

Racial Rhetoric:  
The *Detroit Free Press* and Its Part in the Detroit Race Riot of  
1863

By Matthew Kundinger

“Such being the ferocious and destructive character of the mob, where did it come from? We all know; The conversation of the vast crowd that lined the streets last evening declared with unerring certainty, *this is a Free Press mob!* And so it was. All this terrible assault on life, and destruction of property—these scenes that disgrace civilization, and made strong men weep for pity, indignation or disgrace, have for months been studiously fomented for exclusively political objects.”<sup>1</sup>

On March 6, 1863 the *Detroit Free Press* reported “the greatest excitement” in the city’s history. The paper labeled that day “the bloodiest day that ever dawned upon Detroit.” The city had experienced its first race riot. While not as famous or destructive as riots later in Detroit’s history, the riot of 1863 was certainly a momentous occasion for the city of Detroit and a historical event worthy of examination. The tallies of the day included at least two innocent people dead, a multitude of others—mostly African-American—mercilessly beaten, 35 buildings burned to the ground, and a number of other buildings damaged by fire.<sup>2</sup>

For weeks news of the riot and related issues filled the pages of the city’s two main papers, the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*. The *Free Press* was a Democratic paper, and the *Advertiser and Tribune* was a Republican paper.<sup>3</sup> Because of their respective political ideologies, the papers would often use different angles—and sometimes different facts—when reporting on the same event. It is impossible to define exactly what it meant to be either a Republican or a Democrat in the 1860s; like modern times, the political ideologies of the Civil War were more a spectrum

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<sup>1</sup> “The Nature and Causes of the Riot,” *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, March 7, 1863, afternoon ed. Sic.

<sup>2</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 8, 1863, morning eds. *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, March 7, 1863, afternoon ed. John C Schneider, “Detroit and the Problem of Disorder: The Riot of 1863,” *Michigan History* 58, (1974), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Schneider, 7, 9.

than two distinct camps. However, as the two papers represented them, there were some key aspects to the ideologies of each party. The *Advertiser and Tribune* represented a Radical Republican view. The paper supported abolition absolutely and black rights to some extent. The paper supported the war, and most of the time President Lincoln. Its main criticism of the commander and chief was that he was not radical enough in his support of emancipation, the use of black soldiers, and African-American rights in general.

The *Free Press* supported the war as well—though not how it was being fought. This paper did not support Lincoln, and blamed the problems with the war on him and his administration. The paper advocated white supremacy in every instance, and supported the war solely for the purpose of sustaining the union, not to end slavery or even to stop its expansion. As far as the other issues of the day went, the *Free Press* was much more pro-labor and pro-working class than the *Advertiser and Tribune*.

In some ways both papers can be seen as vessels of their respective parties within the political culture of Detroit. It is important, however, not to treat this representation as an absolute. The papers were speaking as members of a party, to other members of that party, but they were not speaking for every member of the party that they represented. When looking at the events surrounding the riot it is important to keep in mind that the papers, especially the *Free Press*, were talking to a group of people that share, for the most part, similar beliefs.

Because of the inherent party conflict between the papers, they did not shy from attacking each other. After the riot, the *Advertiser and Tribune* was very critical of city officials, but the paper reserved its harshest criticism for its competition. On the seventh of March the *Advertiser and Tribune* ran a column in part condemning the mob but mostly accusing the *Free Press* of “intend[ing] to excite the ignorant and prejudiced against the negro primarily, and the secondarily against the Republicans....”<sup>4</sup> In the same issue, the *Advertiser and Tribune* said, “this is a *Free Press* mob!” The next day the paper lead off with the headline: “The *Free Press* Mob.” The article attempted to prove

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<sup>4</sup> “The Nature and Causes of the Riot.” *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*. March 7, 1863, afternoon ed.

its allegation by citing several passages from the *Free Press* over the preceding months that it claimed to have “educated the ignorant mob up to the necessary ferocity.”<sup>5</sup>

Simple perusing of the papers makes it clear that the *Free Press* was more interested than the *Advertiser and Tribune* in stories that attacked African-Americans. This is neither unique nor surprising when the papers’ party affiliations are taken into account. However, the *Advertiser and Tribune*’s accusations that the *Free Press* deliberately incited the mob are unique. I will first explain the facts of the riot. Then, through a study of the *Free Press* in the months preceding the riot, I will examine the accusations of the *Advertiser and Tribune* and any culpability on the part of the *Free Press*. While there is no evidence to show that the *Free Press* purposefully instigated the mob, it is clear that the paper expressed the same attitudes of hate and prejudice that caused the violence on March sixth.

The *Free Press* used blatant racism and stories that tied African-Americans to incendiary issues to form a racial rhetoric designed to portray blacks as not only inferior, but also as a threat. The blatant racism—such as jokes about how blacks smell—served little purpose other than making fun of another race, and doing so in a way that made the paper’s white readers feel superior. However, the paper also tried to incite fear and anger in its readers by reporting on hot issues—such as labor, war, citizenship, and morality—and showing how blacks were a threat to whites, usually of the working class, within each of these broader issues.

To understand the perceived threat, one must take into account that during this time period a man’s role was as the head of his household. In this role a man was supposed to provide for his family, protect his family, and serve as an upstanding citizen. This role as head of household was so ingrained that even the concept of citizenship was tied to it; one voted as the leader of his family, not solely for himself. The articles in the *Free Press* portrayed threats that at their core can be seen as threats to a man’s role as the leader of his household. The paper showed blacks as being dangerous to several of the functions that men identified as being their roles in life.

Before the coverage of the papers can be examined, the facts of the event must be understood. Histories like Charles P. Roland’s *An American Iliad The Story of the Civil*

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<sup>5</sup> “The Free Press Mob, *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, March 9, 1863, afternoon ed.

War mention the riot, but only to the extent that that there was a Detroit race riot.<sup>6</sup> There are some Michigan and Detroit Civil War Histories that do slightly better; these include *The Paradox of Progress: Economic Change, Individual Enterprise, and Political Culture in Michigan, 1837 – 1878* by Martin J. Hershock;<sup>7</sup> *A Distant Thunder: Michigan in the Civil War* by Richard Bak;<sup>8</sup> and *Negroes in Michigan During the Civil War* by Norman McRae;<sup>9</sup> as well as Detroit histories by Silas Farmer<sup>10</sup> and Clarence Burton.<sup>11</sup> McRae's goes into the most detail of any of these books, however even it provides only slightly more than the most basic facts about the event.

