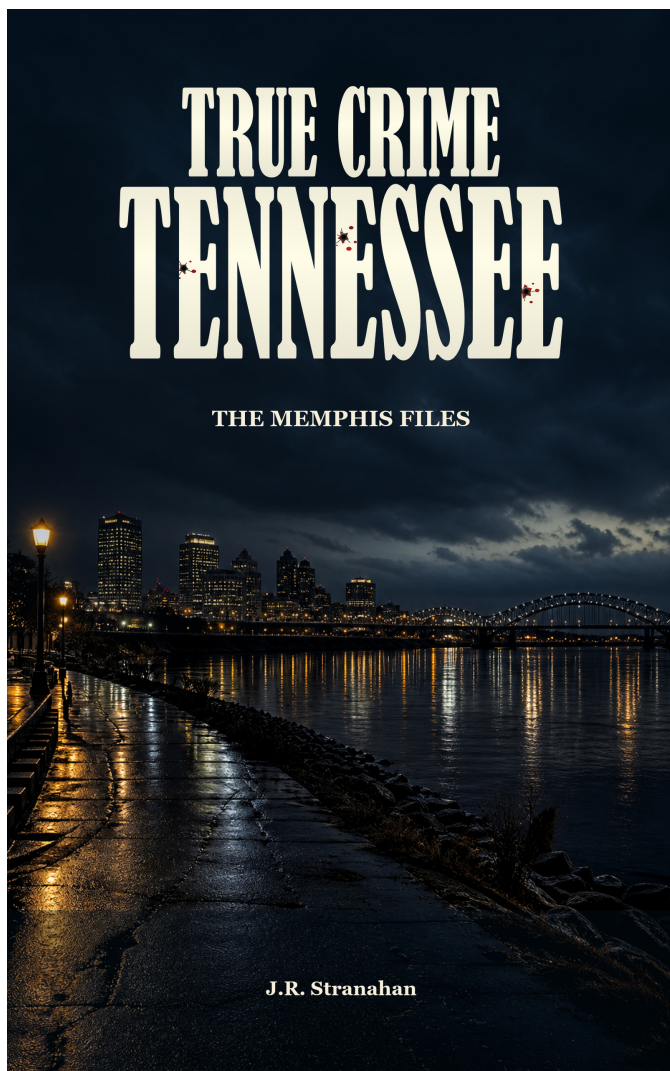


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Chapter One

Three Days in May

The first people who needed protection in postwar Memphis were among those least likely to receive it.

They had come to the city from farms, plantations, and smaller communities across the Mississippi Valley. Some had escaped slavery during the Civil War. Some had followed the United States Army. Some found work loading boats, driving carts, washing clothes, cooking meals, or rebuilding a commercial city that had survived occupation and military conflict. Others taught school, organized congregations, and tried to make homes in camps near Fort Pickering. Freedom had arrived as law, but safety had not arrived with it.

By 1865, Black residents formed a large part of Memphis. The Tennessee Encyclopedia records that freedpeople had become the majority in the city by the end of the war. Their presence changed the labor market, the streets, and the balance of public life. That change frightened many white Memphians who had expected Confederate defeat to leave the old racial order intact. The federal government could abolish slavery, but it could not make every local official accept Black citizenship.

The strain was visible in daily encounters. White police officers claimed authority over Black soldiers who had worn United States uniforms. Recently discharged soldiers knew that their service had not erased contempt. Black workers competed for jobs with white workers, including Irish immigrants who occupied an uncertain place in the city's economy but possessed the social power of whiteness. Former Confederates resented occupation. Merchants complained about refugees. Police power sat in the middle of those resentments.

The violence that began on May 1, 1866 did not remain a dispute between a few men. It became a campaign against a community.

The congressional committee that later investigated the massacre reconstructed its opening from many witnesses. A confrontation involving Black soldiers and white policemen escalated near the south side of the city. Reports spread faster than verified facts. Stories that Black soldiers had killed policemen supplied a justification to people already prepared for retaliation. Federal officers disarmed the Black soldiers and confined them to their barracks. The decision prevented a larger fight between armed units, but it also stripped the nearby Black community of one of its few possible defenses.

Then the attacks widened.

