Violence in an "Arsenal of Democracy": the Beaumont Race Riot, 1943

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War forcibly alters a nation. The economic, political, and social structure is tested, perhaps shaken or crumbled. Not the least of the alterations produced by war has been a redirection in the role of black Americans. World War II proved no exception as the years of conflict fostered increased hope and frustration for blacks. Having been disproportionately represented on the unemployment rolls of the 1930s, they welcomed the defense buildup which began in 1940. But as they would soon discover, the fruits belonged to whites only. As blacks came to realize this they proved more reticent to engage wholly in the war effort, demonstrating a renewed awareness of the hypocrisy of American democratic principles through such activities as the March on Washington Movement. While controversy exists over whether the position of blacks in the war was conservative in nature or a time of genuine protest, the racial violence of 1943 suggests that changes were occurring. The race riots of that year, moreover, seriously threatened an American war effort for the first time and thus assumed new dimensions. Of the rash of racial conflagrations during the war years that in Beaumont, Texas was perhaps the last in which blacks and their property proved exclusively to be the victims.¹

Beaumont lay on the banks of the Neches River just east of Houston. In 1940 Beaumont contained 59,000 citizens, with black residents forming 32 percent of the population. By mid-1943 the city had grown to an estimated 80,000 persons, or an increase of 21,000 inhabitants in three years, with blacks still representing fully one-third of the citizenry.²

The city and its surrounding area was an “arsenal of democracy,” teeming with war production. Pennsylvania Shipyards, Inc., a ship repair and construction business that handled mostly cargo ships and built the famous Liberty Ships, constituted by far the largest single war industry in Beaumont. The shipyard employed 8,500 men at its location on the Neches River and held yearly government contracts in excess of $100 million dollars. Oil refineries of major petroleum companies, concerns which produced bombs and other wartime goods, and several other shipyards dotted the area. In Orange, Texas, situated twenty-six miles east of Beaumont on the Louisiana border, lay the Consolidated Steel Shipyards, erected as part of the Maritime Commission’s expansion project in 1940. It ultimately became larger than any other neighboring shipyard, with yearly government contracts totaling $240 million dollars.³

With such a profusion of war industries employing black and white laborers, it should have been no surprise that by 1942 Beaumont began to seethe with racial discord. The maze of businesses, both large and small, caused overcrowding. Because Beaumont lacked adequate housing, many workers had to be transported to and from the city from outlying areas every day. In one instance auto transport trucks were converted into makeshift buses to help ease the problem.⁴

Economic restriction was a second general cause of racial animosity in Beaumont during the war years. Wages reached an all time high, jobs were plentiful—for whites at least, and in general a period of economic well-being
existed. This boom condition was not confined to Beaumont, of course, but prevailed in every war center. But with restrictions on many domestic items the public was unable to use its economic affluence in accordance with its wishes. Since consumer items were unavailable, most people were forced to be content with possession of a fat bank account and a prewar car with threadbare tires and an empty gasoline tank. Thus many became dissatisfied with the norms of a planned economy and tempers grew short as the weight of wartime society began to be felt.

City transportation further aggravated problems. The Beaumont City Lines bus service had been quite adequate in 1940, but with the rapid growth of the city the system became overcrowded. And, since no cars or buses were being produced for domestic use, the company could not expand to meet new needs. Overcrowding caused a severe strain between blacks and whites because when the buses were packed blacks often stood in the aisles ahead of the dividing signs for the segregated sections required by city ordinance. Intolerant whites demanded that the law be obeyed to the letter, especially to avoid contact between black men and white women. This situation spawned the first burst of racial violence in the city, and served as a predecessor to more widespread discord.