Information about the riot is sparse, but there are a few secondary sources that examine it closely. The best work done on the topic is by John C. Schneider. He has two works that address the riot. In the spring, 1974 issue of *Michigan History* Schneider published an article entitled "Detroit and the Problem of Disorder: The Riot of 1863."<sup>12</sup> Then, in 1980 he came out with *Detroit and the Problem of Order, 1830 -1880*.<sup>13</sup> In both of the works Schneider took a close look at the riot. However, he focused on how the city of Detroit was prepared and how it responded to the riot. The book is mostly about order in the city of Detroit, although it does devote some attention to the causes of the riot, including the role of the *Free Press*. On this issue Schneider claims, "Finally, much of the blame for the violence which ensued in Detroit must rest on the *Free Press*."<sup>14</sup> While he brings up the issue, Schneider does not look closely at this claim nor does he examine the content of the articles to determine why specifically the *Free Press* deserved blame for the riot.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Charles P. Roland, *An American Iliad: The Story of the Civil War* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press Kentucky, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Martin J. Hershock, *The Paradox of Progress: Economic Change, Individual Enterprise, and Political Culture in Michigan, 1837-1878* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bak, *A Distant Thunder: Michigan in the Civil War* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Huron River Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Norman McRae, *Negroes in Michigan During the Civil War* (Lansing, Michigan: Michigan Civil War Centennial Observance Commission, 1966).

<sup>10</sup> Silas Farmer, *The History of Detroit and Michigan* (Detroit, S. Farmer & Co, 1884).

<sup>11</sup> Clarence Burton, *The City of Detroit, Michigan 1701 – 1922* (Detroit, Clarke Pub. Co, 1922), vol. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Schneider, "Detroit and the Problem of Disorder."

<sup>13</sup> John C. Schneider, *Detroit and the Problem of Order, 1830-1880*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Schneider, "Detroit and the Problem of Disorder," and *Detroit and the Problem of Order*.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Another good secondary source to refer to is Frank B. Woodford's *Father Abraham's Children: Michigan Episodes in the Civil War*. Woodford dedicates a chapter to the civil disturbance in Detroit. He does a great job of explaining what happened. The shortcoming of this piece is that it entirely lacks analysis. *Father Abraham's Children* is a great resource to help explain the events, but not to discover why they happened.<sup>16</sup>

The final secondary source, while it looks closely at the events, is problematic. It is an unpublished book by Andrew Quinn entitled the "Detroit Riot of 1863: Racial Violence and Internal Division in Northern Society." This work is problematic not only because it is unpublished and hard to access, but also because Quinn does a poor job of providing sources for his claims. The book is not completely void of citations, but it is short on them and the source of much of Quinn's information is not included.<sup>17</sup>

However, as long as a reader takes this into account, the book can be a valuable source. Quinn has more analysis than either Schneider or Woodford. He focuses on how the racial violence in Detroit was representative of other race conflicts. He also looks at how the images of different actors, particularly William Faulkner—a central person in the ordeal as will be explained later—changed as the conflict progressed. In this analysis Quinn looks closely at *Free Press* articles about Faulkner. However, his analysis mainly looks at events during and after the riot. He only briefly explains the causes of the riot, and never suggests or examines the *Free Press's* role in the incident.<sup>18</sup>

While that is the extent of secondary resources about the actual event, there is a wealth of background information that can help immensely to understand the broader issues surrounding the Detroit riot. Articles about other race conflicts or civil disturbance during the Civil War can help a reader to understand the issues at hand. Iver Bernstein's book, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and*

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<sup>16</sup> Frank B. Woodford, *Abraham's Children: Michigan Episodes in the Civil War* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Sekou Quinn, "Detroit riot of 1863: Racial Violence and Internal Division in Northern Society," (book manuscript, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

*Politics in the Age of Civil War*, can give insight into a bloodier—and more famous—Civil War related public disturbance.<sup>19</sup>

For a look specifically at racial conflicts and how they interact with wars one can look at Bernard F. Robinson's article "War and Race Conflicts in the United States," which appeared in the fourth issue of *Phylon* in 1943. Robinson looks at the preconditions required for a race riot and how war time enhances these conditions.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, an extremely useful book in understanding the connection between race and labor is David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Labor was one of the key issues that the *Free Press* used to portray African-Americans as a threat. Roediger examines whiteness as a racial category. His perspective is one that focuses on the working class, and he shows how whiteness as a racial identity was directly tied to labor. He also looks at some of the implications of this in terms of race relations.<sup>21</sup> This work is very valuable in that provides a foundation to many of the issues revolving around labor that arise in the *Free Press* during the months preceding the riot.

These are the secondary sources available on the Detroit riot of 1863 and the revolving issues. As for primary sources I will use chiefly the two major Detroit newspapers of the day, the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*. My only other primary source will be a pamphlet entitled *A Thrilling Narrative From the Lips of the Sufferers of the Late Detroit Riot, March 6, 1863, with the Hair Breadth escapes of Men, Women and Children, and Destruction of Colored Men's Property, Not Less Than \$15,000*. An anonymous witness to the riots published this document shortly after the event. It is one of the principal sources for the authors listed above.<sup>22</sup> The piece is written by someone sympathetic to African-Americans, and quotes only the black victims of the mob. It does not go into details about the causes of the riot or the events

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<sup>19</sup> Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Bernard F. Robinson, "War and Race Conflicts in the United States," *Phylon* 4, No. 4. (1943), 311-318, 321-327.

<sup>21</sup> David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> *A Thrilling Narrative From the Lips of the Sufferers of the Late Detroit Riot, March 6, 1863, with the Hair Breadth escapes of Men, Women and Children, and Destruction of Colored Men's Property, Not Less Than \$15,000* (Detroit) 1863

leading up to the riot besides a brief description of the allegations against Faulkner. Therefore, I will use this source in my discussion of the actual events, but it will be of little use when analyzing the accusations that the *Free Press* fomented the mob.

The nature of his paper requires a qualitative research design as opposed to a quantitative one. It may be interesting to see how many times the *Free Press* wrote positive or negative stories about minorities, and then compare that with the same numbers but of the *Advertiser and Tribune*. However, the point of this project is to determine how blatantly the *Free Press* used racial rhetoric to instigate a mob. A quantitative study may provide some insight, but a paper does not stir up a riot simply by mentioning a topic. The only way the *Free Press* could have done what it is accused of doing would have been through articles with malicious content; it is not what the paper said, but how it said it. This fact necessitates a qualitative study; it is necessary to look at the actual substance of the articles.

Once the articles are examined, it becomes clear that the *Detroit Free Press* was a racist paper, and it printed racist stories in the months preceding the riot. The paper was pushing a racial ideology, one that taught that blacks were inferior and a threat. I will show this by pointing to four types of stories the paper printed in the months before the war: stories that connected blacks to labor problems, blacks to citizenship issues, blacks to the war, and blacks to crime and a general degradation of the moral order. Within all of these categories the paper portrayed blacks as a threat. The readers of the *Free Press* were mostly lower class white laborers, a class with little power. Even absent the racial rhetoric, issues of labor, of voting, of war, and of crime—especially sexual transgressions such as rape—are at their core about power. By showing how African-Americans were a threat to whites when it came to these issues, the paper was suggesting that the already limited power of the white working class was at risk. Further, each of these categories represent a function that was vital to a man's main role in life, being the head of his household. In essence, the articles of the *Free Press* were portraying a threat to its male readers' power to fulfill their primary functions. The paper was showing a threat to their masculinity.

