

ARTICLES

***“What Happened in Springfield”: Housing, Police,  
and the 1965 Octagon Lounge Incident***

**Christopher Tucker**

**Introduction**

***“A Very Ugly Incident”***

In the summer of 1965, black residents of Springfield, Massachusetts, were pitted against local police officers after what was labeled a “disturbance” at the Octagon Lounge, an establishment frequented by Springfield’s black population. On the evening of Friday, 16 July 1965, the nightclub was full of patrons enjoying the start of the weekend: “people singing, laughing, shouting and drinking.” By eleven o’clock, a handful of club-goers (accounts reported twenty individuals, all but one of them black) stepped out of the club and onto the sidewalk in front of the Rifle Street establishment. A nearby Springfield police patrol car pulled up to the club, responding to the “drinking, dancing and singing” of those on the sidewalk. According to police, “the officers were heckled and mocked by the crowd,” and “police responded from several sections of the city” following a radio call for help from the first responders. “Police said the crowd shouted obscenities at them, struggled against arrest and slammed a car door on one officer,” the *Boston Globe* reported. “Police said one woman was shrieking, ‘Kill them! Get them! Don’t let them push you around.’” The testimony of black witnesses at the Octagon Lounge “claim[ed] police lashed out with night sticks, fists, and feet; that they beat prisoners at the scene, on the way to the station, and inside police headquarters.” The end result of the incident was the arrest of seventeen black nightclub patrons and one eighteen-year-old white woman. Later, the police would admit to “using clubs on two occasions against defendants struggling and fighting with them.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the most significant records of what happened in Springfield—before, during, and after the Octagon Lounge event itself—was an independent report published almost a year later by the Hampden County chapter of the Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts and the Boston College Law School. Written primarily by lawyer George V. Higgins, the report, titled “The Five-Month Summer,” was published

in June of 1966. Higgins explored not only the actual incident, but also the fine details of the Octagon Lounge, as well as the outside influences and frustrations that may have led to such a violent display. "The Five-Month Summer" reads like a novella, written in prose best suited for fiction, despite its roots in the reality of 1960s Springfield "It was a still, warm, peaceful night in [Springfield], and some of the citizens went out for a glass of beer or a tall cold drink and a little entertainment," Higgins wrote. "In the morning the problems would still be there to be faced, but in the morning it would be Saturday and you could sleep late and catch a ballgame in the afternoon. . . . It was Friday night. It was time to relax a little, and catch your breath." Yet, Higgins cautioned in the same paragraph, "Relaxation in Springfield resembles relaxation in other communities where the people come in two or more colors; it is done pretty much along ethnic lines."<sup>2</sup>

Higgins's report provided the most detailed physical description of the establishment (which, within a year of the incident, had been renamed and converted into a steakhouse), from its layout to its location in the city. Importantly, he also viewed the Octagon Lounge event through the lenses of segregation and housing. The report explores how racial lines were divided between the whites and the blacks of Springfield, conclusions that would be echoed by the State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in December of 1966. "There are about 170,000 people living in Springfield. About 17,000 of them are Negroes," Higgins reported. "The white people are distributed geographically throughout the city, mostly on economic lines. The Negroes, ninety percent of them, live within one square mile in the east-southeastern sector of the community." Like most American cities, he argued, Springfield had seen its own "black ghetto" emerge. More than half of nonwhite<sup>3</sup> housing in Springfield was reported as substandard, and thirty percent of nonwhite families "live in [what] the Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington defines as poverty." More significantly, according to Higgins, Springfield's African-American residents "don't relax in the same place as the white people. They live with Negroes. . . .When the people from [that square mile] go out on Friday nights, they go to Negro bars. The Octagon Lounge . . . was such a bar."<sup>4</sup> The Octagon Lounge's location on the black side of town made it an opportune place for Springfield's black community to gather, to celebrate, to relax.

"The Five-Month Summer" supplements newspaper reports of

the event. Just before midnight, according to Higgins, two white patrolmen parked their patrol vehicles outside the club with the intention of issuing a citation to a car that had been illegally “partly parked” on the sidewalk. The vehicle belonged to twenty-five-year-old Albert Lee, a black Springfield resident who had “just arrived at the Octagon Lounge with a friend.” His friend, Stewart Weldon, another black resident of the city, was twenty-four years old. After being notified by other club patrons that the car was being ticketed, Lee and Weldon “went outside to see what was happening.”<sup>5</sup> By 1:00 a.m., the arrests had been made and the situation had quieted. Yet, as Higgins wrote, the conflict was perhaps just beginning.

“An uncivilized, unlawful, dangerous disturbance,” said the police. “A vicious display of lawless police savagery,” said the civilians. At 1:00 a.m. on July 17, the summer of 1965 was not over in Springfield. There would be more warm, still nights for movie-going and shopping. There was as yet no trouble in the community as a whole; whatever bad feeling there was between the police and the people they had arrested. But trouble was available. It was ready for the asking. On the morning of July 17, there were two stories of the Octagon matter abroad in Springfield, two versions of the same event, each blaming a sensitive, disregarded segment of the community for precipitating in a very ugly incident.<sup>6</sup>

The reaction of Springfield’s police department—and the charges of brutality leveled against the officers at the scene—would be debated for months and into the following year. The disturbance outside of the Octagon Lounge ignited an inferno of protests against racism, police brutality, and the oppression of Springfield’s black residents. The incident would be discussed throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, but would also make national headlines. National civil rights organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality and Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) would pay close attention to and participate in the emerging activism in the city. By the time of the Octagon Lounge arrests, Springfield’s schools, public facilities, and neighborhoods had been more separate than equal, with no parity in sight. The arrests of the Lounge patrons, along with the response from Springfield’s politicians

and the public protests of subsequent weeks, proved that the racial unrest in Springfield was about more than one nightclub—it was about a systematic restriction of rights from the city’s black residents.

Moreover, examining the incident, along with the seeds of discontent that had been sown in years prior, reveals that in the mid-1960s, the small New England city of Springfield was placed firmly in the national struggle for black equality. The Octagon Lounge event galvanized activists both regionally and nationally, many of whom would use Springfield as a case study for why political activity and protest were necessary, even in small northern cities. Further, the 16 July 1965 incident was not a singular event; rather it emerged as a result of increased tension between the Springfield metropolitan area’s black population and white population. This tension was mainly economic in nature, and emerged from housing and employment inequality. By the mid-1960s, the ghettoization of Springfield was complete. Like much of the nation, Springfield would find itself embroiled in urban uprisings, increased policing, and curfews. Activism, social awareness, and cultural activity would increase. Black neighbors would congregate in social spaces like the Octagon Lounge, hoping for a respite from what Higgins called the “trouble in the community.” Springfield in 1965 may not have looked like Newark, Detroit, or Harlem, but a distrust between the white and the black communities was as evident there as in the rest of the urban Northeast.

