed African Americans gathered to defend their neighborhood. This response was presented at trial as evidence that African Americans, not whites, started the conflict.
- 2. 1700 Bond Ave, Leroy Bundy home site**  
Dr. Leroy Bundy, a dentist and a leader of the African American community, lived here and operated a service station at the intersection. He was an advocate for unionization of African American workers and inclusion in city government. He was accused of fomenting militant behavior in the South End and stood trial for causing the 1917 riot. He was found guilty on false testimony and was sentenced to life in prison. However, he was later exonerated by the Illinois Supreme Court.
- 3. 11th St & McCasland Ave**  
It was near this part of the South End that white rioters passed through, targeting homes for violence. Houses were burned and shots were fired at fleeing victims. Buildings here were destroyed, with notable damage on the southwest corner of the intersection.
- 4. 10th St & Bond Ave**  
On the night of July 1, 1917, white marauders drove through the South End randomly shooting into homes. The bell of True Light Church rang to alert the neighborhood. The bell's tolling caused a police car to be dispatched. In the dark streets, an unmarked police car turned at this intersection. A tire may have blown, causing a gun-like sound. African American neighbors, already tense from the shooting and assembled by the church bell, fired shots at the car, unknowingly killing two police officers. This event sparked a rampage the following morning.
- 5. 10th & Trendley Ave**  
White rioters, having done damage to the homes further west of here, attempted to push their destruction deeper into the South End, beyond 10th St. The neighbors here were organized and ready. Snipers were in place and, after a few shots were fired, the rioters retreated. There was still considerable damage here.
- 6. 10th & Piggott Ave**  
Near this intersection is the Municipal Bridge (then called the "Free Bridge," because it had no toll). It opened in January 1917 and was a primary way for people living in the South End to cross over to St. Louis. During the violence, victims attempted to flee across to safety. White rioters tried to block the way. Luella Cox, a white woman from St. Louis, who had crossed for nonprofit work, started directing families to flee across the bridge. One woman was beheaded at this site, according to Mrs. Cox's testimony. Eventually, the rioters were driven away and hundreds of families fled across the bridge to safety.
- 7. 700 East Broadway, Broadway Opera House**  
The "Opera House" was an empty theater that stood here. It is rumored that many African Americans were burned to death inside. Bystanders claimed to have seen men, women, and children seek refuge in the basement of the building. Officially, no bodies were found, but the remains may have been incinerated. Firefighters could not save the theater, but did stop the fire from spreading to a nearby factory storing 1,000 gallons of oil and gas. The library next door was also saved.
- 8. 8th St & East Broadway, SE Corner**  
Otto Nelson lived here at 741a East Broadway, near the Opera House. He was the city's only African American detective and during the riot the city turned against him. He and his wife were forced to hide in the weeds as their home was destroyed. When the path was clear, they worked their way toward the Eads Bridge, where they found themselves in a stream of African Americans heading over the bridge to safety.