On June 30, 1942, three altercations between blacks and whites occurred aboard city buses within the black district. Each of these incidents involved the presence of black passengers in the white sections of the buses because of overflow from Jim Crow sections. Further racial difficulties aboard buses occurred on July 2, provoking the ire of whites and undoubtedly stimulating discord.5

On July 27 another confrontation developed aboard a city bus, this one between the driver and a black passenger, Charles J. Reco. The black man, a military policeman at home on leave, boarded the vehicle and took a seat next to the Jim Crow sign where his knees protruded into the white section. The driver ordered Reco to move but was roundly cursed. Taken aback, the driver sent word for the police to arrest Reco, and four officers arrived on the scene and forcibly removed him to a waiting squad car. During this incident Reco continued to resist the policemen, and at one point reached for Officer Billy Brown's nightstick and revolver. At this Brown pulled his gun and, with Reco's hand on the barrel, shot the black man three times. Officer Ben B. White then shot Reco an additional time, and Officer Clyde Brown, despite a fractured hand suffered while removing Reco from the bus, managed to club the victim with his nightstick.6

Police transported Reco to the police station where he was charged with using abusive language. Subsequently, Reco recovered from his wounds at Fort Crockett near Galveston, but not before he brought the U. S. Government into the incident. Reco's superiors, astounded at what had occurred, duly related the details to the War Department, which in turn informed the Attorney General, Francis Biddle. Without hesitation Biddle launched a scorching verbal barrage against the Beaumont Police Department and Ross Dickey, Chief of Police since mid-1942 and a former state patrolman. The federal district attorney in Beaumont began an investigation, and a grand jury convened to hear evidence on the incident.

But as in many other cases, the investigation came to nothing. The grand jury on August 19 exonerated the policemen of all responsibility in the incident, and the Attorney General's office quietly dropped the Reco case since there seemed to be "no prospect of conviction." Once again discrimination had
emerged victorious while those who saw the actual course of race relations in Beaumont could only grimace helplessly. The remainder of 1942 and the early months of 1943 appeared relatively calm in Beaumont, as well as in the state and nation, as the country worked feverishly for victory. But while building itself into an arsenal of war, the nation concurrently produced a lethal atmosphere of strain and suspicion as society grew to fit the needs of the era. This tension developed in Beaumont to as high a degree as anywhere, while traditional discrimination and racial inequality during the winter of 1942 and spring of 1943 made the situation even more ominous.

As the summer of 1943 approached, the nation had reached full production, and economic conditions were good when compared with those of the previous decade. However, wartime tensions, suspicions, and the instability of society culminated in a highly combustible racial atmosphere which finally erupted in a full summer of racial bedlam, resulting in many deaths, untold injuries, and inestimable financial losses.

The first race riot of the long summer of 1943 had occurred in Mobile, Alabama. Pressure from the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to upgrade jobs for blacks forced the Alabama Drydock and Shipbuilding Company to place several blacks alongside whites on the shipways in skilled positions. Violence resulted on May 25, but fortunately no deaths occurred. The shipyard then sent home all 7,000 black employees until the situation was rectified, keeping the 22,000 white workers on the job. The result was segregation as the FEPC permitted the shipyard to allow blacks exclusively to man four shipways while whites manned the rest. This proved a poor substitute for the original principles of the FEPC and understandably brought denunciation from the black population.

On June 3 racial violence again occurred, this time in Los Angeles—the infamous “zoot-suit” riots. Here white servicemen and civilians victimized Mexican-Americans in an outburst of racial discord caused largely by racist sensationalism from the local press. In the several days of rioting injuries abounded as the downtown areas swarmed with crazed rioters. As in other similar incidents, most of the participants escaped punishment.

During the turbulence at Los Angeles, Beaumont began seething with its own racial hatred. Curtis Thomas, a young black man, beat and raped an eighteen-year-old white telephone operator on the night of June 4. Thomas, who had been called for induction into the army, was clearly irrational as he explained to the victim his motive for the assault: “The army is going to get me, and if I do this, I’ll get killed for this and I won’t be going to the army.” True to his prognostication, Thomas later that night found himself in the “negro ward” of Hotel Dieu hospital near death after police shot him several times as he attempted to escape from the scene, momentarily having lost the desire to die.