### **Historiography: Placing the North in the Black Freedom Struggle**

In 1950, just four years prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, black Americans made up just 1.5 percent of the total population of the six New England states. By 1960 that percentage had increased to 2.4 percent, and in 1970 blacks in New England represented just over three percent of the total population.<sup>7</sup> Yet the question of race relations and racial progress had a very real impact on the minds and hearts of the citizens of New England during this tumultuous period. Even in New England, seemingly so far away, geographically, from the dominant and popular narrative of the movement, black Americans paid close attention to the national events of the struggle. Black New Englanders believed that they were and would continue to be impacted by the evolution of and revolution toward civil rights, on a local as well

as national scale. These New Englanders believed they could be active agents and promote their own agendas within their communities. Some of the most vocal activism among black New Englanders following the end of World War II emerged in the Springfield, Massachusetts metropolitan area, where a vibrant black community had existed even prior to the Civil War. By the 1960s, pervasive oppression in Springfield's housing, employment, and school systems led this historically-active community to energetically and vocally change these racist patterns of discrimination and inequality.

While African Americans in Springfield had been politically and socially active long before the 1960s, there were two significant catalysts that encouraged the Black Freedom Struggle there in that decade: the United States Commission on Civil Rights' housing study, in 1964, and the incident at the Octagon Lounge of July, 1965. On the surface, they appear to be unrelated; the former examined housing discrimination in the city, the latter was a case of police brutality and urban unrest. Yet, as the evidence reveals, housing inequality and the over-policing of black citizens were connected, and both resulted in widespread activism among individuals as well as more organized groups such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

The story of the Octagon Lounge incident and its underlying causes fits well within the existing historiography and emerging scholarship on the Black Freedom Struggle in the north. It conforms to the examples set by recent scholars studying how social and economic conditions across the country impacted both regional and national movements for social justice and equality. Many recent studies have offered comparative views of black political organizations and movements, as well as new syntheses of the Black Freedom Struggle. Other recent works have concentrated analyses on local communities throughout the United States. These views—both broad and comparative—of the Black Freedom Struggle northern United States offer evidence supporting the view that the struggles faced by blacks in the North were similar to those of Southern blacks. Moreover, historians have proven that African-American communities in the North were active, engaged, and worthy of their place in the scholarship of the Freedom Struggle. The works of many of these historians provided an invaluable foundation for this article.<sup>8</sup>

Three specific studies of the Black Freedom Struggle in the Northeast, all produced in the last decade, have proven to be most helpful in shaping my own scholarship. The first, Yohuru Williams's *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (2008), examines the influence of the Black Panther Party in the Connecticut capital by looking at the outside forces that led to the group's rise. Williams traces the trajectory of the New Haven Panthers by examining housing discrimination, urban renewal, the emergence of the NAACP and CORE, the role of the local city government in "subverting the efforts of civil rights organizations," and "the circumstances under which the [national Black Panther] Party sanctioned a chapter in New Haven, Connecticut." Further, Williams devotes significant study to the branch's community programs, its local activities, and the federal surveillance to which it was subject—as well as the 1969 murder of New York Panther Alan Rackley, and the New Haven Black Panther trials.<sup>9</sup> This analysis of an individual city's struggle has been incredibly helpful as I navigate my own work on Springfield.

Williams persuasively outlines the conditions in 1960s New Haven that inspired African Americans there to embrace the ideology of the Panthers and support a local chapter. "The evolution of the New Haven chapter of the BPP was representative of the changes taking place in the Party as a whole after 1968," Williams writes. "The emergence of the BPP in New Haven also demonstrates the nature of the shift from civil rights to Black Power to human rights protests that took place in the 1960s." Similar to the movement in the South, Williams argues that the New Haven movement largely followed Martin Luther King's message of nonviolent, Christian activism. Yet by the late-1960s, political "buying of black interests," as Williams puts it, paved the way for more radical thinking, propelling the Panthers' popularity both nationally and locally. "The New Haven chapter emerged during the critical period when the BPP was in transition. New Haven enjoyed both the support of local militants and the presence of transplanted members from other chapters and the national offices."<sup>10</sup>

One leading member of the Black Panther Party, Ericka Huggins (later a defendant in the New Haven Panther trials), was at first wary of New Haven. "New England was so conservative. . . . I had never seen anything that conservative in my life. There were times when I wished that I had been in the South. . . . In New England I could

never tell what people truly felt,” she said. Despite Huggins’s anxiety, Williams presents the New Haven chapter as a success—albeit a brief one. “Once a presence had been established in New Haven, the local members helped to educate the Party on local issues,” Williams argues, “giving it a sense of connection with the community . . . [and] a sense of legitimacy. . . . The New Haven chapter was able to accomplish some real changes early in its existence.”<sup>11</sup> Williams’s primary thesis—that the brief presence of the New Haven Panthers led to significant community change—is also useful in the context of Springfield. Like New Haven, Springfield had a vibrant African-American community that, by the 1960s, would be looking to advance its own causes, and to change its means and methods of protest.

Also in 2008, Kevin Mumford’s book *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* places the populous New Jersey city within the same framework as I present Springfield. Mumford “offers a fresh analysis of [Newark’s] urban growth and economic change by exploring the politics of ethnic settlement and cultural recognition alongside a new framework for understanding mobilizations for protest and modes of civic resolution,” he writes in his introduction.<sup>12</sup> Mumford’s focus here is both cultural and political, and he examines how blacks in Newark sought racial equality first through political involvement and civic action. He further argues that by “the 1960s, still disillusioned, African Americans residing in ghettos and victimized by violence engaged in direct-action protest and challenged municipal government for better services, more benefits, [and] political representation.” He concentrates on the “persistent if continually changing networks of civic leaders and everyday folks utilizing—and in the process transforming—an urban democracy.”<sup>13</sup> Mumford’s research is closely connected to my own, with his discussions of segregated housing, the black community’s relationship with the police, and uprisings that occurred in the city. Just as I connect tensions over Springfield’s housing inequalities to the protests that appeared in the wake of the Octagon Lounge incident, Mumford argues that police brutality and the debates over Newark’s riots were linked to the increased ghettoization and isolation of Newark’s black population.