White police officers and civilians moved into Black neighborhoods. They entered houses, robbed residents, assaulted people in the streets, and set buildings on fire. Homes burned beside churches and schools. The targets were not limited to anyone who had taken part in the opening confrontation. Men with no connection to it were beaten or shot. Women were assaulted. Children were placed in danger as families fled burning houses. The difference between an arrest and an attack disappeared because some of the same men who carried public authority took part in the mob.

The word riot entered early accounts, and it remained in the title of the congressional report. It can mislead a modern reader. A riot suggests disorder moving in several directions. The surviving evidence describes something more organized in effect, even when individual groups acted without a single command. After the first confrontation, armed white men attacked a Black population whose soldiers had been disarmed. The National Park Service calls the event the Memphis Massacre. That name better reflects the imbalance.

One of the men preserved by name in the federal report was Jackson Goodell. He worked as a drayman, hauling goods through the city. The committee described him as having no role in the original trouble. His ordinariness is the point. He was not a general or political organizer. He was a worker living inside the area marked for violence. The report

placed his murder under a heading that called it brutal, a rare moment when the government's typography matched the moral weight of the testimony.

Goodell's life cannot be rebuilt in full from the pages that survive. That absence is part of the history. A congressional record can preserve the manner of a man's death while leaving much of the man outside the frame. Yet his occupation matters. He moved goods in a river city that depended on physical labor. He participated in the economy that white Memphis needed, even while some white residents refused to accept the freedom of the person doing the work.

Other witnesses described robbery alongside physical violence. Albert Harris, a shoemaker, was identified in the report as one victim of theft. The combination was not accidental. Racial terror could punish Black independence and enrich the attacker at the same time. A house emptied by fear could be looted. A business could be destroyed. A family that left Memphis might never recover property it had been forced to abandon.

The attacks continued into May 2 and May 3. Fires changed the geography of survival. A building that served as a church might also serve as a school, meeting place, and relief center. Destroying it struck several kinds of community life at once. The National Park Service's Reconstruction theme study reports that ninety-one homes, four churches, and eight schools were burned. Another Park Service account gives eighty-nine homes and twelve Black churches. The variation should not be hidden. Investigators worked with damaged records, frightened witnesses, overlapping uses of buildings, and competing definitions. The difference between the totals does not reduce the scale. It shows why responsible history identifies its source instead of pretending every number emerged from one perfect list.

The same principle applies to the dead. The theme study reports forty-six Black people and two white people killed. The Tennessee Encyclopedia describes approximately forty-six African Americans and

two whites. An official number is necessary, but it can become too neat. It cannot show the silence in a household after a parent failed to return. It cannot show the moment a family decided that a city was no longer survivable. It cannot show how many people carried injuries without appearing in a formal count.

Sexual violence was part of the massacre. The Reconstruction theme study reports that five Black women were raped. Their names are not made prominent in the public summaries that readers most often encounter. That is not a reason to ignore them. It is a reason to write carefully. Their assaults should not be used for spectacle or inserted as proof of general savagery and then forgotten. The record shows that the attack on Black freedom included violence directed specifically at women. It also shows the limits of a public record created in an era when victims of sexual violence faced enormous danger in giving testimony.

Firefighters and police appear in accounts not only as people who failed to stop the destruction, but as participants within the white crowds. That fact changes the meaning of escape. A resident running toward an officer could not assume the badge promised help. A family watching a building burn could not assume the fire department would act as a neutral service. Public institutions had become part of the threat.

Military authority remained nearby, and that proximity deepened the failure. General George Stoneman initially resisted broader intervention. The federal response developed too slowly while neighborhoods burned. Afterward, military and congressional inquiries gathered evidence. The government could investigate the ruins more effectively than it had protected the people who lived among them.

The House Select Committee's work produced an extraordinary record. Witnesses described killings, robberies, beatings, fires, and official conduct across hundreds of printed pages. The report gave members of Congress evidence that the crisis of freedom was not abstract. Formerly enslaved people could be declared free and still face local governments unwilling to defend their lives or property.

The committee also encountered resistance. Local authorities could minimize. Participants could deny. Witnesses could fear retaliation. Some people had already fled. Any investigation conducted after mass violence begins with an altered population. Those most able to describe what happened may be dead, displaced, injured, or dependent on the very officials being investigated.