## NOTES

- Judge Milton Wharton nomination. See "Race Riot at East St. Louis – 1917," excerpted by Bill Nunes from material of John Cobb (formerly of State Community College in East St. Louis) and Elliott Rudwick; included in *East St. Louis, Illinois, Year-by-Year* Illustrated History by Bill Nunes (Dexter MI: Thompson-Shore, 1988), pp. 166-167 [the account presented in this source cannot be verified by SIUE researchers]. See also: "Riot Jury Told Negroes Began Race Outbreak," *St. Louis Star and Times*, 03 Oct 1917, p. A1. See also Malcolm McLaughlin, *Power, Community, and Racial Killing in East St. Louis* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) pp. 126-127.
- See McLaughlin 47, 94, 171-172; Rudwick p. 261.
- McLaughlin, 136, 165.
- Rudwick, 38-39; McLaughlin, 127.
- McLaughlin 169.
- Crisis*, September 1917, p. 226
- The Crisis*, p. 224.
- Barnes, 171-2. McCoy's, 441.
- Crisis*, p. 228
- Rudwick, 46.
- Rudwick, p. 53.
- Rudwick, pp. 52-53.
- McCoy's Directory gives the residence of the Clarks to be 741a Walnut Avenue in 1916. See McCoy's Directory, p. 126. Rudwick, citing trial testimony of Mrs. Clark, gives the residence to be at 4th and Railroad Avenue. Rudwick, p. 100. It is possible that they moved residences between 1916 and 1917. McLaughlin tells the violence occurred at 4th and Broadway, which would be reasonably close to the site noted in Rudwick. McLaughlin, p. 129.
- Rudwick, pp. 46-47. Salisbury Evening Post, July 3, 1917. P. 6.
- Barnes, p. 136.
- The Crisis*, pp. 235-236. The Crisis spells [misspells?] her name "Narcis Gurley" when the city director spells it "Narsis Gurlie." This research is siding with the local source. *The Crisis* has several spelling errors.
- McLaughlin, 127. Salisbury Evening Post, July 3, 1917. P. 6.
- Crisis*, p. 221. Nunes, p. 167. McCoy's East St. Louis Directory for 1916, p. 348. For Brockway, see McLaughlin, p. 145+; Rudwick, p. 106+.
- Andrew Theising, "Three Lives that Changed a City," in *The Making of an All-America City: East St. Louis at 150*. Mark Abbott, ed. St. Louis: Virginia Publishing, 2011.
- Rudwick, pp. 29-31.
- Andrew Theising, *Made in USA* (St. Louis: Virginia Publishing, 2003), p. 157. Marcus Garvey, *The Conspiracy of the East St. Louis Riots* (speech, July 8, 1917).
- Asheville [NC] Citizen*, July 3, 1917, pp. 1-2.
- Rudwick p. 49; *Asheville [NC] Citizen*, July 3, 1917, pp. 1-2.
- Rudwick p. 49; *Asheville [NC] Citizen*, July 3, 1917, pp. 1-2.

# SACRED SITES

## a SELF-GUIDED TOUR

of the

# EAST ST LOUIS RACE RIOT



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## INTRODUCTION

Charles Lumpkins, Ph.D.

On Monday, July 2, 1917, black and white residents of industrial East St. Louis, Illinois, witnessed their city plunged into a second round of racial violence, just thirty-five days after the first eruption of racial conflict on May 28. The July conflagration began when violent-seeking white individuals meted revenge on black townspeople for the killing of two plain-clothes police detectives by armed black militiamen—who mistakenly thought the detectives were the white drive-by shooters who terrorized black neighborhoods during June. The police, angered about the death of their colleagues, rarely stopped rioters from beating or killing their victims, including those white persons who tried to protect isolated African Americans. Unlike the May event, the July race riot reached horrific levels, when assailants torched hundreds of black homes and businesses and white-owned companies that employed significant numbers of black workers; pummeled, injured, or killed undetermined numbers of black residents and nonresidents; and drove at least 7,000 black townspeople across the Mississippi River to safety and permanent exile in St. Louis, Missouri. Rioters avoided the city's Denverside, a predominantly black neighborhood, where black residents engaged in armed self-defense. Assailants ended their rampage on July 3 when Illinois National Guardsmen aggressively arrested or dispersed them. Estimates of deaths varied widely, no more than twenty or so white individuals killed and from several dozen to several hundred black persons, but the authorities fixed the official death toll at nine white men and thirty-nine black men, women, and children.

In its murderous barbarity, the East St. Louis race riot of July 2 and 3, 1917, shocked Americans who thought an outbreak of mass racial violence was impossible in an industrialized city in a northern state. Occurring three months after the United States officially entered World War I, many Americans demanded President Woodrow Wilson revise his war slogan from "to make the world safe for democracy" to "make America safe for democracy." Residents and nonresidents blamed the riot on the sharp rise in the city's black population caused by the Great Migration of black southerners seeking employment in a booming wartime labor market in northern and Midwestern industrial cities, thus creating interracial competition for jobs and housing. Others blamed the riot on white backlash to increases in black criminal activities or perceived black strikebreaking. Some contemporaries called the riot a pogrom because they identified the city's businessmen-politicians creating the riot to: disrupt, if not destroy, black East St. Louis and its developing black political machine; to wrest additional resources and services from the city's elites; to arrest black political activist-leaders like Assistant State's Attorney Noah Parden and the dentist Leroy Bundy; and to institute a new form of municipal government to diminish black political strength in city governance.