The *Free Press* used racial rhetoric to construct threats shaded in racism but in reality touching far broader issues. However, whether these stories inspired the people or

reflected opinions that the people already had is impossible to tell. More to the focus of this paper, it is unclear if by doing this, by constructing racial threats in this way, the paper caused the riot. It is clear that the *Free Press* shared feelings of hate and prejudice with many in the city, but it cannot be shown that it caused them.

Before any examination of the causes of the riot can commence, the actual events of the riot must be explained. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of February a Detroit man was arrested for committing an “outrage” upon the body Mary Brown, a white girl of almost 10 years. According to the *Free Press*’s coverage of Brown’s testimony, on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of February Brown’s stepmother sent her to the post office. On the way Mary ran into a black girl named Ellen Hoover. It is unclear what the relationship was between Hoover and Brown, it is clear that they were at least acquainted. The two girls walked by a tavern and eatery owned by William Faulkner and decided to go in to “warm their feet.” Once in the bar, it was alleged that Faulkner raped Brown and possibly molested Hoover.<sup>23</sup>

There are two interesting sidebars to the story that should be noted here. First, the truth of the girls’ allegations is in doubt. Both girls later recanted their testimony, saying that they made the whole story up. They did not admit to this, however, until several years later, after the damage had been done.<sup>24</sup> On top of this, Mary Brown’s reputation was already questionable at the time of the allegations. As Schneider reports, she was “by no means an innocent flower.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, what actually happened in Faulkner’s tavern is unclear, but unimportant. What is important is that the public believed Brown’s story.

The second unclear point regards Faulkner’s race. According to Woodford, Faulkner denied being “a negro” and “claimed to be of mixed Spanish-Indian blood.”<sup>26</sup> This is supported by the pamphlet printed at the time of the riot, “Thomas Faulkner...was to all intents a white man. This is beyond doubt, for he was a regular voter, and the journals of the city that understood his politics state that he voted the Democratic

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<sup>23</sup> “Horrible Outrage,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 27, 1863, morning ed. “The Faulkner Outrage,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 1, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>24</sup> Schneider, “Detroit and the Problem of Disorder,” 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Woodford, 65.



ticket.”<sup>27</sup> Even the *Free Press*, at the end of one of their stories, said that Faulkner, “has apparently but a trifle of negro blood in his veins.”<sup>28</sup> However, a trifle was enough for both papers to repeatedly call Faulkner a “negro.”<sup>29</sup> The truth at this point did not matter, only the public’s perception did.

On March fifth, Faulkner’s trial started. The nature of the offense combined with the races of both the perpetrator and the victim caused a large and excitable crowd to gather. “The feeling against [Faulkner] could not but be noticed by every observer.” The first day of trial was adjourned around noon to be resumed the next day. When guards started to escort Faulkner out of the courthouse, they ran into a large crowd of “respectable citizens” outside City Hall. The crowd harassed Faulkner and his escorts throughout their trip back to the jail, and at one point Faulkner was hit in the head with a “large paving stone.” Through a valiant effort, though, the guards were able to place Faulkner securely in the jail to await his second and final day of trial.<sup>30</sup>

On the March sixth, the guards moved Faulkner to the courtroom before dawn to avoid a crowd such as they experienced the day before going back to the jail. The courtroom was tense, and the *Free Press* reported that violence seemed close to erupting within the building. But, there were no incidents inside, and shortly after two in o’clock in the afternoon the jury found Faulkner guilty and the judge gave the maximum possible penalty: life at Jackson State Prison.<sup>31</sup>

While the trial proceeded inside the courtroom, the problems were already beginning outside of it. A mob, even larger than the one the day before, had gathered. While waiting for the trial to end, they “inaugurated the day by petty persecutions of any negroes who chanced” to walk in the area. Any blacks “who happened along were subjected to kicks, cuffs and blows, and were liable to be butchered upon the streets.”<sup>32</sup> The tensions were not limited to outside the courthouse. “Even in the very halls of

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<sup>27</sup> *A Thrilling Narrative*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> “Trial of the Negro Faulkner,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863, morning eds.

<sup>29</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, February 27, March 1, 6, and 7, morning eds. *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, March 6, 7, afternoon eds.

<sup>30</sup> “The Trial of the Negro Faulkner,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 6, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>31</sup> “The Trial of the Negro Faulkner,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>32</sup> “A Bloody Riot,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863, morning ed.

justice there were grave apprehensions that violence would be committed.”<sup>33</sup> The clouds were forming for the storm that was to come.

In anticipation of more problems moving Faulkner back to the jail, city authorities called out the Detroit Provost Guard to escort him. The guards made a wall around Faulkner and started walking him the several blocks to the jail. The closer they came to their destination, the more intense the crowd became.<sup>34</sup> They again showered Faulkner and his protectors with bricks and paving stones. At some point, the Provost Guard captain, Lieutenant Van Stan, “halted his men and faced the mob with muskets leveled and bayonets fixed.”<sup>35</sup> Hoping to quell the crowd, he ordered a round of blanks to be fired. When this did not work, another round, this time of live ammunition, was fired—if it was ordered is uncertain.<sup>36</sup>

At least one bullet from the second round hit a man, Charles Langer. Langer was of German descent and by all accounts was not participating in the violence of the mob, only observing the events from the sidewalk. His innocence, however, did not save him. He was “killed instantly” when the bullet ripped through his heart.<sup>37</sup>

If there was any hope for a peaceful night in Detroit it stopped with Langer’s heart. The *Free Press* reported the events following Langer’s death:

The cry of death and vengeance ran through the crowd like an electric shock. The sight of the bleeding corpse of the dead man...kindled anew the flames of insubordination and frenzy. The Germans, especially, were maddened beyond description, because their countryman had been sacrificed as they thought and expressed it, to protect a negro who was deserving of torture and death. The excitement among all classes, however, was intense. Being baffled in their attempt to rescue the criminal, they sought other channels to give vent to their malice.<sup>38</sup>

From the battleground where Langer was killed the crowd moved to “the first house where a negro family resided.” It was the house and cooper shop of Whitney Reynolds. Reynolds was not home at the time, but there were five African-Americans working in

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Schneider, “Detroit and the Problem of Disorder,” 16.

<sup>35</sup> Woodford, 64.

<sup>36</sup> Schneider, “Detroit and the Problem of Disorder,” 16. Woodford, 64. *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863. *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, March 7, 1863, afternoon ed.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “A Bloody Riot,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863, morning ed.

the building. The mob besieged the shop and the house attached to it. One of the workers found a shot gun, and used it to push back the crowd.