About 3:00 a.m. on the morning of June 6, a potential lynch mob formed outside the hospital and began calling for Thomas. Fortunately, the angry crowd—numbering about 50—lacked a leader or spokesman so that it never took decisive action, especially after Police Chief Dickey arrived and verbally accosted them. Reminding them that Thomas, who had been spirited away to the city jail, would undoubtedly die as a result of his wounds, Dickey persuaded the mob to disperse. The fact that Thomas succumbed on June 8 precluded another lynching attempt, but the racial hatred of some whites became even more indignant since Thomas had died before he could be properly punished. This attitude
proved predominant among the white employees of Pennsylvania Shipyards, who
had formed the majority of the mob. Many of these individuals were not native
Beaumonters, but had been attracted to the city by the lure of good jobs. Root­
less, frustrated, and alienated, these citizens, as well as other whites, proved
potentially dangerous. 12

On the afternoon of June 15, 1943, the Beaumont police received a tele­
phone call from a woman 13 stating that she had been raped by a black man.
This sent officers scurrying to the scene to determine the identity of the alleged
rapist and the condition of the victim. Roadblocks were thrown up in the vicinity
and groups of policemen, sheriff's department officers, state troopers and inter­
ested citizens began to scour the area in search of the black man. Other officers
searched the woman's house for telltale fingerprints, but none were found. The
authorities possessed only the woman's vague description of her assailant: he
was of average build and features.

As word of this incident spread throughout the city, many Beaumonters
must have fumed at the thought of the attack but apparently refused to be driven
to violence by rumors. In the Pennsylvania Shipyards, however, a different mood
existed. Employees exchanged information about the incident, and rumor begat
rumor as night shift employees began to enter the yards for work and tell of
what had happened in more tainted detail. Quickly the shipyard employees
became excited and restive as they recounted the Curtis Thomas affair and now
the violation of a young mother.

About nine o'clock on the night of June 15 over 2,000 shipyard workers
dropped their tools and marched out of the yards. The walkout appeared to be
spontaneous, with almost all white workers taking part. The mob crossed the
bridge separating the shipyard island from the rest of the city and continued
downtown toward the city hall, police station, and Jefferson County Courthouse,
all situated only a few blocks apart. Along the way the crowd swelled to perhaps
3,000 as interested bystanders joined. 14

When the mob reached the police station it had driven itself into a wild
frenzy. A lack of organization and leadership fortunately prevailed, and they
simply milled about the city jail section of the police station, demanding that
the rapist be handed over to be lynched. Chief of Police Dickey, fearing mass
destruction, brought the alleged victim to the scene in an effort to pacify the
throng, but her pleas went unheeded.

As the mob grew increasingly hostile, some continued to the courthouse,
where they demanded that Sheriff W. W. Richardson escort them through the
county jail to make sure the alleged rapist was not present. Richardson con­
sented, but why the group wanted a tour is unclear, since no one could have
recognized the criminal had he been there. Satisfied that the black was not
present, the throng moved back to the police station to rejoin the main body
which soon burst out of control. Even though leadership was lacking it spon­
taneously reacted to the situation in a fashion characteristic of other race riots. 15

About midnight on June 15 the mob, which may have numbered over 4,000,
began rioting through the nearby black districts of the city. This rioting continued
widespread and uncontrolled until about daylight on the morning of June 16.
During these hours confusion reigned as the rioters swarmed over most of the
downtown area, causing death and destruction.

As in most other race riots, the violence in Beaumont began and continued
spontaneously. No ringleaders guided the crowd. Because it was disorganized,
the riot proved less destructive than it might have been. The mob, numbering
probably between 3,000 and 4,000 when it assembled at the police station, cer-
tainly could have become larger once the actual rioting began and as interested
citizens swelled the ranks. With a mob of perhaps 5,000 the chances for a wide-
spread holocaust appeared strong, but the lack of leadership contributed to the
relative brevity of the riot and limited destruction by the rioters.