The East St. Louis race riot/pogrom marked a watershed for East St. Louis and for race relations in twentieth-century America. This self-guided tour brochure allows you to conduct your individualized, historical commemoration of the men, women, and children who perished in or who survived the city's holocaust.

**9. South 8th & Walnut Ave, NE Corner**

Mary Edwards, age 23, lived at 23 South 8th St. She was the director of the cafeteria at Lincoln School and had lived in East St. Louis most of her life. She told W. E. B. DuBois that she knew at 10 a.m. that “white and colored had been fighting,” but did not realize how serious it was. She did not think the trouble would come to 8th St, but it did. Rioters were shooting into the homes and setting fire to them. Her daughter and her father were inside dodging bullets. Rioters burned the house at 8th and Walnut, and she heard them yell, “Save it. Whites live there.”

**10. 8th St & Brady Ave, NE corner**

On this site was a Southern Railway crossing. The night of the massacre, rail cars filled the tracks along the curve of Railroad Ave. Armed men fired at the houses on these streets, and as African Americans fled, they were shot by the men standing along the tracks. *The St. Louis Republic* newspaper described: “[The victim] would zig-zag through the spaces between buildings. Then a well-directed shot would strike him. He would leap into the air. There were deep shouts, intermingled with shrill feminine ones. The flames would creep up to the body.” If the man writhed, more shots would be fired. The flames engulfed him and tore further east along the road.

**11. South 6th St & Railroad Ave, James R Thompson Blvd**

At 7:30 p.m. on the evening of the massacre, over 100 African Americans barricaded themselves in two homes. They were armed and resisted the white rioters—so much so that the rioters complained to the Illinois National Guard standing nearby. An officer lectured the rioters, “they are playing the game the way you are.” He arranged a cease-fire and the African Americans were escorted to St. Louis.

**12. South 5th St & Railroad Ave, James R Thompson Blvd**

The most severe damage in the riot was along the Southern Railway tracks that ran along this street. Many African American families lived in the homes adjacent to the tracks, and the tracks at the time had dozens of rail cars sitting still on them. Some fled their homes and hid among the freight. Rioters burned the rail cars. In the end, 44 rail cars were destroyed, as was the Southern Railway warehouse near South 2nd St and East Broadway, where the rail cars were to be unloaded.

**13. South 4th St & Railroad Ave, James R Thompson Blvd**

The residence at this site belonged to Scott and Iva Clark. Rioters set fire to the house while the couple hid in the cellar. After the walls collapsed, they fled next door. Rioters burned that house and the Clarks fled again. They ran along the railroad tracks where they found a guardsman, who seemingly offered protection. The three of them proceeded to South 4th St and then toward East Broadway, cutting through an alley. A mob attacked the Clarks and the guardsman did nothing. Mr. Clark was struck in the head with an iron bar and a rope was placed around his neck. He pleaded for his life. The rioters attempted to hang him but the rope was too short, so they dragged him instead. He died of strangulation four days later.