Eventually, a rioter ignited the cooper shop and the people inside had the choice of running into the waiting fists of the crowd or burning to death inside. They, of course, made a run for it. During this dash for safety one of the besieged, Joshua Boyd, was struck in the head with an axe. He later became the only man other than Langer known to have died as a result of the riot.<sup>39</sup>

The mob continued on its quest for violence and destruction for hours. Beatings and arson ruled the streets of Detroit. It began solely in black neighborhoods, but by 7:00 PM it had spread to a poor white area as well. While the white mob was burning the city, blacks ran to the woods and to Canada, anywhere they could escape from the violence of the mob. Eventually, city officials called out troops from Fort Wayne and Ypsilanti. By 11:00 PM the city was “as quiet as on any ordinary night.”<sup>40</sup>

The city may have been quiet, but the embers from the blazes still glowed. Overall, between thirty and thirty-five buildings had been completely destroyed, and fires damaged many others. An estimated 200 hundred blacks and several whites were left without any type of shelter. Two people had been killed, countless others had been wounded.<sup>41</sup> The pain and devastation, while perhaps not as bad as other cities had experienced, was worse than anything Detroit had ever seen.

The writers at the *Free Press* seemed to abhor the riot as much as anyone would expect them to. The day after the violence the paper said of the event, ‘the feeling of revenge and hatred...culminated in the most brutal and bloody riot that ever disgraced any community.’<sup>42</sup> Later in same issue, “Our city was yesterday and last night the scene of the most lamentable and disgraceful riot we have ever been called upon to record.”<sup>43</sup> The paper was clearly disturbed by the violence that occurred.

However, as already shown, the *Advertiser and Tribune* was quick to place blame for the riot firmly on the shoulders of the *Free Press*. Not only did the *Advertiser and*

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<sup>39</sup> “A Bloody Riot,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863, morning ed. *A Thrilling Narrative*, 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Woodford, 66-68.

<sup>41</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 8, 1863, morning eds. *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, March 7, 1863, afternoon ed. Woodford, 66-69. Schneider, 17.

<sup>42</sup> “A Bloody Riot,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>43</sup> “Disgraceful Riot,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863, morning ed.

*Tribune* repeatedly title articles, “The Free Press Mob” and constantly refer to the riot in this way, the paper also ran the following clip on March 12<sup>th</sup>:

March 12.—Six days since a *most ferocious mob, incited by the Detroit Free Press*, in which one white man and one colored man *were killed*, some *thirty houses burned* down, and thousands of dollars of property destroyed, *women stoned, and their sucking babes thrown into the street, and houses set fire with the inmates in them! Will the tax-payers and order-loving citizens forget this?*<sup>44</sup>

The paper continued to run the clip—with the appropriate day—until April 6, one month after the riot. Everyday for almost a month its readers were reminded that, in the view of the editors of the *Advertiser and Tribune*, it was “a *Free Press* mob.”

The *Free Press* responded by saying that they were not at fault. “The truth is, and these men know it, that politics have had nothing to do with the affair whatever. The deep feeling against the idea of placing the negro race upon an equality with the whites is confined to no party.”<sup>45</sup> The paper also claimed, “It is useless to deny the fact that there is in the North an irrepressible conflict of races.”<sup>46</sup> And thus the two sides were established. The city of Detroit was shocked with the violence that had occurred. The charge of the *Advertiser and Tribune* was very serious, and certainly worth examining.

To understand the *Free Press* in the period before the riot one must look back to the editor who made it what it was; who grew it from a party paper to the strongest media power in Detroit. On February 15, 1853 the first issue of the paper was printed under the new owner and editor, Wilber F. Storey. Storey later came to fame for being the copperhead editor of the *Chicago Times* who clashed with Lincoln on several occasions during the war. At the head of the *Free Press*, Storey was determined to make the paper “radically and thoroughly democratic – not in name merely, but in the advocacy of those great principles of popular liberty which have always been the cardinal doctrines of the republican party in this country, and which are the supporting pillars of the National Union.”<sup>47</sup> Justin Walsh explains the most important Democratic value according to Storey. “First, racism. Underlying all of Storey’s other convictions was the certitude that

<sup>44</sup> *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, March 12, 1863, afternoon ed. Sic.

<sup>45</sup> “The Mob—Its Origin,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 8, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Prospectus of Wilber F. Storey,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 15, 1853, morning ed.

the Anglo Saxon race was ordained by the Almighty to spread the blessings of American liberty to all in the Western Hemisphere except Negroes.”<sup>48</sup>

Storey left the *Free Press* in 1861, but the paper kept going down the path that he had started it on. The paper in the months before the riot is thoroughly racist, as several articles show clearly. One from July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1862 specifies the need for only white men to fight the war, “What is wanted now is *men—white men*, soldiers of our own race—*citizens* to sustain their government.”<sup>49</sup> Four days later the paper refers to the countries founders in its call for white supremacy, “Our fathers declared that they—the white race, the Anglo-Saxon race—were free and equal. They made this government for themselves, for the white man, and not for the negro.”<sup>50</sup> On the next day, August third, the *Free Press* warns what white soldiers would think of emancipation, “Hundreds of thousands of them who will take the field against the rebellion, will never fight for negro emancipation, and will never be thrust into the ranks to serve as the military equals of the plantation savages.”<sup>51</sup> The issue here was larger than simply white superiority, the *Free Press* was essentially saying that the United States was a white man’s country and white men did not need help defending it.

It must be noted that these three passages all took place before Lincoln’s preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862. After this date a new variety of verbal venom was added. The blatant racism was still there, but the *Free Press* started using backdoor tactics more often to encourage prejudice. The paper, after September 22, 1863 increased the printing of articles that tied African-Americans to other hot issues such as labor, black citizenship, and the war. The paper also focused on printing any story about black crime, or even more popular, relationships between black men and white women. The rhetoric that the paper used showed a clear threat on several aspects of masculinity, of a man’s role in society.

It is unclear why there was this change in strategy. Because of the timing it seems to be related to the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. It is possible that the forces behind the paper saw African-Americans as more of a threat now that it was starting to

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<sup>48</sup> Justin E. Walsh, “Radically and Thoroughly Democratic: Wilber F. Storey and The Detroit Free Press 1853 to 1861,” *Michigan History* 47 (1963): 201.

<sup>49</sup> “Wanted, A policy,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 29, 1862, morning ed. Sic.

<sup>50</sup> “The Indiana Democracy,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 2, 1862, morning ed.

<sup>51</sup> “Embarrassment of the Country,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 3, 1862, morning ed.

look like the war was being fought for black freedom. It is also possible that the paper was reacting to a similar feeling arising from the city, and just printing what the Democrats of Detroit wanted to hear.

Another possible reason for the backdoor tactic is that William E. Quinby, Storey's successor, realized that his readers were already racist. It is hard to imagine that the *Free Press* was able to create the feelings of supremacy and fear in its readers. These feelings must have already existed. The paper could play on them, encourage them, but there had to be a foundation for them first. The white working class of Detroit probably already felt a connection between the issues of the day and blacks. At stake to them was more than just white supremacy; it was their job, their country, their family. Essentially, the *Free Press* was making the argument that blacks were attacking white men and their families in many ways. The paper could only do this successfully if the fear already existed within its readers.

