

Arkansas State Archives

## Arkansas Digital Archives

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Arkansas Digital Newspaper Project (ADNP)

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### Topic Guide: Race riots in Arkansas

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### COMMON SEARCH TERMS

- race war
- race riot
- negro and whitecap
- negro and night rider
- negro lynching
- Arkansas race war
- race war Ark
- [city/county] race
- war race troubles
- Arkansas race riot
- race riot Ark
- Ku Klux Klan

### SOME SIGNIFICANT DATES

- 1871 Chicot County Race War/Massacre
- 1880 Texarkana Race Riot
- 1883 Howard/Hempstead County Race Riot
- 1888 Crittenden County Expulsion, Pargould Race Riots
- 1892 Hampton/Calhoun County Race War
- 1896 Canfield Race War, Polk County Race War, Southern Arkansas Race Riots
- 1897 Atkins Race War, Nevada County Race War, Lonoke County Race War
- 1899 Little River County Race War
- 1904 Bonanza Race War
- 1905 Harrison Race Riot
- 1906 Argenta Race Riot, Cotter Expulsion
- 1909 Harrison Race Riot
- 1910 El Dorado Race Riot
- 1912 Walnut Ridge Race War
- 1919 Elaine Race Riot/Massacre
- 1923 Catcher Race Riot
- 1957 Little Rock Desegregation Crisis at Central HS
- 1970 Earle Race Riot

Racial tension in Arkansas was high at the end of the Civil War. Though the South had been defeated and slavery was abolished, the lingering effects of slavery and racism continued. The changing economy and polarizing political climate caused social unrest, which turned into racial violence targeted at Black Arkansans. The first race riots and race wars in Arkansas followed soon after.

Racism at the turn of the century took many forms, including intimidation such as whitecapping (threatening someone with violence), nightriding (illegal acts carried out at night in disguise), and even lynching (a frequent tactic of the Ku Klux Klan). During Reconstruction especially, white mobs and supremacist groups were pervasive in Arkansas. When this violence incited larger events, they were referred to as race riots or race wars. These riots could last from one day to twenty years (as was the case in Paragould). White violence against Black people was the defining aspect of race riots, though the impetus also typically included economic or political elements.

In Arkansas, race riots typically followed three patterns based on the demographics of the area. In areas with a large population of Black people, race riots were violent and often deadly as white residents used force in an attempt to preserve the social order that favored them. The most famous case of this in Arkansas is the Little Rock riot outside Central High School in 1957, when a white mob gathered to protest desegregation. (See Little Rock Nine Topic Guide)

In places with a low population of Black people, riots consisted of white mobs trying to force out the minority Black residents by intimidation or violence. This practice of expulsion led to "sundown towns," places that were known to drive out or prohibit Black people from living there. Sundown towns were common in the northwestern part of Arkansas. The most notorious Arkansas instances of such "ethnic cleansing" occurred in Boone County in 1905 and again in 1909, when the white citizenry of Harrison forcefully drove out almost all of the town's Black residents.

The final type of race riot occurred in well-established Black communities, such as Pine Bluff, and happened frequently across the state during the Civil Rights movement. White mob violence resulted in Black residents working together to protect themselves from attacks. These defensive riots created a vicious cycle of white mobs preemptively assaulting Black people, whom they suspected of planning protests to protect themselves from these selfsame white mobs.

The deadliest race riot in Arkansas, and one of the worst racial conflicts nationwide, was the Elaine Massacre in 1919. Elaine had more Black residents than white residents, and this race riot followed the deadly

pattern typical of this type of demographic. White Arkansans gathered to stop what they labeled as an insurrection by the Black residents. It is estimated that a white mob of up to a thousand people gathered in Elaine. By the end of this race riot, white mobs had indiscriminately killed hundreds of Black residents. This racial conflict was further drawn out as hundreds of other Black residents were charged with various crimes after being attacked by white mobs. This led to a long court process as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) worked with local lawyers to save Black Arkansans from the death penalty. (See Elaine Massacre Topic Guide)

Arkansas race riots were such significant events that they were often reported in newspapers outside the state. Some of the best reports of these events are dispatches from Arkansas, including first-hand accounts, printed in papers throughout the country.

### SELECT ARTICLES FROM CHRONICLING AMERICA

- "Letter from Arkansas" *New National Era*, Washington, D.C. January 4, 1872, Image 3, Column 2-3
- "An Arkansas War of Races" *The Highland Weekly News*, Ohio August 8, 1883, Image 2, Column 2
- "Race War in Arkansas" *Daily Evening Bulletin*, Kentucky August 27, 1887, Image 1, Column 5
- "The Arkansas Race War" *The Indianapolis Journal*, Indiana July 15, 1888, Image 8, Column 5
- "Seven Lynched!" *Semi-Weekly Graphic* March 25, 1899, Image 1, Column 5
- "Trouble on the Border" *The Monticellonian* March 31, 1899, Image 4, Column 2
- "The Race War in Paragould" *Baxter Springs News*, Kansas August 12, 1899, Image 2, Column 5
- "Paragould Race War is Over" *Eagle River Review*, Wisconsin August 17, 1899, Image 2, Column 2
- "The Race Question" *The Forrest City Times* February 1, 1890, Image 2, Column 5-6
- "Arkansas Race War" *Union County Courier* South Dakota June 3, 1897, Image 2, Column 1
- "Negroes Ordered to Hide Out" *Newport Daily Independent* April 30, 1904, Image 3, Column 2
- "Arkansas Had Nineteen Lynchings" *The Monticellonian* January 12, 1905, Image 1, Column 3
- "Nine Are Killed in Race Riots" *The Prescott Daily News* October 2, 1919, Image 1, Column 1-2
- "Ku-Klux Klan Once More Follows the Fiery Cross" *The Mena Weekly Star* December 2, 1920, Image 4, Column 2-3

### RELEVANT EDUCATION AND LESSON PLANS

Arkansas State Archives: Reconstruction Lesson Plan:

<https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/lesson-plans/4/>

Central Arkansas Library System: The Elaine Massacre Lesson Plan:

<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/140>

Central Arkansas Library System: Race Relations in Arkansas: Reconstruction Lesson Plan:

<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/21/rec/4>

Library of Congress: Racial Massacres and the Red Summer of 1919 Resource Guide:

<https://guides.loc.gov/racial-massacres-1919>

Find more of our topic guides at <https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/adnp/>.

Further information about this topic can be found in the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, courtesy of the Central Arkansas Library System at <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>.

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