**14. South 4th St spur & East Broadway, W of Fountain of Youth Park**

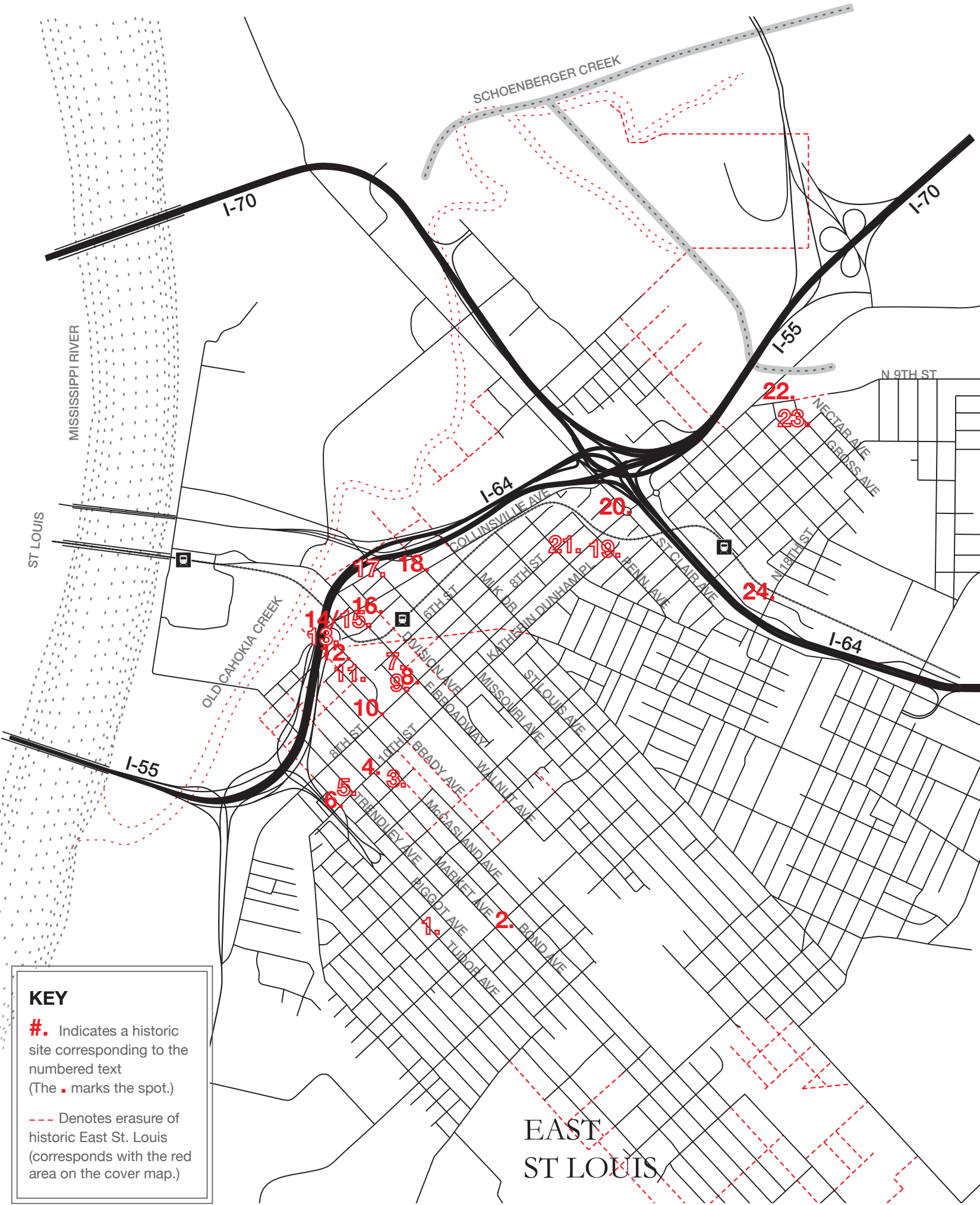
Here was the apex of the violence. *Post-Dispatch* reporter Paul Anderson counted six corpses on the street. When an ambulance arrived, rioters threatened the driver with death. Guardsman were standing a few hundred feet away but refused to intervene, despite Anderson’s pleading. Reporter Carlos Hurd witnessed a lynching there, where a rioter yelled “pull for East St. Louis!” The body was left hanging for hours. One rioter approached a body lying in the gutter and fired several shots to make sure the man was dead.

**15. South 4th St & East Broadway, E of Fountain of Youth Park**

An African American man was shot where Collinsville Ave meets East Broadway. One of the first actions of the mob was to stop a streetcar, which was easily done by pulling the overhead trolleys from the charged electric wire. White rioters attacked African American passengers while soldiers stood and watched.