Because of the massive prejudice that already existed, Quinby could instigate the populace by merely printing information; he did not need to editorialize. For example, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, the paper ran an article about Governor Blair—the Michigan Republican governor—and his support of African-American equality. The article states that Blair wants “to admit the blacks to the elective franchise, that is to full citizenship...to admit negroes in unlimited numbers into the State...to make them competitors with the whites in all kinds of labor....” Later, the article states, “Blair desires to conquer the rebels to make the negroes the equals of white men.”<sup>52</sup> The paper did not have to explain to its readers why this should upset them; it only had to tell them that it was going to happen.

Stories like this appear very frequently between the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and the riot on the sixth of March. In an article on November 16<sup>th</sup>, the *Free Press* said, “The New York *Tribune*, the leading abolition organ, has already urged emancipation upon the ground that it will cheapen ‘rude labor.’”<sup>53</sup> Clearly any time the words “abolition” or “emancipation” were mentioned, readers would have immediately associated the subject with African-Americans. Later, the article says, “Yet, we believe

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<sup>52</sup> “Governor Blair and Negro Citizenship,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 28, 1862, morning ed.

<sup>53</sup> “Labor,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 16, 1862, morning ed.

that it is much more important to preserve the dignity of Northern labor than it is to emancipate the slaves....”<sup>54</sup> Here, the paper is setting up a vital tension, that between labor and slavery. The paper often argued, whether implicitly or explicitly, that there was a battle between labor and emancipation; a battle with working class whites on one side and blacks and rich whites on the other side.

The *Free Press's* logic was that there were limited resources, and either blacks were going to get them or whites were. According to this argument, abolitionists were working with industrialists to free slaves so they could undermine white labor by hiring blacks and paying them less. This belief was not limited to the *Free Press* or the city of Detroit. Roediger addresses this as a common aspect of the racial ideology of the working class. He says that during the civil war Democrats “predicted that masses of exslaves would flood into the North...” He goes on to say that during the civil war, “The idea of a Republican ‘abolition-capitalist’ conspiracy to unleash ‘hordes of freedmen’ to compete for white jobs in the North was fleshed out more completely than it ever had been before...”<sup>55</sup> To northern white labor and the *Free Press* what was good for African-Americans could not have been good for white labor.

The paper’s focus on this issue is clear in an article from December second, 1862. The article starts off talking about labor and the strife of the working class. “Manufacturing New England undoubtedly makes money out of the war, but the agricultural, laboring and mercantile parts of the country suffer.”<sup>56</sup> Note here the conflict between “manufacturing New England” and the “laboring” parts of the country. The article goes on to complain that the laboring class cannot call for higher wages. “In short, every avocation in which those who do not perform ‘rude labor’...are engaged, may insist upon higher pay, but when the bone and muscle...urges the grand claim of the stomach, the question is different...”<sup>57</sup> In essence, the article argues that the upper class was allowed to profit more and more while the working class is forced to suffer through the pangs of hunger.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Roediger, 71.

<sup>56</sup> “Negro Equality,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 2, 1862, morning ed.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

To this point, except for a few backhanded comments about the abolition movement, the article is entirely about labor, not slavery. However, it changes quickly, talking about what emancipation would mean to labor.<sup>58</sup> “[Freed slaves] must crowd into the free States, or into those of them which have not refused them the privilege of residence. They will swarm upon us like the locusts of Egypt, devouring the whole land.” It goes on, ““Northern white labor may, in its necessity, clamor for an increase of wages...but the plantation savages must have the fat of the land, the *first* chance in the acquisition of employment and pay. This is the terrible programme which abolition sends forth for the coldest and idlest three months of the year.”<sup>59</sup> The “us versus them” attitude is clear. Either they get the money or we get it. Either they get the food or we get it. If abolition succeeds, then white labor would be “idle” throughout the winter. If the slaves were freed, then white families would have to suffer from the cold of winter. The underlying threat was that emancipation would not only steal white jobs, but that it would challenge the white male laborer’s role as a breadwinner. A man’s primary purpose in this society was to feed and to protect his family. A man without a job was powerless to feed his family.

An article from January eighth, 1863, while not explicitly about labor, certainly sings a similar song. “If we may ask, what would become of the white race during the process of giving ‘time and opportunity’ to the blacks?... The negro on this continent belongs to the Southern States. His *chance* is there. Why *must* the North assume his interests, endow him with privileges and invite his presence?” The *Free Press* tried to argue that slavery was not a problem that the north had to deal with. “We have not enslaved them. They are as distinct from us politically and socially as the cannibals or Chinese are.”<sup>60</sup> The paper, talking to the laborers of Detroit, was trying to say that there were limited resources and if the slaves were freed then they would come north, and when they did they were certain to get priority.

At the end of the article come a few sentences that the *Advertiser and Tribune* cited as proof that the *Free Press* intentionally caused the riot.

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<sup>58</sup> This article appeared on December 2, after the preliminary emancipation but before Lincoln actually declared the slaves in the rebelling states free. The article is mainly an argument against the final Emancipation Proclamation.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> “Negro Equality,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 8, 1863, morning ed.



Whatever of prejudice exists against the race is being inflamed to its utmost intensity. We do not say that this is right; but that it is natural, and that all the signs of the times indicate that the project of nigger citizenship will receive a baptism of blood which will appal the authors of it, and will cause the poor deluded niggers to curse them....yet the effort to force a degraded race into equality with Northern free white men will be resisted, and successfully resisted, and the niggers, not the abolitionists who are befooling them, will be the sufferers.<sup>61</sup>

If not quite a call to arms, the end of this article seems to be ominous foreshadowing of the events to come. The predictions of violence did not appear in an article about black violence, crime, or suffrage, but in an article about the scarcity of resources in the north and the coming necessity of sharing them with freed slaves from the south. Even though the paper often pointed out threats regarding these other issues—violence, crime, and suffrage—the issue that drove the *Free Press* to this warning of a riot was labor.

The articles from November 16<sup>th</sup> and December second underscore this important connection that the *Free Press* saw between emancipation and harm to laborers. The article from November 16<sup>th</sup> is entitled “Labor.” Yet, the article starts by talking about emancipation, “The New York *Tribune*...has already urged emancipation....”<sup>62</sup> On the second of December appeared the article titled “Negro Equality.” This article’s first several paragraphs are about labor. It begins, “One of the most serious questions arising from the war is, ‘What shall be done to relieve the labor of the ‘country?’”<sup>63</sup> It is clear that the paper saw an unbreakable bond between these two issues.