Even so, the record broke through the language of isolated disorder. It showed repeated acts across a broad area. It showed attacks on people who had not participated in the initiating confrontation. It showed racial selection. It showed public officers acting with private mobs. That pattern is why the massacre belongs in a true-crime history of Memphis. The crime was not mysterious. The obstacle was accountability.

No courtroom ending balanced the chapter. There was no sequence in which the principal attackers were identified, tried, and punished in proportion to the harm. The congressional report documented conduct, but documentation did not become local prosecution. The families who buried their dead did not receive a verdict that named the system around the killers.

The absence of convictions should not be mistaken for an absence of evidence. Criminal justice depends on more than facts. It depends on officials willing to recognize victims, investigators willing to follow evidence, prosecutors willing to charge, courts willing to protect witnesses, and juries willing to judge across lines of race and power. In 1866 Memphis, those conditions did not exist for Black victims.

The massacre also reached beyond the city. News of Memphis joined reports of racial violence elsewhere in the South. The New Orleans Massacre followed in July. Together, the events weakened President Andrew Johnson's approach to Reconstruction and helped persuade many northern voters and lawmakers that former Confederate states could not be trusted to protect freedpeople without stronger federal action.

Congress passed measures defining citizenship and equal protection. Tennessee's path back into the Union became tied to ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment. It would be too simple to say the Memphis dead caused a constitutional transformation. Black citizenship was the result of long struggle, military service, political organizing, and national conflict. Yet the massacre gave brutal evidence of what freedom without enforcement looked like.

For survivors, national consequences did not restore the destroyed house. They did not undo assault. They did not return Jackson Goodell to his work. Political history often turns suffering into a cause that produced reform. That approach can make an event appear redeemed by what followed. Nothing in the Fourteenth Amendment made the three days necessary. Reform was an answer to the failure, not compensation for it.

Some Black residents remained and rebuilt. Robert R. Church Sr., who became one of Memphis's most important Black businessmen, was shot and left for dead during the massacre according to the Tennessee Encyclopedia. He survived. His later success belongs to the city's history, but it should not be used to suggest that perseverance erased what was done. Survival placed a demand on the living that the attackers had no right to impose.

Others left Memphis. Flight is sometimes described as a demographic outcome, a movement on a chart. For a family, it meant deciding what could be carried, what had to be abandoned, and where safety might exist. It meant giving up customers, neighbors, schools, and familiar streets. Racial violence worked not only by killing. It changed who could afford to remain.

The locations near Fort Pickering have been remade by roads, industry, and later development. A visitor can move through modern Memphis without seeing the boundaries of the camps as they existed in 1866. That physical change makes the documentary record more important. It also creates risk. When the landscape no longer announces what

happened, a city can treat the massacre as remote, even though it helped shape the distribution of power and trust that followed.

No permanent lesson followed from the ruins. Memphis would again see Black enterprise answered with violence and public power fail its victims. The city would also produce journalists, ministers, workers, lawyers, and families who forced hidden crimes into the record. Both histories belong to the same place.

In May 1866, the federal government arrived too late to prevent the massacre. It did preserve testimony that local justice failed to honor. Those pages leave a difficult inheritance. Evidence survived without convictions, and a public crime went unpunished. To understand that divide, the story has to return to the homes, workplaces, and institutions the mob tried to remove from the city's future.

The scale of change before the massacre helps explain why ordinary encounters carried such political weight. Union occupation had made Memphis a destination for people escaping slavery from Arkansas, Mississippi, rural Tennessee, and beyond. Camps formed because freedom had to be made physical. People needed food, shelter, work, medicine, worship, and schools. The federal military became employer, landlord, police force, and uncertain guardian.

Those communities were not temporary collections of dependence. Residents organized institutions and entered the city's economy. Men who had been treated as property negotiated wages. Women protected children and built households under conditions that offered little privacy or security. Teachers created classrooms where literacy represented both practical independence and a claim to citizenship. Ministers formed congregations that joined spiritual life with relief and political discussion.

White observers who saw only refugees missed that growth. White workers who saw only competitors missed the labor system that had forced Black people to work without wages before emancipation. Former Confederates who described occupation as humiliation ignored the danger Black Union soldiers had accepted on behalf of the government

that now hesitated to protect them.

The initial confrontation on May 1 therefore entered a city already arguing about the meaning of uniforms, badges, wages, and public space. A white officer expected submission. A Black veteran understood that military service had changed his standing. The encounter did not create those expectations. It exposed them.