The lack of leadership and disorganization also affected the overall pattern
of turbulence in Beaumont. The black districts of the city encompassed much
of downtown, but there were two general areas where blacks were concentrated.
One lay in the downtown district, and the other in the northern sector of the
city. Since the two sections lay some distance apart, an “organized” mob proba-
bly would have attacked one at a time, or by splitting the crowd, might have
attacked both districts simultaneously. But for lack of leadership the attack lost
its full force. The mob, once it resolved to riot, broke up into small bands and
roamed the downtown area all night. Each band, usually consisting of from five
to twenty-five members, carried out its own plan of destruction. Very rarely did
these bodies join into a large throng to effect particularly devastating ruination.

Before leaving the police station around midnight, the mob took as its first
victim an unfortunate black man who attempted to drive past the scene in his
car. Some of the throng pulled him from the vehicle, pummeled him, then over-
turned his auto and set it ablaze. The aggregation then broke up and either ramp-
paged through the downtown area or journeyed to the northern sector of the
city, largely a black residential district.

Downtown, the mob generally spent its time firing buildings and autos,
while beating every black encountered. Some buildings burned to the ground,
among them the city’s three black funeral homes, a jewelry store which undoubt-
edly was looted, and a pharmacy. Against this onslaught most black inhabitants
retreated to the inner areas of the black district where the rioters dared not
venture.16

In the city’s northern black district, as downtown, pandemonium prevailed.
The rioters, in small groups, roamed the area in total darkness, leading to several
cases of mistaken identity—at least four whites were shot. Property destruction
here became more widespread than downtown. Several autos met a fiery demise,
as did many buildings, leading the fire chief to later opine that the fire depart-
ment spent most of the period from midnight to daybreak battling blazes in the
northern district. Sixteen major fires were reported in the area, together with
numerous smaller blazes. Looting occurred as well, and autos could be seen
speeding through the city filled with assorted stolen goods.17

One black man had a clear view of the destruction as looters swept through
the Dew Drop Inn on Gladys Street. P. G. Thomas, the restaurant owner, re-
mained inside when rioters arrived shortly after midnight to break down the
front door and sack the building. From a service window, Thomas observed in
horror as they systematically destroyed the interior of the structure. Nearby,
Perrodin’s Radio and Sound Service, Bendy’s Cafe, and the Canton Cafe received
similar treatment.18

Personal violence ran rampant along with the destruction and looting. A
black shot a white man as he walked home from work. A white youth, undoubt-
edly taking part in the rioting, suffered a bullet in the back as he stood alongside
an auto. Many blacks had their teeth knocked out and jaws smashed by a group
of hammer-wielding whites. Their fate resembled that of countless other blacks
whom rioters encountered.

One of the most concentrated areas of personal violence occurred at the
bus depot on Park Street. Fifty-two black draftees who had been in Houston for their physical examinations waited in the station for a bus to their homes in Port Arthur. About midnight a mob of three to four hundred rioters appeared: “Here they are, a whole bunch of them. Let’s get them.” As a result most of the black inductees received injuries, many of which proved serious. Irvin Collins received numerous blows from iron pipes and proved a target for armed rioters. He finally crawled under a nearby house where he remained until the next day. Roy Ford, another draftee, climbed on top of the depot to escape serious injury and witnessed a panoramic view of the holocaust. Alex Mouton received several blows while still inside the building. He ran out, only to be clubbed mercilessly by whites. He suffered a serious heart injury in the affray, and subsequently died on October 4.

Other serious injuries occurred throughout the town. John Johnson, a black employee of the American Ice Company, had just entered his car after working past midnight when a group of whites shotgunned him in the abdomen. He died on the operating table.