The connections that the *Free Press* made between African-Americans and the issues of black citizenship and the war were more obvious. It is clear that if a person is racist, and if that person did not support emancipation, then that person was going to be against citizenship for blacks and against a war that was looking more and more like a war for emancipation. But there was more at stake here. The issues of black rights and the war both revolved around citizenship, which was a key facet of a white man’s place in society. If black men were allowed the franchise and allowed equal rights, then they would be on the same footing as white men. It would destroy the self image of the white

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. It is important to note some language used by the *Free Press* is offensive by modern standards. While I certainly do not include this language except when it is necessary, I feel that it would be neither historically accurate nor academically honest to avoid it.

<sup>62</sup> “Labor,” Detroit Free Press, November 16, 1862, morning ed.

<sup>63</sup> “Negro Equality,” Detroit Free Press, December 2, 1862, morning ed.

working class if there was nothing separating it politically from black men. It was also key for white men's self image that blacks were not needed to win the war. A man's job was to defend his family and to defend his country. If black soldiers were used to win the war it would have meant that white men were failing to defend their country.

The first article after the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that played on the fears of black citizenship appeared on October 28<sup>th</sup>. The article, previously mentioned, is about how Governor Blair wanted to make African-Americans the "equals of white men." The article expands on this:

The professed object of the radicals is to elevate the negro race, and no race can rise in the social scale in a country which denies them the highest civil rights. It is for this reason that the universal elective franchise is justly considered the main pillar of the freedom of white men, and Governor Blair...demands the same privileges for black men.<sup>64</sup>

Predictions that African-Americans would become full citizens and would be given the franchise, while accurate, were sure to excite the *Free Press's* decidedly anti-emancipation readers. Articles talking about black rights kept appearing. On January third, 1863, the paper claimed to be paraphrasing a black speaker at an emancipation celebration when it said, "if 'white trash' would conduct themselves properly, they might hope to enjoy the same rights and privileges with the negro hereafter."<sup>65</sup> The next day the paper reported that the President and the Attorney General discovered that blacks were "American *citizens* of African descent."<sup>66</sup>

On the seventh of January, the *Free Press* wrote about another celebration of emancipation. This article again harped on the fact that blacks were considered by the President and by themselves to be "American citizens of African descent." The article was written in a very sarcastic tone that was used to mock African-Americans. It states that they are celebrating the "proclamation of freedom" which would transform them from "chattel" to "human beings, as good, and perhaps, better than white 'American citizens.'"<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "Governor Blair and Negro Citizenship," *Detroit Free Press*, October 28, 1862, morning ed.

<sup>65</sup> "The Ethiopians on the Proclamation," *Detroit Free Press*, January 3, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>66</sup> "The President's Discovery," *Detroit Free Press*, January 4, 1863, morning ed. Sic.

<sup>67</sup> "The Proclamation of Freedom," *Detroit Free Press*, January 7, 1863, morning ed.

In the same article, the paper showed it was not above using low brow humor to abuse blacks. It often commented on the smell in the hall where the celebration was held. The article ended with this statement about the celebration. “Seriously, it was a scene disgusting to any white man, and utterly repugnant to all laws of common decency.”<sup>68</sup> The *Free Press* used any method it could to degrade blacks and scare its white readers.

The paper frightened people simply by saying that blacks might get full civil rights, which was seen as an assault on the political power of the working class. On occasion, the paper portrayed this assault as being much further progressed. On January 17<sup>th</sup>, it ran a story raising the question of a possible black president. The article started off with a very alarming statement for people of the day. “Under Mr. Lincoln’s decision that niggers are ‘American citizens of African descent,’ any of his sable pets is eligible to succeed him in the Presidency.”<sup>69</sup> As much as this would have angered the readers of the paper, a later sentence may have had an even greater effect. “It is evident that, if the administration are right, niggers have great advantages over foreign naturalized citizens.”<sup>70</sup> The statement was referring to the fact that one has to be born a U.S. citizen to run for the presidency. This message targeted the laboring class of Detroit, a large portion of it being made up of immigrants.

The lower class, the laboring class, was made up of mostly Democrats. The Democratic paper of the day was the *Free Press*. That paper constantly talked about the trouble that emancipation would bring to labor. It also roused the public by claiming to quote blacks saying that they were better than “white trash.” The paper then went as far as to say that African-Americans had more civil rights than immigrants, and that the next president could be black. The Democratic media vessel for the city of Detroit portrayed a certain assault on the political power of its readers by African-Americans.

The paper also intensified racism towards blacks in its articles about the war. It did this through two types of articles. The first were articles that talked about the possibility of black soldiers. Within this category there is a noticeable change in the articles—the change corresponds with emancipation and the slow progression towards the use of black soldiers. On August seventh, 1862, before the preliminary Emancipation

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> “Is a Negro Eligible to the Presidency?” *Detroit Free Press*, January 17, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Proclamation, the *Free Press* printed an article in which it reported that Lincoln would refuse to use black soldiers. The paper's opinion about the issue was clear, "the whole country will rejoice that Mr. Lincoln has expressed his determination not to degrade the gallant volunteers...by acceding to the demands of the few fierce fanatics who would pervert the war for the Union into a simple abolition raid."<sup>71</sup>

This quote was important for a couple of reasons. First, it showed that the paper was completely opposed to any use of African-Americans as soldiers. It felt that such use would "degrade" the white soldiers. The portrayed insult to white soldiers could have been a simple show of racism, or it could have been deeper, again arguing that blacks were attacking the masculine role of white men. The paper was saying that Detroit's sons did not want or need the help of black soldiers to win the war. The statement also showed how the paper, and presumably its readers, would react if either black soldiers were used or the war was being fought for the emancipation of the slaves. Both of these strategies were later used by the administration, and the paper reacted as one would expect.

On February first the *Free Press* reported that Senator Chandler, a radical Republican senator from Michigan, wanted to raise a black regiment. In the article the paper reported that blacks think that "they are eligible for any position from that of major General down..." If this were to happen, white soldiers would have to show the black officers "that military respect, such as presenting arms and touching caps, which the military law demands."<sup>72</sup> There were few things that would have angered an already prejudiced white patriot more than the thought of a white volunteer being forced to touch his cap to a former slave.

The second way in which the *Free Press* used the war to anger its readers was by connecting it directly with abolition; in affect, saying that it was a war for abolition. The start of this can be seen in the article from August seventh when the paper commends Lincoln for not turning the war into an "abolition raid."<sup>73</sup> Once the President expressed his intent to free the slaves, the paper decided that it was a war against slavery that was being fought.

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<sup>71</sup> "The President Refused Negro Regiments," *Detroit Free Press*, August 7, 1862, morning ed.

<sup>72</sup> "Senator Chandler," *Detroit Free Press*, February 1, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>73</sup> "The President Refused Negro Regiments," *Detroit Free Press*, August 7, 1862, morning ed.