Mumford’s identification of this exclusion from the city’s public sphere is the impetus for his research and argument. Nowhere is it more evident than in his discussion on housing segregation. Blacks in Newark—both poor and middle-class—faced discrimination in their

housing searches. During the Great Migration, “the process of ghettoization [in Newark] encompassed all strata of the black community,” Mumford argues, “for the fact was that both the poor and the prosperous faced discrimination by whites in housing and real estate, and thus all felt the confines of the ghetto wall.”<sup>14</sup> Mumford writes that in the 1950s, “the black middle class increased in both size and influence,”<sup>15</sup> and further contends that the postwar period saw a decrease in housing segregation due in large part to black middle-class activism. Despite this, the “tide of resegregation” emerged due in part to, the political influence of Italian Americans, who saw little benefit to housing integration within Newark’s residential wards. Thus, “by the 1960s Newark was a city of many ethnic groups, but most African Americans still resided in . . . two or three major ghettos, rather than a series of rigidly segregated neighborhoods.” Additionally, “racial isolation had increased dramatically in forty years . . . meaning that African Americans were less likely to encounter different groups of folks and experience multiple ethnic cultures on a daily basis.”<sup>16</sup>

Newark’s black residents faced similar segregation within community and civic institutions, including the city’s police department, which by the mid-1960s faced allegations from CORE, the NAACP, and the ACLU that they refused to hire black applicants, and specialized in racial profiling. Lack of representation in law enforcement widened the divide between white police and black citizens; this was especially evident in the wake of the beating of an African-American taxi driver named John Smith by two white NPD officers, in July 1967. The police reported that Smith was “loud, profane, and abusive,” and that after his arrest he “await[ed] arraignment in a holding cell” while suffering from a broken rib. “Over the next five days,” Mumford writes, “the most devastating riots in the history of New Jersey exploded . . . costing twenty-six lives and destroying millions of dollars’ worth of property.”<sup>17</sup>

Mumford’s analysis of Newark’s subsequent *Report for Action*—written by a committee of seven white men and three black men, and published several months after the riots—is similar to my own search for clarity in the aftermath of the Octagon Lounge incident, looking into in Higgins’s *The Five-Month Summer*. The *Report for Action* was “a remarkable, comprehensive summary [of the riots] that emphasized three causes of the riots: lack of political representation; police brutality; and worsening social conditions.”<sup>18</sup>

Along with Williams's and Mumford's works, Brian Purnell's 2013 book *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn* is an excellent historiographical example of how national organizations impact local movements. In his exploration of Brooklyn's CORE chapter, Purnell charts the rise of political activism in Kings County, New York, and describes both the successes and failures of the organization there. "Brooklyn CORE was a dynamic and audacious force in New York City protest politics. Its successes and shortcomings reveal a great deal about the history of racial discrimination, and local attempts to change that history, in the urban North," Purnell writes in his introduction. "That Brooklyn CORE tried to eradicate racism, and the reasons it did not fully succeed, provides some much-needed insight into why racism and racial and class segregation persisted in American urban life during the latter half of the twentieth century."<sup>19</sup>

Purnell immediately places his work within the scholarship of the North's Black Freedom Struggle, and his research reveals New York City as an important location for Northern activism. His chapters trace the movement in Brooklyn thematically, from its origins to its mid-1960s waning, looking specifically at housing, employment, schools, and urban violence. He examines Brooklyn CORE's project to literally clean up Bedford-Stuyvesant by tackling issues with the Department of Sanitation (called Operation Clean Sweep); its crusade for equal opportunity in construction jobs; and the group's attempts to disrupt the 1964–1965 World's Fair. By the April 1965 "Brooklyn Stands with Selma" rally, Purnell argues, the borough's CORE chapter was in decline, just as urban unrest was escalating. The reason for this, he contends, is indicative of Northern race relations as a whole. In Northern cities, "almost everyone pretended that racism just *did not* exist; when power brokers in cities outside the South *did* acknowledge the ways their societies were plagued with racism, they usually delayed action," Purnell writes in his conclusion. "Despite these tactics, or perhaps because of them, the urban crisis intensified. So did local activists' demands and tactics."<sup>20</sup> Purnell's deep delve into African-American activists' tactics in the North mirrors my own discussion of local activism in Springfield, and that city's own urban crisis.

Similarly, Jason Sokol's 2014 book, *All Eyes Are Upon Us: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn* explores the deep-seeded racism that existed in the Northeast, both preceding and following the Second

World War. However, he broadens his geographical focus, looking at the entirety of the Northeast. Sokol's work here is exceedingly relevant to my own, and was of tremendous assistance to my research. "The Northeast has been, and remains, the most American of regions," he writes in his first pages. "This is not because it is a glittering model of freedom and democracy. It is because the Northeast has long held genuine movements for racial democracy, and for racial segregation, within the same heart."<sup>21</sup> As Sokol argues, patterns of segregation and broad inequality existed in the Northeast, and would continue to do so, before, during, and beyond the typical chronology of the movement; yet, so would the various movements dedicated to ending social injustice and racial oppression. His emphasis on the regional distinctions of New England and the Northeast are similar to my own conclusions about Springfield.

Sokol's is the most in-depth exploration of Springfield's racial mood to emerge in recent historiography. "There is in the North a mystique about the past that continues to influence the present," he claims. "It is a set of ideas and ideals, a cultural complex that interacts with the stuff of electoral politics, public policy, urban and suburban landscapes, and structures of inequality."<sup>22</sup> He explores this "Northern Mystique" by examining New York as well as New England; Jackie Robinson, Shirley Chisolm, and Edward Brooke all make appearances in Sokol's narrative. His analyses of these places and people provide important context for research. "Whites in the Northeast were not eager to establish racial equality," he contends. "But their region's history contained within it the sparks of possibility." He states that historical conversations about the Northeast were part of a "regional imagination," one in which "the narrative of freedom had no room" for discussions of the region's racist past. Northeasterners, he argues, always stood on the side of freedom and liberty; it was "the birthplace of American freedom" during the American Revolution, whose citizens also "took up arms against the slave South" in the Civil War. "Northeasterners of various stripes found uses for the loft version of regional history," while in "the middle of the twentieth century, the mystique helped to frame how northerners would grapple with the stormy present." African Americans, Sokol contends, were themselves influenced by the "mystique;" yet when they were disappointed by it, frustrated by the lack of equality and representation, "blacks could embarrass white leaders for failing to actualize this version of history," and thereby they "exposed the gap between the unceasing language of freedom and the inequalities that defined northern life."<sup>23</sup>



*The Octagon Lounge, July 1965 (Photo: Ray Kelly, rkelly@repub.com)*

I contend that the Octagon Lounge incident—which Sokol discusses in his third chapter<sup>24</sup>—and its aftermath inspired black citizens of Springfield to expose the inequalities of the city. Indeed, Springfield plays a significant role in Sokol’s narrative. His first chapter is a significant discussion of Springfield’s attempt to desegregate their schools during the Second World War, wherein he argues that white residents’ reluctance to embrace the so-called “Springfield Plan” for school desegregation “showed that enlightened racial attitudes could coexist quite easily with racial segregation.”<sup>25</sup> Beyond New England, the Springfield Plan was discussed widely, and supported throughout the Northeast. Sokol calls the Springfield Plan “a touchstone for race relations in the World War Two era. For a moment it became the fancy of the nation;”

despite this, however, “when the cooperative spirit of wartime was gone, there was less talk of teaching racial democracy in school.” There were no black firefighters or policeman in Springfield in 1946. Employment discrimination was rampant. “At Smith & Wesson, the city’s largest employer, African Americans worked only as floor sweepers, machine oilers, and toilet cleaners,” he writes. A decade later, in 1956, four percent of Springfield’s citizens were African Americans, but only ten teachers in the city were black—an increase from three, ten years earlier.<sup>26</sup> The failure of the Springfield Plan, would, however, inspire African Americans throughout the North to concentrate on changing the laws of the land, rather than trying to change the minds of its residents. . “Changing attitudes was no longer all that important,” Sokol writes. “The key now was to place in the law books protections for racial minorities.”<sup>27</sup>

In mid-1960s Springfield, the “change laws, not hearts” mindset Sokol writes of was stronger than ever. Early in the decade, Springfield’s black residents would seek to change the laws of both their city and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, specifically as they related to housing and community segregation. More significantly, African Americans in Springfield sought to end the over-policing of their neighborhoods and places of recreation. Two specific events—the United States Commission on Civil Rights’ investigation into housing, and the incident at the Octagon Lounge—challenged black citizens of Springfield and other western Massachusetts communities, and inspired them to continue fighting for legislative progress.