Rumor then did what rumor often does during collective violence. It removed the need for individual proof. A report that policemen had been killed became permission to punish people who did not know the officers or soldiers involved. A person could be selected by race and location rather than conduct. Once retaliation was described as defense of the city, the victim pool expanded to anyone the attackers associated with Black freedom.

The confinement of the Black soldiers deserves close attention. Federal command may have intended to prevent armed escalation. The practical result was to assure white crowds that disciplined opposition had been removed. The decision also sent a message about whose potential violence required immediate control. Black soldiers were disarmed because officials feared what they might do. White civilians and local police moved with weapons while officials failed to stop what they were already doing.

That asymmetry appears repeatedly in the testimony. A Black resident's weapon could be treated as evidence of danger. A white participant's weapon could disappear into the authority of the crowd. When later accounts used the word riot, the language allowed readers to imagine two sides equally free to attack or retreat. The actual distribution of public power was different.

The attacks on churches and schools were crimes against the future as well as the present. A burned school removed books, furniture, and shelter, but it also attacked the idea that Black children would be educated citizens. A burned church damaged relief networks and meeting space. A destroyed home took tools, clothing, papers, savings,

and the small objects through which a family kept continuity.

Property totals cannot measure that loss. An investigator can count a structure once even if it served several roles. A family can lose nearly everything inside one counted house. Records of ownership may be incomplete because formerly enslaved people had only recently gained the legal capacity and opportunity to acquire property. Insurance, when available at all, did not function as a neutral restoration system.

Robbery and fire also made later proof harder. A receipt disappeared. A witness fled. A person seeking compensation had to show ownership through a system that had not protected the property. The massacre damaged the evidence survivors needed to make claims about the massacre.

The sexual assaults show another form of imposed silence. A Black woman giving testimony in 1866 faced racism, gender inequality, public shame, and possible retaliation. An official total without names may reflect an effort to protect privacy, a failure to ask, or a judgment that the details were too difficult to print. Nothing written now can restore biographies the record never preserved. The absence must remain visible so that it does not become another erasure.

Children appear throughout the event as members of households forced to flee, witnesses to attack, and victims of fire and displacement. Their experiences rarely arrive in the record as full first-person accounts. Adults spoke for them, or investigators treated them as part of family totals. A child who survived could carry memory far beyond the dates printed in the report, even if no later interviewer preserved it.

This is one reason the official end date can mislead. The main attacks stopped by May 3. The consequences continued in injury, homelessness, unemployment, interrupted schooling, pregnancy from rape, fear of police, and decisions to leave Memphis. The violence lasted three days. Recovery occupied lives.

Federal investigation brought its own unequal exchange. Survivors had to repeat what had happened to officials who could record but not promise punishment. Testimony asked people to transform grief into sequence. Who entered first? What was taken? Which direction did the shooter move? How many men were present? Those questions are necessary for evidence. They can also feel painfully narrow to someone whose entire sense of safety has collapsed.

The committee's organization of testimony into headings created clarity for lawmakers. It separated individual robberies, murders, assaults, and official actions. The format helps a reader follow evidence, yet the people involved did not experience each category separately. The same group might rob a house, beat its resident, threaten a woman, and set the building on fire. The legal labels divide what the victim endured as one event.

Local impunity had another national effect. It demonstrated that restoring the former Confederate states to ordinary self-government without enforceable protection would leave Black citizenship dependent on the goodwill of hostile officials. The massacre helped move political debate from reunion toward reconstruction. That shift did not guarantee safety, but it changed the constitutional tools available for later generations.

The Fourteenth Amendment's promise of equal protection stands in direct contrast to the Memphis record. Police power had not protected equally. Courts had not offered equal remedy. Public services had not treated Black homes and institutions as equally worthy of defense. The amendment answered a national pattern through constitutional language. Enforcement remained the harder task.

Later white violence across Tennessee and the South confirmed that a constitutional promise could still be resisted by local terror. The massacre was not the last outbreak before a steady improvement. Its significance lies partly in how early it revealed the shape of that resistance. Emancipation had ended legal ownership of human beings.

It had not ended the desire to control where Black people worked, lived, gathered, learned, and exercised authority.