In the same article that raised the question of a black president, the paper claimed that the abolitionists “even boast that they caused the rebellion...”<sup>74</sup> In an article from the eighth of January, the *Free Press* stated that the abolitionists, as represented by the *New York Tribune*, have “pronounced in favor of mediation and an end of the war” because the slaves had been freed.<sup>75</sup> The article clearly implies that the war was entirely about abolition. In the article from February first, in regard to the war and how the government was run, the paper said, “Our opinion is that the niggers will come out ahead. As the government is now conducted entirely for their benefit...”<sup>76</sup> The *Free Press* clearly thought of the war, or at least portrayed the war, as being fought for African-Americans; especially enslaved African-Americans.

The fact that the *Free Press* portrayed the war as being fought for emancipation was important for several reasons. On the surface there would have been the anger that white boys were dying to free the slaves, not something that many *Free Press* readers would have liked for the simple reason that they did not care about slavery. But on top of that, a war being fought for blacks was a war being fought to bring to fruition all of the other threats that the white working class feared. It was a war to free black labor to come north and take jobs, and it was a war to give blacks political power, possibly more political power than white immigrants. Not only could the white Democratic readers of the paper be angry that their sons were dying, but they were dying in a war to free slaves to take their jobs and become their political masters.

Thus, the *Free Press* used these three hot issues—labor, black citizenship/rights, and the war—to connect African-Americans with causes or effects that the readers of the paper viewed negatively, often as threats. To put it more simply, someone reading the *Free Press* would have connected African-Americans with many of the things that they saw as problems in the world. If a white laborer was unemployed, it was because of black migrants. If an Irish immigrant felt like he had no power, he could point to the governments concern about slavery. If a white mother lost her son to the war, it was because of the abolitionists and their attempt to free the slaves.

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<sup>74</sup> “Is a Negro Eligible to the Presidency?” *Detroit Free Press*, January 17, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>75</sup> “Negro Equality,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 8, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>76</sup> “Senator Chandler,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 1, 1863, morning ed.

While the *Free Press* used these hot issues as a type of backdoor racism, it also did its share of alerting the white public to the direct and explicit danger that their black neighbors posed. The 15 day span from February 13<sup>th</sup> until February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1863—the day the Faulkner “outrage” was first reported—saw the *Free Press* print eight front page stories about either interracial relationships or black crime.<sup>77</sup> Some of these stories were about the same event, but the fact is that in the days leading up to the story about and the trial of William Faulkner the readers of the *Free Press* had seen story after story about violations of society’s moral codes by African-Americans.

A type of story that was especially popular during the month of February was any story about “amalgamation affairs” or “amalgamation dens.” Four of the eight stories were of this type. They ran on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup>, and all four were about different events.<sup>78</sup>

The article from the 19<sup>th</sup> is an exposé about a police raid on one of these “dives.” The story starts off, “The number of low dens and dives where degraded creatures, white and black, of both sexes, congregate nightly for lewd, boisterous and drunken midnight events is beyond belief.”<sup>79</sup> This line suggests the story was not racist—it says both black and white—however, the title of the article is “Descent on a Nigger Dive,” and the dives always involved some African-Americans. None of the stories about these “low dens” was solely about whites. As long as blacks were involved, it did not matter how many white participants there were.

Another common feature of these stories is that they often contain sexual perversions far beyond simple interracial relations—which were seen as sexual perversions already. The story from the 20<sup>th</sup> reads, “The sight which met the eyes of the officers, on entering, cannot be excelled in human depravity—three white women and three negroes being all in the same room, and all in the same bed.”<sup>80</sup> Not only could readers have been shocked and disturbed that so many white women were being taken advantage of by black men; but their activities were perverse and degrading enough to frighten any good standing citizen.

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<sup>77</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, February 13 (two different stories in this issue), 15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 27, 1863, morning eds.

<sup>78</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, February 13, 19, 20, 21, 1863, morning eds.

<sup>79</sup> “Descent on a Nigger Dive,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 19, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>80</sup> “An Amalgamation Den Broken Up,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 20, 1863, morning ed.

Often, to show the guilt of the black men, the stories point out how the white women involved would have been pretty and proper if they had lived a different life. “The women were fair looking, and, in another place and in different apparel, would have been considered as not inferior to the majority of their sex in personal attractions.”<sup>81</sup> And in another article, “Here [a black man] fell in with a young woman, who is described by those who have seen her as exceedingly pretty.”<sup>82</sup> Another example appeared months earlier, “The girl is only about eighteen years old, is really good-looking, and evidently understands the rules of etiquette quite as well as many who would sooner wed the d—l...as the [black man] to whom she is betrothed.”<sup>83</sup> Not only were the mores of society being broken, but black men were stealing pretty, innocent, proper white women. In a patriarchal society in which it was a man’s job to protect his wife and daughters, these stories were sure to infuriate the paper’s readers.

Again the issue of masculinity and the male role arises. Blacks were a threat because they could take away white jobs, attacking the ability of white men to perform their role as breadwinners. On top of that, African-Americans were directly attacking a white man’s ability to defend his family by stealing daughters and deflowering them.

This threat is clearly shown by some articles that involve nothing more than an interracial couple. The last one cited, from December, is one example. Another is a story from the 21<sup>st</sup> of February. This story was about how all of “the abolition speeches and resolutions are producing at the capital an abundant cross of amalgamation.”<sup>84</sup> The highlight of this story is about a “big, overgrown, and greasy nigger” who started a relationship with a white girl who already had a “husband absent in the army.”<sup>85</sup> This article manages to tie in several themes: first, the obvious anger about general mixing of the races; second, anger about abolition and how it was causing this mixing; and third, anger about the war being fought for abolition and how it was allowing innocent, “exceedingly pretty” girls to be stolen from their husbands who were off dying for a slave cause. This article ran a scant six days before the Faulkner case was first reported, and less than two weeks before the actual riot.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Another Amalgamation Affair,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 21, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>83</sup> Another Amalgamation Case,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 24, 1863, morning ed. Sic.

<sup>84</sup> “Another Amalgamation Affair, *Detroit Free Press*, February 21, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

The reporting of the Faulkner case started on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February and from the first line in the story a reader can tell that it is different—easily explainable by the nature of the accusations. “One of the most terrible outrages ever perpetrated in any community, and which has certainly never had a parallel here, took place on the 16<sup>th</sup> of the present month...”<sup>86</sup> The first line seems ominously foreboding, and even to readers of the day it had to seem as if an infamous history was in the making.

A key aspect of the reporting in the *Free Press* was the presumption of guilt that was clear from the very beginning. The sub-headline reads, “A negro entraps a little girl into his room and commits a fiendish crime upon her person.” Later in the story, the paper reported, Mary Brown “is extraordinarily intelligent, tells her sad story in a straight-forward manner, and there can be no doubt of its entire truth.”<sup>87</sup> The paper had made two things clear: Faulkner was black and he was guilty. The first point is important because, as pointed out earlier, Faulkner’s race is not clear now, and it certainly was not at the time. After this article, however, the paper had decided Faulkner’s race; whether he was actually an African-American or not, from February 27<sup>th</sup> on, in the public’s eye, he was a “negro.”