### ***“Wasn’t Fit for Pigs to Live in”*** **Housing Inequality in Springfield**

The first American civil rights act of the twentieth century was signed into law by President Dwight Eisenhower in September of 1957, after what had been described as “an unconscionable time making its way through Congress.” Title I of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 created the United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR), “an independent, bipartisan, federal agency” that’s sole purpose was “to investigate allegations that United States citizens were being deprived of the right to vote,” based on race, ethnicity, and/or religion. Later, the Commission would be “empowered to assemble authentic and documented information,” and “to build up an unassailable factual record of the status of civil rights throughout the country,” moving beyond

voting rights and into all categories of civil liberties. The primary responsibility of the agency was to “point the way toward more effective policies, on the part of both the Executive and Congress,” in order to solve “what had by 1957 become universally recognized as the gravest domestic problem facing the American nation.”<sup>28</sup>

As the new decade dawned, state advisories appointed by the USCCR continued to hold public hearings on housing discrimination in cities and communities across the nation—even in New England. The experiences reported to the USCCR’s state advisory committees augmented the concerns raised by urban renewal activists. The subsequent reports published by the state advisory boards to the Commission offer some of the most conclusive primary-source evidence into the rampant housing inequality that existed in the New England region throughout the decade. The evidence provided by citizens, landlords, and investigators alike pointed to the unavoidable truth, that even in a region with a super-minority of black citizens, communities were segregated and black neighborhoods were deficient. Likewise, in suburban or even rural neighborhoods, white residents were blatant in their discrimination against black neighbors. Landlords, real estate agents, and mortgage lenders were deliberate in their dealings with black homebuyers as well as renters. Moreover, a significant component of the USCCR reports was the vivid detail given to describe how truly decrepit and unequal black housing was as compared to that of white New Englanders. These reports underscored the reality that New England communities were developing their own “Negro ghettos,” which, as President Lyndon Johnson would state in 1966, resulted in “as severe a denial of freedom and the fruits of American citizenship as more obvious injustices.”<sup>29</sup>

On 18 June 1964, sixteen residents of greater Springfield, Massachusetts, came forward to testify against the unfair and illegal housing practices of white landlords throughout Western Massachusetts. Reported to the Massachusetts State Advisory Committee to the USCCR, this airing of grievances by the citizens of the Springfield metropolitan area would form the basis for the committee’s final report, published nearly two years later. The report, which examined the housing crises in Springfield as well as nearby Holyoke and Chicopee, argued that the racial problems plaguing Springfield and the surrounding cities and towns were internal: “Like the proverbial iceberg, the area’s racial problem is below the surface,” the report

read, arguing that cases over clear and present racial strife, such as the 1965 “Octagon Lounge disturbance,” were rare, adding that in each “of the cities, the observer would see Negroes and whites in the same public places—restaurants, stores, schools, and parks.” The black communities of the Springfield metropolitan area “would not appear to be cultural wastelands,” the report found, citing Springfield’s “public library, the city’s Classical and Technical High Schools, museums, and leading churches within the boundaries of the Negro community.” Yet, a close study of these communities “reveals that the subtleties of racial segregation exist even when the Negro area does not resemble the ghetto of Roxbury or Harlem; that the crowded Negro area takes on the general appearance of the city; that Negroes are the victims of unequal treatment and job discrimination,” and “that a ‘white noose’ encircles the Negro areas within the core city.”<sup>30</sup>

By 1960, the Springfield Metropolitan area, including cities such as Northampton, Westfield, Longmeadow, and others, had seen its population double over the previous five decades. With nearly 500,000 inhabitants, the area’s “nonwhite population” (defined by the committee as primarily black people, with a small minority of Puerto Ricans who had been “brought into the Connecticut Valley by the tobacco farmers) was growing “at a much greater rate than the white,” increasing by more than 400 percent. In fact, the “proportion of nonwhites to whites in the Springfield/Holyoke/Chicopee area was almost equal to that in the Boston area in 1960, but the percentage of increase was almost double that for Boston in the last decade.” Indeed, despite the existence of nonwhite communities in the smaller cities and towns, the majority of Western Massachusetts’ nonwhite residents lived in those three central cities; in 1960 “no community outside the Springfield-Holyoke-Chicopee Metropolitan Area except Northampton had more than 100 nonwhites.” Nonwhites in Northampton made up less than half of one percent of that city’s nearly 30,000 citizens.<sup>31</sup>

The black and Puerto Rican residents of the Springfield area, “concentrated primarily within the three core cities,” were “enclosed by a ‘solid’ ring of white suburbs, [and] increasingly concentrated in racially segregated neighborhoods within these cities.” In Holyoke, eighty percent of black residents lived in three census tracts, while in Chicopee, ninety percent of the nonwhite population were living in one census tract—specifically, the tract that covered Westover Air Force Base. Meanwhile, in Springfield, fifteen of the thirty-three census

tracts had fewer than seventy-five black residents in 1960, with the black and Puerto Rican families concentrated in six of Springfield's census tracts. That same year, seventy-eight percent of nonwhites resided in the Upper Hill, McKnight Bay, and North End sections of Springfield, up from sixty percent a decade earlier. Over that same period, the North End saw a nonwhite increase of ninety-nine percent. The North End itself underwent a dramatic transformation due to the North End Urban Renewal Project, when 125 black families from the North End were displaced to McKnight's Bay; 101 black families were simply moved to another section of the North End. In Holyoke, most black families lived in a specific section of town, called the Bond Street area.<sup>32</sup>

The Springfield report concluded that black people in the Springfield area faced the same obstacles and obstructions to fair and equal housing as black residents to the east, specifically Boston. These residents experienced "a disproportionate share of substandard and dilapidated housing, [had] less space in proportion to his needs, and [paid] a higher rent and a larger percentage of his income for rent than" white residents. The US Census of Housing found that sixty-eight percent of nonwhite families paid over seventy dollars in monthly rent, as opposed to fifty-two percent of white families; only thirty-two percent of nonwhite families paid under seventy dollars. Overcrowding, substandard and deteriorating facilities, and higher rent were all characteristics of the Springfield metropolitan area, as was the concentration of black families in public housing, with one federally-funded housing project having ninety-three percent black and Puerto Rican occupancy. State housing projects "have only a token number of nonwhites" while "not a single elderly [living] unit is occupied by a nonwhite."<sup>33</sup>