In the fringes of the riot area Ellis C. Brown, a white carpenter, was found dead with a crushed skull. There were no witnesses, but police speculated that a group of blacks was responsible. This is not to suggest that blacks acted as aggressively as whites during the riot. Most blacks remained on the defensive, but a few undoubtedly used the situation to vent their frustrations on whites through retaliatory action.

Blacks suffered many casualties and witnessed much destruction during the riot. Rioters reportedly broke into over two hundred homes, many of which they fired. Probably at least three or four hundred blacks received injuries, and some were hospitalized. Hospital records do not accurately reflect the number of injuries, however, since most blacks felt apprehensive about entering the hospital for fear of further beating or arrest for rioting. Besides those injured, about 2,500 blacks fled the city by foot or auto, some never to return. Many of those who left included black shipyard workers.

During the period of death and destruction, the law enforcement contingents engaged in chaotic activity. At the outset of the violence Chief Dickey called the entire regular force to duty and mobilized the 150-member police auxiliary. The sheriff activated his department, and city officials called up four companies of the 18th Battalion of the Texas State Guard, which consisted of Beaumont residents commanded by Major Fred C. Stone, a local architect.

Unfortunately, during the height of rioting, these relatively scant forces had to battle the holocaust alone since most units called in later from outlying areas did not arrive until the violence had subsided. Accordingly, Dickey placed most of the force on hand in the riot-torn sections of the city where it attempted to curb the violence. This effort proved fruitless, although peace officers endeavored to incarcerate suspected rioters. Most of those who found themselves confronted by suspicious officials, however, either argued their way out of arrest or silently disappeared into the darkness.

This accounted for the meager tally of arrests made during the riot—only 206. What made the figure even more surprising, however, was that the total enforcement contingent could not have numbered less than 400. Part of the explanation lay in the lack of detention facilities. By summarily arresting individuals who appeared to be rioters, lawmen quickly filled to capacity the city and county jails. A makeshift remedy was finally found, and officers herded subsequent prisoners into a large building on the county fairgrounds. Other rea-
sons for the relatively small number arrested included the laxity of enforcement and general confusion. Despite these conditions, officers did confiscate 156 pistols, 56 shotguns, 44 rifles, 86 knives, 43 clubs, 11 brass knuckles, a huge quantity of ammunition, and other "miscellaneous weapons including hammers, pipes, sashweights, etc."23

Most of the arrests and confiscations took place without the help of the four companies of the Texas State Guard, since this body of erstwhile soldiers spent the bulk of the night organizing for action. After moving from the courthouse, where its weapons lay, to Beaumont High School, where it stood for hours, the battalion moved a third time to the lawn of City Hall. Pup tents and barbed wire sprang up, and a Salvation Army canteen appeared to feed the warriors.

Most of the guardsmen, including the 18th Battalion and the other forces that later arrived, spent their time patrolling the streets for would-be rioters. The guardsmen did capture and jail some persons, but patrolling stricken areas of the city remained the major responsibility of the men during their activation which lasted until June 20.24

At the first sign of violence on June 15 the city administration had contacted the state government in Austin. Unfortunately, Governor Coke R. Stevenson was on his way to Washington, and the lieutenant governor, John Lee Smith, was in the Midwest. In place of the top executives stood A. M. Aikin, Jr., the president pro tempore of the Texas Senate. Aikin had occupied the acting governor's office only one day when the riot erupted.

Aikin understandably hesitated to take action, but shortly after the riot began authorized the deployment of an additional 1,600 Texas State Guardsmen from nearby cities, as well as Department of Public Safety men and other police units. None of these contingents arrived during the actual rioting, but they helped control an additional outbreak about midday of the 16th.