It is important to point out that the *Advertiser and Tribune* reported on this accusation as well. The paper first reported the wrong name for Faulkner, calling him “Fox.” Like the *Free Press*, the *Advertiser and Tribune* also dubbed the accused a “negro” in its headline. However, the *Advertiser and Tribune* did not assume the guilt of the “negro” like the *Free Press* did. “The facts connected with this terrible outrage seem horrible, and, indeed, impossible. But if proven true...”<sup>88</sup> This difference is important because it shows the difference in reporting styles and in the agendas of the two papers. It is important to note that, of the eight stories that the *Free Press* had printed about black crime since February 13<sup>th</sup>, this was the first comparable story in the *Advertiser and Tribune*.

At the end of the *Free Press*’s first article about the case, they set the tone for all subsequent reporting of it. “The whole affair, taken in all its aspects, is one for which every instinct of humanity cries out for vengeance. There is no punishment on the statute

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<sup>86</sup> “Horrible Outrage,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 27, 1863, morning ed.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> “A Serious Charge,” *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, February 27, 1863, afternoon ed.



books of Michigan which would, in a hundredth part, atone for the heinous crime. Let a fair examination be had, and justice, though it be utterly inadequate, take its proper course.”<sup>89</sup> The entreaty for a fair trial and the rule of law seems impotent compared to the first part of the statement. The quote was echoed two days later in another story about the case, “The evidence of the negro’s guilt is overwhelming and cannot be controverted. The only thing to be regretted is that there is no law sufficiently severe to punish him as the damnable crime which he has committed so richly merits.”<sup>90</sup> This was followed shortly by, “it is thought that an excited and indignant mob would have attempted to wreak summary vengeance upon him within the very walls of the courtroom.”<sup>91</sup> It seems that the *Free Press* is screaming for a lynching. One must wonder what the paper’s opinion would have been if, instead of the riot on the sixth, the crowd had been able to get to Faulkner, lynch him, and then disperse. It is hard to imagine the paper condemning that type of action after what it had printed.

The next article about the crime comes on the sixth,—the riot happened the same day, but after the paper was printed—the day after Faulkner’s trial started. As stated earlier, on the first day of Faulkner’s trial the guards had trouble getting him back to the jail after the day’s proceedings. The mob, the *Free Press* reported, would have liked “to rescue the prisoner from the officers and wreak summary vengeance upon his person.” The mob was made up of “Respectable citizens, forgetting their obligations to preserve the peace, and remembering only the damnable crime of which they had heard the prisoner convicted”<sup>92</sup>—before Faulkner was actually convicted. Apparently, the *Free Press* felt that one could still be a respectable citizen while ignoring the law and trying to lynch a man.

Then came the riot. While the *Free Press* did seem to be instigating its readers, pushing them, encouraging their passionate racism and bigotry; there is absolutely no evidence that any member of the paper wanted what happened to happen. This being said, a person, or a paper in this case, can be at fault without having intent. That is the case, at least to some extent, in this situation. I am not claiming that what the *Free Press* printed

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<sup>89</sup> “Horrible Outrage,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 27, 1863, morning ed. Sic.

<sup>90</sup> “The Faulkner Outrage,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 1, 1863, morning ed. Sic.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> “Trial of the Negro Faulkner,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 6, 1863, morning ed.

was not news. It was, and it can be assumed that most of it was true. However, the stories that it chose to print—eight stories about black crime in a 15 day span—and how it editorialized—almost screaming for mob justice—clearly shows that at least some culpability for the riot belonged to the paper.

The *Detroit Free Press* used a racial rhetoric to argue that African-Americans were threatening its working class white readers. The paper did this partly by pointing out physical threats—such as black thieves and murderers—but mostly by showing how blacks were intertwined in the issues that already threatened whites. The rhetoric was essentially about power. The *Free Press* showed how blacks were going to supplant white laborers, how they were going to gain vast political power—more than white immigrants—and how the war that was tearing the country apart and killing its sons was the fault of blacks. The paper showed how African-Americans were attacking the family, specifically innocent white girls. It all came down to power and the masculine role in society. Blacks were attacking white men by attacking their functions in society. Did white men have the power, were they manly enough, to defend themselves and their families?

It is likely that, at some level the riot was a reaction to this threat. The mob could not have been thinking in its collective mind that it needed to attack the blacks before they stole their jobs and made them impotent. But the mob definitely saw Detroit's African-American community as some type of threat, why else use violence? Certainly the trial of William Faulkner was the catalyst of the riot. But the intersection between labor, emancipation, war, power, and masculinity cannot be ignored. The *Free Press* had certainly not ignored it in the preceding months.

Books and papers have been written about the riot before. While there is limited information about the event, this paper does not add anything to the body of knowledge about the actual riot. Other writers have also tackled issues of power and how they relate to race and labor issues. However, no one before has looked at the *Free Press* over the months preceding the riot and at how it contributed to the events. In this paper I sought to provide an important context to the riot, one that cannot be ignored if a person wishes to truly understand it. Knowing that the riot stemmed from the trial of William Faulkner is important, as other writers have noted. However, it is equally important to start to

grasp the interplay between the issues of power, labor, citizenship, and the war, and how all of these contributed to the racial ideology of the *Free Press*.

Important research remains. This paper looked at the interconnection of these themes in the *Free Press*, a very limited scope. How conscious was the regular working class white Detroiters of these themes? How representative was the *Free Press* of other Democratic organs? The interplay between the themes certainly did not stand alone in time and space, but when did it start and how did it evolve? Was it the same in other parts of the country, or were there different issues? Much is left to be answered.

Another question that I cannot answer stands tall. Examining the *Free Press's* articles shows only what they printed. It shows what happened leading up to the riot, and how the editors felt about any number of things, including African-Americans. It cannot show how the paper and its opinions fit into society. It cannot be determined by the research done thus far whether the *Free Press* caused the prejudices and violence of its readers; or whether the racism of its readers caused the paper to print what it did. The answer has to be somewhere in between. Few people would argue that the opinions of the press have no effect on the masses; equally few would argue that those opinions control society. To answer this question someone would have to find a way to delve into the psyche of a city. Probably, no answer is possible.

One can tell, by looking at the content in the *Free Press*, that the paper at least reflected, and at the most caused, the feelings of bigotry, hatred, and fear that led to the “bloodiest day that ever dawned upon Detroit.”<sup>93</sup> The *Advertiser and Tribune* called the riot a “*Free Press* mob.” They were right in at least one way. Just as the *Free Press* used the *New York Tribune* as a representation of abolition and Radical Republicans, so can the *Free Press* be seen as a representation of a racist society; of a racist town. Detroit was a city already tense with issues of labor, emancipation, and the war. The *Free Press* and the people that shared its views found a scapegoat: African-Americans. The paper used a racial rhetoric that showed how blacks were a direct threat to whites. On March seventh the tension grew too strong for whatever bonds were holding it and an orgy of violence was the result.

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<sup>93</sup> “A Bloody Riot,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1863, morning ed.

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