Chicopee's nonwhite population was unique in the Springfield metropolitan area, as most residents were active servicemen living on Westover Air Force Base. In circumstances similar to those surrounding Dow Air Force Base, in Bangor, Maine, many of the black residents of Chicopee did not live there voluntarily, but because of their status as servicemen. Further, only one area of the census tracts in Chicopee housed "a substantial number of nonwhites in 1960," among them 654 black residents. The status of the nonwhite residents of Chicopee was much different than that of Springfield's, Holyoke's, and those of smaller towns. Nonwhites in Chicopee were better educated on average (most had received at least some college education), and in some

cases were in the higher income bracket of \$6,000 to \$10,000 a year. Another primary distinction was that ninety-two percent of the non-whites living in Chicopee were renters, and nearly all lived in “housing categorized as sound.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite the distinct traits of this population, the committee found that nonwhite residents who lived off-base, such as in neighboring Holyoke, still faced discrimination, especially in the form of higher rent and inadequate housing. At an “open meeting,” in which the “base commander did not allow military personnel to participate,” the committee cited the Executive Director of the Holyoke Housing Authority, who claimed that “Negro service [men and their families] were being gouged.” In some cases, black servicemen “had to get extra jobs to keep the rent paid up,” and were forced to live in public housing or even in motel rooms. In a questionnaire sent to 7,895 Air Force personnel, sixty-nine percent of black personnel who rented their homes responded that “they lived in multiple-family dwellings, and nine percent [lived] in public housing in Springfield or Holyoke.” Those who lived in Springfield were, as expected, “concentrated in the five Negro census tracts: Old and Upper Hill, McKnight Bay, the North End, and Brightwood.” In addition, the study found that black personnel paid higher rent on average than white servicemen, and that black families lived in dwellings with fewer rooms than did whites. The study concluded that “the Negro serviceman and his family not living on the base lived in one of the core cities, often in the ‘Negro area,’ in a smaller space for which he frequently paid more rent than the white officer or enlisted man.”<sup>35</sup>

Many of these so-called “Negro areas” took on what the committee defined as “ghetto characteristics.” These areas “are isolated from the mainstream of city life,” and not just geographically, but socially, culturally, and economically. The ghetto “is marked by low family, social, and economic status. . . . There is always unemployment in the ghetto.” Further, the Springfield metro-area ghetto “has higher rates of disease, mental retardation, undetected glaucoma, infant mortality, accidents, and juvenile delinquency.”<sup>36</sup> The children born into these ghettos carried the burden of poverty, disease, and otherness. Schools were *de-facto* segregated, and their upkeep neglected. “Until recently the city [of Springfield] has been spending its money on construction of schools in white areas,” said the report, while “schools in the ghetto [are] among the city’s oldest, [and] they often are without libraries and

adequate playground space.” These schools were “overcrowded, with pupil-teacher ratios that exceed state standards.” As a result, dropout rates were higher than in Springfield’s white neighborhoods.<sup>37</sup>

Students who spent their days in substandard schools often went home to substandard housing. As one witness testified to the advisory committee in 1964, the “housing in which they were living was frankly abominable. It was something that wasn’t fit for pigs to live in, let alone human beings,” with no indoor plumbing and no electricity in some cases. Landlords neglected to make the necessary repairs. “In the face of such evidence, one can easily understand the unrest in the Negro neighborhoods.” As the advisory committee concluded in their report, “small wonder that the Negro is at the same time resentful, resigned, belligerent, ambivalent in accepting his fate.”<sup>38</sup>

As with a 1963 report that looked at housing in Boston, residents of the Springfield metropolitan area gathered at the open meeting of the advisory committee, giving eyewitness testimony describing how discrimination existed, and what it looked like, in their communities. Indeed, “the list of racially discriminatory practices is repeatedly continually. The Negro is often dissuaded, embarrassed, or degraded, when he attempts to move into neighborhoods previously closed to him.” This discrimination was a result of an influx of offenders working together—“the apartment owner, the real estate dealer, the developer, the mortgage banker, the home owner, the neighbor, and the entire small town community”—to “isolate the nonwhite and prevent him from making a choice of where he wishes to live. His attempts to become a part of the community have often gone unheeded.” One witness testified that “each attempt of a Negro to break into a wholly white apartment house or block is a pioneering experience, filled with fear of being rejected, or not being wanted, and taking a certain kind of courage to dare to attempt.” The witnesses corroborated the state advisory committee’s assumption that patterns of discrimination existed in both Springfield and Holyoke.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly to the experiences of blacks in Boston, the most common complaint among black home seekers was the direct denial of rental by landlords. Other landlords would rent homes to black families only in “Negro areas,” and in some cases would use their prospective tenants’ previous address as a signifier of where they came from—and thus their racial identity. Landlords were also complicit in

maintaining the racial status quo in segregated sections of the cities, often refusing to allow white tenants to live in their “all Negro locations.” In one instance, a white woman and her minister husband who had hoped to move to “a low-income interracial part of the city” found themselves rebuffed by landlords who did not want to integrate his all-black units. One of these landlords, “would not rent to us because the house was all Negro, and he didn’t want white tenants. He felt it was more peaceful this way.” In Brightwood, a different landlord assured the couple that they “needn’t worry” about who their neighbors would be, as he did not rent to black tenants.<sup>40</sup>

Landlords in Springfield and neighboring communities found justification for their discrimination, often “claiming they would suffer economic loss if they rented to Negroes or attempted to ‘integrate’ their apartment houses.” One apartment owner claimed “that he [became] involved in the lives of his tenants and must accede to their demands,” even if it means denying housing to someone based on their race. “I must weigh the complaints and comments I get when people do call and express their opinions on our attempting to integrate a building,” one building owner stated. “In the best light possible, I must revert my thinking back to the economic position that this building has in my overall business picture.” Apartment owners also argued that while black tenants were legally entitled to equal, integrated housing, “under our social terms it is now not yet possible.” They added that “renting to a Negro has meant more vacancies and greater tenant turnover,” while “minority groups (Spanish, German, Italian, or Jewish) wish to live by themselves.”<sup>41</sup> In Holyoke, two pro-integration groups—the Holyoke Human Relations Council and the Association for the Improvement of Minorities—distributed (at churches, social clubs, and through the local newspaper) 10,000 “Good Neighbor” pledges for integration. Disappointingly, “only 600 pledges were signed and returned. This feeble response was interpreted by the two sponsoring groups as an indication of the citizens’ desire to maintain the status quo.”<sup>42</sup>

Black residents of the Springfield area who were interested in buying their homes faced intimidation and discrimination from mortgage lenders and real estate agents. In some cases, “Negro home purchasers were confronted with price increases of as much as \$2000,” while one “prospective purchaser in Springfield had to go to three different banks before he obtained a mortgage.” The third bank, however, “forced the owner to reduce the sale price as a condition of the loan.” In