The major violence had subsided about daybreak, with the riot simply exhausting itself rather than being brought under control by outside forces. But at the courthouse about 200 men, mostly shipyard workers, gathered about noon on the 16th to demand of Sheriff Richardson the whereabouts of the alleged rapist whose actions had precipitated the violence. Richardson, however, proved to be at wit's end.25 He appeared on the front steps of the building with a submachine gun crooked under one arm, and notified the throng that he was "damn tired of all this." The sheriff then ordered the crowd to disperse and "go back to building ships like you should be doing." The unruly mob began jeering at Richardson, who then shouted that he would take them "all on one at a time. And let me tell you, I'm going to keep law and order in this county."26

Rebuffed, the mob dispersed. In a few minutes, however, most of these men congregated again and headed for the downtown black district, apparently bent on causing trouble. They subsequently met a barricade manned by Texas Rangers, who told them to disband. When they did not, the officers sprayed the throng with tear gas, an action which effectively ended the rioting in Beaumont. The violence had claimed three lives; several hundred persons received injuries; untold property was destroyed.27

At 5:55 p.m. on June 16 Acting Governor Aikin declared martial law in Beaumont. Communications had continued between the city administration and Aikin since the affray erupted, and by the afternoon of June 16 they had determined that in order to avoid further violence in a critical war production center quick enactment of martial law would be necessary. Aikin accordingly issued the long overdue order, placing control of the city in the hands of Lieutenant
Colonel Sidney C. Mason of the Adjutant General’s Department. The acting governor assured Mason that martial law would be maintained in the city as long as it was deemed necessary. 28

By nightfall on the 16th about 2,400 law enforcement personnel occupied the city, consisting of 1,800 Texas State Guardsmen, as well as city policemen, the police auxiliary, Texas Rangers, state policemen, and sheriff’s department officials. The city looked like a military camp. The all important defense plants lay paralyzed, with work at Pennsylvania Shipyards stopping on the night of the riot and not reaching full production again for a week. Agitation continued in the yards, and possibly violence could have recurred had it not been for the presence of the troops. 29

The riot temporarily affected the daily routine of wartime life. On June 16 city officials cancelled “Juneteenth” (a holiday for blacks in Texas which commemorated their emancipation on June 19) since they feared it might spark another conflagration. Chief of Police Dickey ordered all city buses off the streets, and also diverted Greyhound buses around the city. Military authorities placed the city off limits to service personnel, possibly to avoid racial violence such as occurred in Los Angeles only a fortnight before.

Many restaurants, hotels, laundries, and other businesses remained closed for a week; mail service was also severely curtailed since most Beaumont mail carriers were black. On the 16th city officials closed all liquor stores in the area, and guardsmen patrolled these places to insure against looting. Additionally, all city swimming pools, parks, and downtown stores closed to keep people off the streets. In short, most functions of the city either closed or operated on a severely restricted basis so that no large bodies of people could amass until the highly combustible atmosphere cleared somewhat. 30

The rioting affected not only Beaumont but also surrounding towns. The Consolidated Steel Shipyards in Orange temporarily dismissed all black employees beginning on June 16 but retained the whites to avert further violence. The City of Orange placed its state guard contingent on alert. The large rubber plant in Port Neches sent its 1,200 black employees home. Similar precautions were taken in Port Arthur, Baytown, and other nearby cities. In response to rumors that floated in from Beaumont, the city administration in nearby Houston placed a full page statement in the Houston Post on June 18 which implored citizens to “stop circulating rumors which create tenseness and interfere with war production and attend to your own business.” Obviously the tensions, resentments, and general instability of wartime society existed not only in Beaumont but also throughout southeast Texas as in much of wartime America. 31

Local authorities naturally concerned themselves with the reasons for the riot. The general assertion that sabotage inspired Beaumont’s racial turbulence became the standard argument: the city, a critical production area, had spawned a riot which pitted American against American and crippled vital war production, thereby stirring fears that Axis influence had incited the recent violence. The editor of the local Beaumont Enterprise concluded:

By committing lawless acts and halting work in vital war industries, they [the rioters] played right into the hands of the enemy. Some of the men who said they had quit work “to protect their families” may have been the unconscious tools of enemy agents.