**16. North 4th & Division St, SW corner**

At this site, police found the cremated body of a boy, who looked to be hiding under a bed when the flames consumed him. Narsis Gurlie lived a few houses south, and gave the following statement to W. E. B. DuBois during his investigation of the massacre:



**KEY**

- #. Indicates a historic site corresponding to the numbered text (The . marks the spot.)
- Denotes erasure of historic East St. Louis (corresponds with the red area on the cover map.)

“Between five and six o’clock we noticed a house nearby burning and heard the men outside. We were afraid to come outside and remained in the house, which caught fire from the other house. When the house began falling in we ran out, terribly burned, and one white man said, ‘Let those old women alone.’ We were allowed to escape. Lost everything, clothing and household goods.”

**17. North 3rd St. & Missouri Ave, SW corner**

Near is the municipal building complex, which included the city hall, police department, and fire station. The actual address was 115 North Main St. The police car in which Officers Coppedge and Wadley died was parked outside the station for all to see. It was blood-soaked and riddled with holes. On the night of the massacre, five hundred men, women, and children spent the night in the police station for safety, and hundreds more in the auditorium in the city hall.

**18. Collinsville Ave & St. Louis Ave, NW Corner**

Near this intersection, white rioters assembled, listened to inflammatory speeches, and marched in military formation toward Broadway. Richard Brockway, the white man who inflamed the crowd, eventually was convicted and sentenced to prison for the crime of rioting.

**19. 1010 Pennsylvania Ave, across from Dunham Museum**

Here was the home of Mayor Malbern M. Stephens, the city’s longest serving mayor. He was first elected in 1887 and he actively recruited industry, including Aluminum Ore Co. and the Armour Meatpacking plant. However, he was replaced as mayor in 1903 by a series of corrupt administrations. He fought for good governance and helped get one mayor indicted for corruption. After the 1917 massacre, civic leaders begged him to come back, even though he was 72 years old. He served eight more years and oversaw the payment of reparations to the victims of the massacre; he personally signed each bond.

**20. North 9th & St. Clair Ave**

St. Clair Ave north of this point was called “Whiskey Chute,” as it was lined with taverns and brothels to tempt young farmers who had just sold livestock at the stockyards. They had to go down this route to get to the train depot. Employment strife at the National Stock Yards helped set off the May 28 riot. Along the Whiskey Chute, whites accosted African American workers leaving the meatpacking plants and there were skirmishes, particularly on St. Clair Ave between 2nd and 4th Streets. Police officers rescued some and the arrival of Illinois National Guard soldiers quickly caused rioters to scatter. The trouble was not over; it was postponed for another day.

**21. 621 North 9th St**

Mayor Fred Mollman, who lived here, was an incompetent politician who knew that the city was about to explode with violence. He had been the leader of a corrupt government that was unprepared to respond to any civil disturbance, much less an open massacre. Marcus Garvey said in a speech that Mollman was to blame for the massacre, believing Mollman wanted African Americans out of the city. Mollman was indicted for malfeasance, but the charges were later dropped.

**22. North 9th & Gross Ave, NW corner**

Around 11 p.m., near the end of the massacre but before Illinois National Guard reinforcements arrived, rioters arrived here and began setting homes on fire. The L&N rail yards were just north of this street and officials feared that the rail terminal would be burned as well.

**23. North 13th & Nectar Ave**

About fifteen houses were destroyed in this neighborhood, though it is more than two miles away from the core of the massacre. As firefighters arrived to extinguish flames in one area, rioters moved to start fires in another. St. Louis firefighters were called to help about 9 p.m. As they made progress fighting fires in the downtown area, rioters had moved to this neighborhood about 11 p.m.

**24. North 18th & Parsons Ave, NE corner**

Several homes were burned in this area, as rioters made one last push to destroy African American homes as midnight approached. Fatalities were few here, as many African Americans already were alerted to trouble by this time and fled the neighborhood.