Holyoke, loans were often only approved after the bank had been notified as to where the applicant was looking to purchase a home. The advisory committee was told by witnesses that bank officials and lenders on occasion “advised” black home buyers “that they would be happier in some other neighborhood.” At the open meeting, the President of the Springfield Board of Realtors “suggested that a Negro arrange for financing with a banker and then ask a realtor to show him properties within a particular price range.”<sup>43</sup>

But it was the public housing in the area that saw the most blatant segregation. According to the advisory committee, this segregation deserved the most attention. “There was no disagreement over the segregated character of public housing projects in Springfield and Holyoke,” the report read. It continued by listing the reasons “for the racial imbalance,” which “ranged from the contention that it was due to the existing imbalance in the population from which the tenants were drawn, to the claim that tenant selection policies were deliberately based on race.” While Holyoke began integrating their public housing in 1958, it had become clear by the mid-1960s that the Authority maintained “a contained policy of concentrating nonwhites in one project.” Witnesses at the meeting claimed that they were met with “delays and discourtesies when they inquired about accommodations;” in one example, the Authority encouraged and “suggested” to a prospective tenant that “she accept housing where there was a concentration of Negroes,” as opposed to moving into a nearly all-white building.<sup>44</sup>

Present at the open meeting was Louis Falcetti, the Executive Director of the Holyoke Housing Authority. Falcetti claimed that the Authority had as early as 1966 made more housing options available to black tenants, and had been encouraged by the Holyoke Human Relations Council to take such a measure.<sup>45</sup> The Holyoke Human Relations Council was just one group dedicated to finding solutions for the region’s housing problems. Many national organizations had by the mid-1960s established local chapters in Springfield and Holyoke to promote the cause of open and equal housing opportunities for nonwhites. Organizations such as the National Urban League, as well as the NAACP and CORE, had opened local offices. A Human Relations Commission had been established, “created by city ordinance,” while “church groups have attempted to exert community leadership in the area of human relations.” In 1963, approximately 1,000 community members had participated in a race relations workshop, promoted

by the Conference on Race and Religion. Also, the Minority Group Housing Committee (MGHC) had been established by Springfield mayor Charles Ryan that same year. That committee's duties were, in part, to assure that families displaced by Springfield's urban renewal projects—most of whom were black—be relocated, after it was discovered that “displaced nonwhite families experience humiliations and other difficulties when seeking housing accommodations.”<sup>46</sup>

In an advertisement in the *Springfield Sunday Republican* on 3 March 1963, the Minority Group Housing Committee promoted their “Good Neighbor Pledge,” in which the group claimed that “the sale or rental of any of our present or future property will be without regard to race, religion, or national origin.” The MGHC would soon be incorporated into the Human Relations Commission, which itself was tasked with providing solutions to the specter of housing discrimination in Springfield, Holyoke, and the surrounding communities. This commission, which consisted of twenty-one members, all appointed by Mayor Ryan, also was staffed by “two volunteers, a Puerto Rican and a Negro . . . , who will provide the Commission with neighborhood assistance.” The focus of the commission was the reeducation of community members, landlords, and tenants. Listed among the responsibilities of the group “are those of gathering and distributing information which will improve understanding among private and public organizations and reduce tensions.”<sup>47</sup>

Complementing their efforts was the Springfield League of Women Voters, which “made an effort to assist minorities to gain access to better housing,” while also promoting education and open communication regarding discrimination and segregation. The group published a pamphlet titled “What About Housing?” in October of 1964, and the following month it hosted an “Open Occupancy Coffee Hour Program.” That program followed a “two-year study” by the group, “in which it found that ‘equality of opportunity in housing does not exist in many areas of the city.’” The Springfield chapter of the Urban League developed a program titled “Housing Unlimited,” which provided listings of apartments available “on an open-occupancy basis,” as well assisting applicants throughout the entire process, including any instances of discrimination on the part of local agencies. Other groups mentioned in the report were the Greater Holyoke Council of Churches; the Holyoke Human Relations Council, a “biracial committee;” and

the Association for the Improvement of Minorities, “a predominantly Negro organization.”<sup>48</sup>

The Springfield advisory committee argued in their report that while “no state has more laws against discrimination than Massachusetts . . . these laws are often ineffectively administered and enforced.” It believed that the ineffective enforcement of the laws was not due to lack of complaints by tenants, but rather to the language of the Fair Housing Act, as well as logistical problems faced by the western branch of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD). The Springfield branch of the MCAD, which opened not until February of 1964, was staffed by just one investigator and one stenographer. In the first ten months of its existence, the Springfield MCAD “processed eighty-four complaints and sixty-eight commission-initiated complaints,” among them, eleven complaints of housing discrimination in the Springfield/Holyoke region, which were processed from February to June. Of these eleven complaints, “probable cause was found in four instances and the complainant occupied the housing sought; probable cause was found in three and the complainant refused the housing; one was dismissed for lack of jurisdiction; one was withdrawn; and ‘no probable cause’ was found” in the other two.<sup>49</sup>

Additionally, the Fair Housing Act was criticized for “lenient penalty for violation of the Act and the lengthy time lapse before an injunction could be obtained.” The three-day notice required by the law “gives the landlord-respondent an opportunity to make some disposition of the premises before he can be enjoined.” Despite this criticism, the report advised that a “bill has been introduced in the Massachusetts General Court to reduce the time of notice to one day.” The advisory committee concluded that the “few complaints filed with [MCAD] on housing are no indication of the amount of discrimination existing in the area,” arguing that the Commission “is also handicapped by the three-day notice requirement before an injunction can be issued.”<sup>50</sup>

Similarly to the Boston report, the Springfield committee appealed to the USCCR in their recommendation for “[continued] study of the administration of State and city antidiscrimination statues and housing codes to discover the most effective means of enforcement.” Further echoing the Boston committee, the Springfield report suggested that the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights “draw up a model

civil-rights act” for all states to follow. The report also advised that the USSCR should “continue a study of discriminatory practices against the serviceman in communities surrounding Federal military installations.” Finally, the Springfield report petitioned the citizens of Western Massachusetts to “recognize the worth and rights of every individual, and take an active part in the programs of the volunteer and official organizations in the area, which are working to make decent housing a reality for all.”<sup>51</sup> Even without a stirring quote from President Kennedy, the sentiment was clear: the struggle for housing equality would need all hands. In Springfield, it would take a pivotal event—one that many black residents saw as a social injustice—to further spur mass political activism against the region’s systematic oppression. This event occurred at the Octagon Lounge, in the summer of 1965.