There is a strong suspicion that enemy agents are trying to create racial friction here, that they have been engaged in this kind of subversive work for months. Evidently their work is bearing fruit. 32
This view lacked credence, however, as proved in an inquiry by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. FBI agents arrived on the 16th and remained in the city for the next several days. They naturally pursued the possibility of enemy influence, and to that end collected numerous depositions and considerable evidence. While the agents made no public report of their findings, the press disclosed that, according to “unquotable” but presumably reliable sources, the FBI found no sign of enemy activity in relation to the riot. The blame for the outbreak was thus placed upon the local citizenry, with emphasis on the shipyard workers. 33

While the FBI investigation continued, an inquiry by the state simultaneously occurred. Lieutenant Colonel Royal G. Phillips of the Department of Public Safety arrived in the city on June 17 and began hearing the 206 prisoners who had been incarcerated in connection with the riot. This military tribunal commenced its investigation on June 17 and worked almost without pause until all had been heard on the afternoon of June 20. Of the total, officials held only twenty-nine men for further action, the remainder being released largely for lack of evidence. Of those retained, the majority were charged with such offenses as loitering, drunkenness, and carrying firearms. These crimes carried a penalty of $25 plus court costs, so that participation in the riot, regardless of what had happened to the black community, essentially carried a $30.20 fine.

On June 22 Phillips officially ended his inquiry and pronounced the case closed as far as the State of Texas was concerned. Of several thousand rioters, only 206 had been brought to court, and only a fraction of that number faced conviction. None received serious penalties. No effort was made to discover the murderers of Ellis C. Brown, John Johnson, or Alex Mouton. Moreover, the fact that no arson charges were levied seemed consistent with the fashion in which the administration of nation, state, and city handled the entire affair. That the guilty parties remained undiscovered seemed to produce no remorse from those charged with investigating the affray since ending the riot was more important at the time than seeking justice. 34

Ironically, a day after the rioting ended, the results were released of a physical examination performed on the woman who reported being raped by a black man on June 15. The examination, directed by Dr. Barker D. Chunn, a reputable Beaumont physician, disclosed that the woman had in fact not been raped. Moreover, Chunn determined that sexual relations had been absent during the twenty-four hour period surrounding the alleged assault. 35

During the period of speculation and investigation Beaumont remained quiet. June 19 passed serenely, although officials had been apprehensive about the maintenance of peace in the city because of the cancelled Juneteenth celebration and a city recall election which resulted in the removal of the current city administration—and eventually led to the resignation of Chief of Police Ross Dickey whom the voters blamed for the riot. The lack of renewed violence on that day proved to be an indicant that the state officials had been watching for, and on June 20 Acting Governor Aikin lifted martial law. The troops in the city were deactivated, and control of the stricken area returned to city officials. 36

If the riot had been a traumatic experience for the city, its effects on Beaumont proved to be negligible. By the end of July the war production of the area had returned to normal, still with segregation and discrimination against blacks. Pennsylvania Shipyards undoubtedly listed fewer blacks on its employment rolls, but otherwise conditions remained the same. Racial agitation was minimized throughout the city, but this was due to fear of another riot rather than improved
relations between blacks and whites. Subsequent police chiefs and city administrations ignored the race problem as had been done in the past, and over the years the gradual improvement of conditions for blacks has occurred in spite of the white majority.

While Beaumont smoldered in the aftermath of violence, a much larger affray occurred as a continuation of the summer of domestic rioting. The Detroit race riot began on June 20, caused largely by rumor and long-standing social and economic ill will between whites and blacks. Several days of rioting witnessed not only white aggression but black retaliation, in large part against white-owned property, a trend that foreshadowed a new pattern of racial rioting that would unfold in the 1960s. The violence resulted in millions of dollars worth of destruction, thousands of injuries, and deaths of thirty-four persons, most of whom were black.37

