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How the roots of Detroit's police department helped spawn 1967 rebellion

By [STATESIDE STAFF \(/PEOPLE/STATESIDE-STAFF\)](/PEOPLE/STATESIDE-STAFF) • JUL 20, 2017



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A National Guardsman patrols a Detroit street during the July 1967 rebellion.

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Stateside's conversation with Jamon Jordan, the tour leader for Black Scroll Network History & Tours.

To understand why African-American Detroiters hit a breaking point with the city's police force in July 1967, we must turn to the history of the Detroit Police Department, and how white officers treated black men, women and children.

Decades of police brutality and harassment, combined with racial segregation and oppression, sparked the violence in 1967. **Jamon Jordan**, an historian and the tour leader for the Black Scroll Network History and Tours (<https://www.facebook.com/BlackScrollDetroit/>), joined *Stateside* at the Detroit Historical Museum to explore this history, and how far the city has come in the past 50 years.

Historians like Jordan have been very clear that one of the central causes of the rebellion was the long history of conflict between Detroit's overwhelmingly white police force and its African-American population.

"The reality of it is that African-American and white Detroiters were living in two different worlds when it came to the way that the police were oriented towards them," Jordan said. "The police department was about 95% white in a city that was becoming about 40% African-American. And for years this had been a problem. There were so many complaints about racist brutality and harassment, and of course, some shootings of African-Americans who were unarmed.

"Most African-Americans, at that time, felt that the police department was like an occupying force or an occupying army, that you had to do what they said."

According to Jordan, the origins of the racial animosity go back to the 1830s, when Michigan was just a territory. Initially, law enforcement consisted of a sheriff and a deputy sheriff. But as the abolitionist movement gained ground and the Underground Railroad drew escaped

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slaves to Detroit, the City Council created a 16-man patrol that was charged with trying to crack down on "negroes and mulattos".

Jordan said this laid the foundation for the city's first race riot during the Civil War. In 1863, African-American saloon owner William Faulkner was arrested and accused of molesting a nine-year-old white girl and an 11-year-old black girl. This sparked a race riot that killed one African-American man and injured dozens of others.

You could have had a Black Lives Matter movement in Detroit in 1925. And the continuation of bad relationships and harassment and brutality and, of course, unarmed African Americans being shot, continued through the 1930s and 1940s.

Police brutality and the shooting of unarmed suspects continued into the 1920s. In 1925, 55 African-Americans were shot by police officers.

"You could have had a Black Lives Matter movement in Detroit in 1925," Jordan said. "The continuation of harassment and brutality, and of course unarmed African Americans being shot, continued through the 1930s and 1940s."

Nearly two decades later, conditions had not improved. Housing discrimination, de facto school segregation, and continued police brutality escalated the conflict.

In the summer of 1966, the city almost had another riot. A group of young African-American men, led by activist Will McClendon, decided to stand up to the "Big Four." That notorious police squad targeted African-Americans for humiliation, harassment, and violence (one of their victims, future Detroit Chief of Police Ike McKinnon, recently told *Stateside* (<http://michiganradio.org/post/what-it-was-be-young-black-police-officer-detroit-during-1967-rebellion>) how that beating motivated him to become a police officer). But in 1966, a rain storm, police re-enforcements, and the intervention of local peacemakers kept the confrontation from escalating.

Problems continued after the 1967 rebellion. In the aftermath, Detroit police created what Jordan calls a "revenge squad." Starting in 1970, "S.T.R.E.S.S" (Stop The Robberies Enjoy Safe Streets) continued the legacy of the "Big Four."

"S.T.R.E.S.S. didn't make any bones about [them] being enemies of the African-American community," Jordan said.

Coleman Young made shutting down S.T.R.E.S.S. a key focus of his campaign for mayor. When Young took office in 1974, he dismantled the unit.

Listen to the full interview above to hear Jamon Jordan discuss more of the troubled history of the Detroit Police.

From July 17-28, Michigan Radio is looking back at Detroit in 1967, the Summer of Rebellion (<http://michiganradio.org/term/summer-rebellion>). We'll explore the issues that led to one of the deadliest civil disturbances in American history and examine why it still resonates in the city today.

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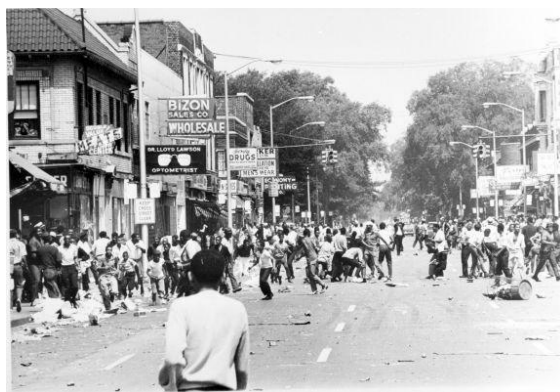
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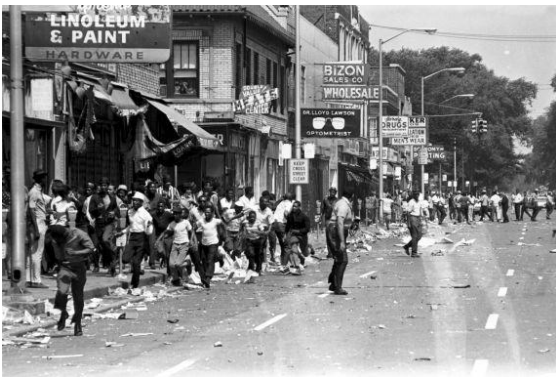
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