### ***“What Happened in Springfield?” Protesting Police Brutality***

The USSCR report on Springfield was finally published in 1966, more than a year after what the advisory committee referred to as the “Octagon Lounge disturbance.” This incident would disrupt any sense of interracial harmony the city of Springfield thought it had. It would pit black citizens against white citizens, and the city’s police force against its black community. “*What happened in Springfield? What caused it? What’s next?*” the *Boston Globe* asked its readers in a headline published several weeks after the incident. “The roots of the problem,” the *Globe* concluded, “go deep into society, housing, and schools.”<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps inevitably, news of the Octagon Lounge spread beyond the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; the black press throughout the nation also focused on the events unfolding in Springfield. Black newspapers such as the *Chicago Daily Defender*, New York’s *Amsterdam News*, the *Cleveland Call and Post*, and the *Afro American* all featured stories on the Octagon Lounge throughout the summer of 1965. One of the most visible organizations to take up the cause of Springfield’s African-American community was CORE, and their role in the Springfield activism was noted. “From coast to coast, CORE chapters are protesting against police mistreatment of Negroes,” the *Call and Post* reported in early August, naming Springfield among a list of cities protesting police brutality, including Seattle and Bogalusa, Louisiana.<sup>53</sup> Later that month, the *Daily Defender* reported on the arrival in Springfield of A.R. Sampson, a member of SCLC and aide to Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr. According to the *Defender*, Sampson “conferred with local Negro leaders, amid talk that another large civil rights demonstration may be in the offing for this tense city,” and “declined to state his purpose in coming to this city, and gave no indication that Dr. King might come up here to lead a march.”<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, what occurred outside the Octagon Lounge on the night of 16 July and into the early morning on 17 July 1965, demonstrated a deep divide between Springfield’s black residents and white residents. Almost immediately, civil rights activists looked to Springfield Mayor Charles Ryan to quell the discord by addressing the charges of police brutality directly. Among the “series of requests” issued to Mayor Ryan were the “transfer of the seven officers [involved in the incident] to duty other than in Negro districts; institution of a human relations course for all Springfield police officers; and the wearing of nameplates by all police so they could be identified in case of future incidents.” Three demonstrations in front of city hall were held following the incident, and Mayor Ryan “promised to look into the situation, and again said the Octagon Lounge incident was in the hands of the Police Commission for study and review.” The protests stopped, but the peace would not last. Disturbed by the mayor’s delay in action and lack of response to their demands, CORE’s local leadership called the community to action. With Chairman Oscar Bright and Vice Chairman Benjamin Swan at the helm, CORE “returned to the City Hall steps.” The *New York Times* reported that the “protest began with a one-and-a-half-mile march in muggy heat. . . . Most of the thirty-two demonstrators were Negroes of high-school age. They carried no signs but sang ‘We Shall Overcome.’” The demonstrators stayed there for four days. At 5:01 p.m. on August 13, Police Chief John Lyons “read a warning to demonstrators, saying if they did not move they would be arrested for trespassing.” In the end, none of the protestors vacated the area.<sup>55</sup>

Twenty-three people would be arrested that evening. Hours later, “Molotov cocktails were hurled into two stores near Winchester Square,” which would be the starting point of a three-mile march the following day. Forty-four people were arrested during that march. Oscar Bright was arrested for apparent narcotics possession—Bright denied having any knowledge of any illegal substances on his person at the time of his arrest. CORE officials in Rhode Island then encouraged African Americans throughout New England “and the Northeast to go to Springfield . . . to stage a protest march through the business section

of the city.” Requests by Bright and Swan for a permit to parade were denied by Chief Lyons. The next day, Massachusetts Governor John A. Volpe requested a meeting between Swan, Bright, Mayor Ryan, and other community and civic leaders. It was reported as being polite and uncontentious, with all parties agreeing to the need for the reeducation of the city’s police officers, but with no promises being made. After the seven-hour meeting, Governor Volpe announced that the planned rally would not be held. Yet the following day, in what the *Globe* described as “shocking suddenness,” Swan said, “Of course there will be a rally. We did not promise to cancel the rally,” Swan said. “We only promised to cancel the parade.”<sup>56</sup>

The following week, twelve of the individuals arrested at the Octagon Lounge on July 16 were found guilty of disturbing the peace. For many in the community, it seemed a forgone conclusion that those arrested would face some sort of punishment. Nine of the individuals—eight men, and one woman—were fined between fifteen and twenty-five dollars. The other three saw their cases filed without a sentence (the oldest of the arrestees was thirty-two; the youngest, seventeen).<sup>57</sup> Yet the question remained—would the police officers accused of brutality also face punishment? Community members had to wait for their answer. After a series of lengthy delays throughout the late summer, hearings against the police officers who had been involved in the Octagon Lounge arrests began in early fall. In October, at the hearing of the first of the six officers accused of brutality, the Lounge’s doorman, Lester Williams, stated that when he attempted to investigate the disturbance outside, he overheard the police calling one of the arrested patrons “some kind of nigger.” Williams himself was told by the officer to “get the hell inside the club.” He obliged, yet three officers took hold of him and “started hitting me on the head like a drum.” When he awoke, he was bleeding on the floor of a “patrol wagon.” Williams could not identify specifically which officers attacked him.<sup>58</sup>

Within a few days, a separate set of witnesses testified that no police brutality occurred. “There was a lot of swearing at officers,” stated Thomas Ireland, a twenty-six-year-old caterer, who further testified that no violence took place. Another witness, a mechanic, testified that patrons refused orders by police to return back inside the club or to go home. A third witness, who was not at the Octagon Lounge but rather the nearby Mill River Cafe, referred to the incident as “a riot. Police and the people were struggling. I heard a colored man yell

‘we’re going to kill those cops.’” All told, six witnesses said “they saw no evidence of police brutality.” In a later hearing against Sergeant James Williams, charges were dropped after six witnesses failed to show up to testify against him. The last of the hearings, held in December, saw the Springfield Police Commission clear the final three accused police officers of any wrongdoing. In their final statement, the Commission declared that “[t]he preponderance of the believable evidence leads this commission to the conclusion that the civilian participants in the episode and not the police officers were the sole cause of this violent civil eruption.” In the end, the six patrolmen and Sergeant Williams were all cleared of the charges against them.<sup>59</sup> Higgins’s *The Five-Month Summer* examined how the city’s police department mishandled the charges of brutality, and made concrete recommendations on how Springfield and its residents should move forward in the wake of the incident. More than that, it offered further proof of the severe disconnect between white and the black residents of what was then New England’s fastest growing metropolitan region. The incident “damaged racial relations badly,” Higgins wrote. “It affronted the pride of the Negro citizens and it ravaged the morale of the police officers. It embarrassed the city across the country . . . and it inspired fear and bitterness in white and black people alike.”<sup>60</sup>

### Conclusion

#### *“From a Misty Dream into a Flesh-and-Blood Reality”*

The Octagon Lounge disturbance was, at its core, a violent confrontation between black citizens and white police. Yet the reaction to the incident—from the varying testimony of black versus white witnesses, to the political and social actions taken in the wake of the event—reveal its deeper role within the narrative of the Black Freedom Struggle in the northeast. The struggle in Springfield went beyond the police; distrust existed wherever that city’s 17,000-plus black citizens interacted with a white majority. As Reverend Charles Cobb stated in January of 1966, six months before Higgins’s report was published, Springfield was “a sick city. . . . What this and perhaps other New England cities, needs most, is courage to translate what we call democracy from a misty dream into a flesh-and-blood reality.”<sup>61</sup> In neighborhoods, in schools, and even on the steps of City Hall, African Americans encountered barriers to full citizenship; throughout New England, political activism and protest were seen as remedies to widespread discrimination and distrust. Springfield would not be the first,

nor the last, of New England's cities to pursue that "misty dream" of democracy.