The final chapter in the long summer of 1943 was written in Harlem on August 1-2. Trouble had simmered there for years, since the riot of 1935. Blacks, who felt alienated in what seemed to be a white man’s world, vented their frustrations upon white-owned property in the ghetto for two days following an altercation that involved a black woman and a white policeman. This pattern clearly served as a precursor for future domestic racial violence. Fiorello LaGuardia, New York’s popular mayor, skillfully deployed officials—many of whom were black—throughout the area to stop the violence while he remained on the scene to direct affairs. He successfully curtailed what could have become a much larger affray. Nonetheless, 5 persons died, injuries occurred to at least 300 others, and rioters destroyed at least $5 million dollars in property.38

Of the five race riots in 1943, the incident in Beaumont provided a clear example of white intolerance toward gradual black advancement. While subsequent riots showed blacks becoming more militant and whites more defensive, the affray in Beaumont retained the characteristics of white aggression sparked by conservative reaction. The rumor of interracial rape, a familiar southern theme, precipitated the violence. Lower class whites, seeking to maintain social distinctions between themselves and blacks, spontaneously began to riot, and the black community proved the obvious target. Generally helpless victims of white prejudice, only a few blacks were militant enough to offer resistance. The enforcement bodies were ineffective, perhaps intentionally so, and the violence ran its full course with no interruption. Taken together, these characteristics marked the Beaumont riot as perhaps the last in which whites mercilessly murdered and pillaged without encountering substantial black retaliation.

Seen in this light, the Beaumont riot illustrated the unrest and impending change in race relations. Subsequent violence showed a redirection in the life of black Americans, further underscored by judicial decisions, presidential leadership for civil rights, new scientific views on race, and the emergence of the Third World. The Beaumont riot was one of the last setbacks to the racial upheaval of later years, yet another forlorn attempt to stave off the twentieth century in the South.
NOTES


4Catherine McMaster to James A. Burran, interview, December 20, 1972, Beaumont, Texas.

5Beaumont Enterprise, July 1, 1942, 1; July 3, 1942, 1.


9Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Field Investigation Report, R. G. 228, Central Files, National Archives, Washington.


12Beaumont Enterprise, June 7, 1943, pp. 1, 2; Beaumont Journal, June 7, 1943, p. 5; Chicago Defender, June 19, 1943, p. 5.

13The identity of this woman has yet to be discovered, despite repeated inquiries. According to newspaper sources, the woman’s family moved to Beaumont from Galveston in April or May 1943, and prior to that resided in Port Arthur. Beaumont Enterprise, June 16, 1943, p. 1.


The low number of riot arrests in comparison with the number of enforcement officials on hand is not peculiar to the Beaumont incident. This trend proved common to many racial affrays, such as the East St. Louis riot of 1917 in which a total of 52 policemen and several hundred guardsmen managed to arrest only about 200 persons. The Chicago riot of 1919 exhibited the same trend, because with 3,000 policemen and three regiments of militia only 229 persons found themselves incarcerated. Elliott M. Rudwick, Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917 (Carbondale, 1964), 89-96; The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, The Negro in Chicago, A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot (Chicago, 1922), 35-41.


Ibid.


Ibid., June 18, 1943, p. 1.


Beaumont Enterprise, June 17, 1943, p. 1; Houston Post, June 18, 1943, p. 2.


Beaumont Enterprise, June 18, 1943, p. 1; June 19, 1943, p. 1; June 20, 1943, p. 1; June 22, 1943, p. 1; July 10, 1943, p. 1; Beaumont Journal, June 19, 1943, p. 1; The author was unable to examine the report of the military court of inquiry filed by Lieutenant Colonel Royal G. Phillips because, according to Department of Public Safety officials, it has disappeared.
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18 Clyde C. Rush to James A. Burran, interview; New York PM, June 18, 1943, p. 4; John Dollard, in Chapter VII of Caste and Class in a Southern Town (New York, 1937), suggests that fabricated rape stories by white women are in many cases results of hysterical and masochistic tendencies, together with covert sexual attraction toward black men.


Approximate downtown area and black district