Memphis memory has changed the event's name over time. The older label race riot survives in archives and historical titles. Massacre places responsibility more accurately, but naming is only a beginning. A city remembers fully when it asks who was harmed, who acted, which institutions failed, and how the resulting displacement changed the city that came afterward.

The surviving record offers no comfort of a solved mystery. It offers something more demanding. The evidence was sufficient to expose a massacre, yet the institutions responsible for punishment refused to act on it. That warning will return in this volume. A criminal act can be visible to a whole city and remain unpunished when the institutions responsible for law share the assumptions of the attackers.

Individual testimony makes that institutional failure harder to hide behind period language. The congressional report did not merely count structures after the smoke cleared. It preserved accounts of people stopped, searched, threatened, robbed, beaten, and killed. Taken separately, an official could dismiss one account as confusion. Read together, the accounts establish repetition across different locations and victims.

Repetition is important evidence in collective crime. One attacker may claim self-defense. One officer may claim a mistaken arrest. One fire may be called accidental. The same explanations lose force when unrelated Black residents describe armed white groups moving through their neighborhoods while public officers participate or stand aside.

The pattern also shows why the opening clash cannot explain the later conduct. Even if every disputed detail of the first confrontation were resolved in favor of the policemen, it would not justify attacks on women, children, churches, schools, or men like Goodell who had no role in it. The massacre was not a continuation of a lawful arrest. It was collective punishment.

Collective punishment does not require a written plan. Shared permission can coordinate people who never meet in one room. Rumor identifies the supposed threat. Race identifies the targets. Police participation reduces fear of arrest. Fire and gunshots spread panic. Looting rewards participation. Newspaper language supplies justification afterward.

That structure made prosecution especially unlikely. A prosecutor would have needed to separate individual acts from the crowd while confronting officers and residents invested in a common account. Witnesses had to identify men who might still patrol their streets. Jurors would be drawn from a white population that had tolerated or supported the attacks. The formal courthouse could reproduce the same power visible outside it.

Federal investigators partly bypassed that local barrier. They could gather evidence under national authority and place it before Congress. Yet federal fact-finding and local criminal law did not connect automatically. The committee could establish what happened for legislative purpose without delivering murder cases to a willing local prosecution.

The gap helps explain why political consequences were stronger than penal consequences. Congress could respond to evidence of state failure by changing the terms of Reconstruction. It had far less practical ability, under the legal system of the period, to guarantee convictions of individual Memphis attackers.

This difference shaped the memory of survivors. The nation could cite their suffering in debate while leaving them to bear local retaliation. Testimony that helped strengthen federal policy could make a witness more visible in the city where the attackers remained free.

The risk did not end when the committee left. A Black resident seeking compensation or pressing charges announced an unwillingness to accept the imposed order. That act could threaten employment, housing, or physical safety. Silence can look like lack of evidence when

it is actually evidence of danger.

The danger surrounding testimony helps explain why names may be missing, but it does not authorize anyone to supply them for narrative effect. The documented pattern can be described with confidence. A conversation inside a burning house cannot be invented merely because it would make the scene feel complete.

The restraint is not a limitation on empathy. It is a form of respect. The people attacked in 1866 had already been spoken for by enslavers, officials, newspapers, and mobs. Retelling should not take possession of their thoughts. It should make the surviving facts clear enough that their absence is not confused with insignificance.

The massacre's place at the beginning of Reconstruction also changes how later Memphis history reads. Black residents built businesses, churches, newspapers, schools, and political organizations after seeing what the city could do. Their achievements were not evidence that the violence had passed. They were acts of construction under memory of violence.

When the People's Grocery case arrived in 1892, the city had a precedent for allowing racial attack to alter property and population. The cases were not identical. One involved broad postwar violence, the other a targeted lynching rooted in commercial conflict. Both showed how public authority could narrow the meaning of Black freedom.

The connection does not suggest inevitability. People made choices at each stage. Soldiers were confined. Police joined crowds. Officials delayed. Attackers entered homes. Prosecutors failed to pursue. Different choices were possible. Historical structure explains opportunity and motive. It does not excuse the people who acted.

That principle keeps responsibility human. The massacre was larger than any one killer, but it was carried out through individual decisions repeated across a city. Institutional racism did not pull a trigger by itself. It authorized, protected, and later obscured the people who did.

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