The incident at the Octagon Lounge lasted mere hours, but the long-term implications would be felt for years. Indeed, after the "guilty" verdicts against those arrested and the exoneration of the Springfield police officers, the wounds of the city's racial strife were left raw and exposed. CORE would continue to be active in the city and the surrounding communities; its local leader, Benjamin Swan, would devote his life to public service and in 1994 was elected to the Massachusetts State Legislature, serving as a Democratic representative for Hampden County. As the 1960s drew to a close, activist fervor would spread from the streets of the city to Springfield's student population, with protests and student walkouts occurring on the campuses of the Five College Consortium (consisting of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst along with Mount Holyoke, Amherst, Hampshire, and Smith Colleges). Amherst College adopted a Black Studies Program in 1969, within a year of Martin Luther King's assassination. The Black Harambee Holiday, an Afro-American cultural festival, was held annually.

Was the incident at the Octagon Lounge the direct cause of all of this? Most likely not. The trouble at the Octagon Lounge was one incident. Yet the aftermath—the protests, the community activism, the national attention—fostered a sense of commitment to racial justice and the fight to end to systematic oppression. Before and after the Octagon Lounge, the Black Freedom Struggle was vibrant and prevalent in Springfield—a New England city—as it was in other areas of the urban north. The African-American population in Western Massachusetts lacked the numbers of those in Chicago, Detroit, or New York; however, these were passionate individuals, and their dedication and devotion to the cause was grounded in a deep-rooted history of black community activism and agency. Their cause was far too great to fit within the walls of the Octagon Lounge.

**Christopher W. Tucker is a social studies teacher at Florida Southwestern Collegiate High School in Fort Myers, Florida. Born in the Boston area and raised in New Hampshire, he is a graduate of Southern New Hampshire University (BA, 2007) and holds Master's degrees from Dartmouth College (MALS,**

**2009) and Clark University (MA, 2017). He lives in Fort Myers with his wife, Erin, and their border collie, Roscoe.**

## NOTES

1. Douglas Crocket, "What Happened in Springfield, What Caused It, What Next?" *Boston Globe*, 21 August 1965, p. 2.

2. George V. Higgins, *The Five-Month Summer: A Report on Procedures of the Board of Police Commissioners of the City of Springfield, Massachusetts, for the Hearing and Decision of Allegations of Police Brutality by Persons Arrested July 16th–17th, 1965, at the Octagon Lounge* (Hampden County Chapter of the Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts and the Boston College Law School, 6 June 1966), 4–5.

3. In the context of housing, "nonwhite" refers to both African-American and Hispanic residents.

4. Higgins, *The Five-Month Summer*, 7.

5. *Ibid.*, 8.

6. *Ibid.*, 8–10.

7. Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," the United States Census Bureau, 2002.

8. For broad views of the Black Freedom Struggle outside of the South, see Stephen Wrinn's *Civil Rights in the Whitest State: Vermont's Perceptions of Civil Rights, 1945–1968* (1997); *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggle Outside the South, 1940–1980*, edited by Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (2003); Davison Douglas's *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865–1954* (2005); Peniel Joseph's *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative of History of Black Power in America* (2006); Janet L. Abu-Lughod's *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (2007); Tom Sugrue's *Sweet Land of*

*Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (2008); Clarence Lang's *Grassroots and the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-'75* (2009); and Khalil Gibran Muhammad's *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (2010).

9. Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 18–19.

10. *Ibid.*, 126–127.

11. *Ibid.*, 129–130.

12. Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 3.

13. *Ibid.*, 6.

14. *Ibid.*, 23.

15. *Ibid.*, 65

16. *Ibid.*, 71, 73.

17. *Ibid.*, 98, 116–118.

18. *Ibid.*, 99.

19. Brian Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 28–29.

20. *Ibid.*, 289.

21. Jason Sokol, *All Eyes Are Upon Us: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), xi.

22. *Ibid.*, xvi.

23. *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii.

24. Sokol's recounting of the Octagon Lounge incident is concise and convincing. His recounting of the events provides a vivid example of how the city of Springfield's tension over segregation and inequality reached its boiling point at that Friday night in July of 1965.

25. *Ibid.*, 23.

26. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

27. *Ibid.*, 28.

28. Foster Rhea Dulles, *The Civil Rights Commission: 1957–1965* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1968), 1–3.

29. Johnson, as quoted in Dulles, 51.

30. The Massachusetts State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Report on Massachusetts: Housing Discrimination in the Springfield-Holyoke-Chicopee Metropolitan Area*, December 1966, p. 1.

31. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

32. *Ibid.*, 4–6, 22.

33. *Ibid.*, 13–20.

34. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

35. *Ibid.*, 25–27.

36. *Ibid.*, 27–28.

37. *Ibid.*, 29.

38. *Ibid.*, 30

39. *Ibid.*, 31.

40. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

41. Ibid., 35–36.
42. Ibid., 37.
43. Ibid., 38–39.
44. Ibid., 39–40.
45. Ibid., 40.
46. Ibid., 41.
47. Ibid., 41–42.
48. Ibid., 41–43.
49. Ibid., 45–46.
50. Ibid., 46, 48.
51. Ibid., 50.
52. Crocket, “What Happened in Springfield,” *Boston Globe*, 2.
53. “CORE Demonstrators Beaten, Arrested,” *Call and Post*, 7 August 1965, p. 3C.
54. James Shevis, “King Aide Confers in Springfield,” *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, 25 August 1965, p. 3.
55. Crocket, “What Happened in Springfield,” *Boston Globe*, 2; *New York Times*, “Springfield, Mass., Negroes Staging Protest at City Hall,” 11 August 1965, p. 20.
56. Crocket, “What Happened in Springfield,” *Boston Globe*, 2; Timothy Leland, “Everything Looked Fine . . . But That Was 2 Days Ago,” *Boston Globe*, 21 August 1965, p. 2.
57. “12 Guilty, 4 Cleared in Springfield,” *Boston Globe*, 27 August 1965, p. 3.

58. Jeremiah V. Murphy, "Police Clubbed Several Men, Say 3 Springfield Witnesses," *Boston Globe*, 8 October 1965, p. 12.

59. Jeremiah V. Murphy, "Springfield Fracas Witnesses Deny Police Used Nightsticks," *Boston Globe*, 12 October 1965, p. 4; "Witnesses Don't Show, Brutality Case Dropped," *Boston Globe*, 9 November 1965, p. 4; No author, "Police Commission Clears Springfield Patrolmen," *Boston Globe*, 16 December 1965, p. 50.

60. Higgins, *The Five-Month Summer*, 290.

61. James Shankel, "Minister Calls Springfield 'sick city': Needs Adjustment," *Afro-American*, 29 January 1966, p. 16.