

“They All Fired at Her”

TENNESSEE, MAY 1866

Cynthia Townsend

TESTIMONY TO HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE

CYNTHIA TOWNSEND (colored) sworn and examined.

By the CHAIRMAN:

2207. Where do you live? On Rayburn avenue, Memphis.

2208. How long have you been in Memphis? About eighteen years.

2209. Have you been a slave? Yes; but I worked and bought myself. I finished paying for myself a few days before they took this place.

2210. Were you here at the time of the riot; if so, state what you saw? Yes. It was right before my door; I do not believe I could express what I saw. On Tuesday evening, the first of May, the riot began. I saw them shooting and firing. On Wednesday morning I saw a man by the name of Roach, a policeman, shoot a negro man; he was driving a dray. Mr. Roach ran up and shot him right in the side of his head. I saw Mr. Cash on Wednesday morning when he shot a man by the name of Charley Wallace. Charley ran down to the bayou; came back; and as he turned the corner of my house, Mr. Cash shot him in the back part of the head. They went up to him, turned him over, turned his pocket inside-out, and took out his pocket-book.

2211. Where were the policemen? I do not know the policemen only by the star they wear. I know Mr. Cash. I did not see any other men killed. When the old man Pendergrast was burning up the houses there, I saw them shoot a young girl; I could not say who did it. She fell right between two houses standing close together, and the houses were burned down right over her. I saw the Pendergrasts burning and plundering until broad day-light. The colored people were trying to get out of the houses. They told them that if they came out they would kill them. They fired into one house at a woman. She said, “Please, master, let me out.” He said, “If you don’t go back I’ll blow your damned brains out.” She went back. They set the house on fire. She just broke right out, and they all fired at her as fast as they could. I saw Mr. Pendergrast’s son Pat fire at her as soon as she

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came in sight. This girl Rachael who was shot and burned was a nice, smart girl; I could not tell you how old she was; she was quite a young woman.

2212. How many shots did they fire at this woman when she came out? I could not tell how many shots—a great many.

2213. Did you see them firing at other people who were coming out of the houses? Be sure and state only what you saw. Yes, sir; I am telling you the truth, and I know I have got to give an account of it. There were little children coming out of the houses, and they fired at them. I saw four or five come out at one time. Little children, old people, and women seemed to be all coming out together, and they just fired right at them. I did not see it, but they said they shot one little child's arm off.

2214. Where did these people go when they came out of the house? Some of them ran into my house. I do not know what has become of them since.

2215. Have you a husband? Yes. My husband and son are about seven miles in the country at work. I sent word to them not to come back until this fuss was over.

2216. Do you know the names of the family you saw come out of this house? No, sir; I do not. One woman came running up and said she liked to have been burned in her house. Mr. Pendergrast had shot at her. She said she got down on her knees and prayed the man to let her out; that she had a little son in there with her. He told her if she did not go back he would kill her. This man McGinn was in the crowd. He seemed to know this woman, and said, "That is a very good woman; it is a pity to burn her up; let her come out." She came out and her little boy with her. The boy had blue clothes on. They pushed him back, and said, "Go back, you damned son of a bitch." She fell on her knees and begged them to let the child out; that it was the only child she had. McGinn told her that she might take some of her things out, which she did; and I saw them take the things from her and burn them up. They let her little boy out afterwards. There was a man broke into my yard while they were shooting. They followed him and shot him down, right in my yard. His name is Dickerson. They did not kill him then. He was just as clever a man as ever I saw.

2217. Are you a member of the church? Yes; a member of the Baptist church. I saw Mr. Pendergrast go into his grocery,

and give ammunition to a policeman to load his pistols with. Then they started out again, firing and shooting. They started a negro man, who ran up the bayou. They told him to come up to them. He came up, and one of them put his pistol to the man's mouth, and shot his tongue out, and killed him dead. His name was Lewis Robertson.

2218. Did you see that? No, sir; but I saw him directly afterwards, when he was kicking and struggling in death. His tongue was out; they opened his month and said his tongue was shot off; they shot him twice, once through the head and once through the thigh. The lady who lives next door was looking out, and said, "Just look at that man, John Pendergrast, shooting and killing that negro;" and this Pendergrast was a man the colored folks thought so much of, too, and had done so much for him. I sent for the old man to ask him about it. He said, "Aunt Cynthia, I am the man that fetched this mob out here, and they will do just what I tell them; I know you are good old people here." I said, "Mr. Pender, will you please take my house and keep it for your own, and let me go away until this fuss is over?" He said he would not advise me to go away; that it was all done with now.

2219. Did they rob your house? Yes; they took my clothes, and fifty dollars in money, but I did not consider that much. They came in my house and took what they pleased; they took out some quilts that I had, too, but I never said a word about it.

2220. Who did the money belong to? It belonged to my son who was in the army, Frank King.

2221. Do you know of any violence being committed on the women in your neighborhood? Yes, sir; I know of some very bad acts.

2222. State what you saw? I could not tell you what I saw; I could have seen it if I had been a mind to.

2223. State the circumstances? There is a woman who lives near me by the name of Harriet; Merriweather was her name before she was married; I do not know what her husband's name is. There were as many as three or four men at a time had connexion with her; she was lying there by herself. They all had connexion with her in turn around, and then one of them tried to use her mouth.

2224. Was this during the riot? Yes, sir; it was on Monday evening.

2225. Did you see these men go in the house? Yes; I saw them going into the house and saw them coming out, and afterwards she came out and said they made her do what I told you they did; she has sometimes been a little deranged since then, her husband left her for it. When he came out of the fort, and found what had been done, he said he would not have anything to do with her any more. They drew their pistols before her and made her submit. There were white people right there who knew what was going on. One woman called me to go and look in and see what they were doing; that was when this thing was going on. She is the woman who came and made a complaint to Charley Smith; she is a very nice woman.

2226. Did she make complaint against Charley Smith for having a hand in this outrage? No; she complained to him; he was not in the house.

2227. What was the name of this woman? I cannot tell you; there are two of them who live on Webster street.

By Mr. BROOMALL:

2228. How many houses did you see burnt? I do not know that I could tell you; the first one I saw burnt was right close to my house. There was a square which had a school-house on it, and I could not tell you how many little cottages; I suppose there were as many as twenty cottages burned on that square.

By Mr. SHANKLIN:

2229. Did you see with your own eyes any portion of the difficulty on the evening of the first fight? Yes, sir; I did see a good deal; I saw a policeman shoot a soldier on Causey street. From that these black soldiers gathered, and a lieutenant at the fort shot the policeman who shot the soldier.

2230. Did you see colored soldiers shoot? Yes; I saw them shooting; I did not see them hit any one.

2231. How many colored soldiers were there shooting? I could not tell; they had given up their guns, and had nothing but their pistols.

2232. How many white men did you see engaged in shooting on Tuesday evening? I do not know; I never saw so many together, they gathered from every direction.

2233. Do you know the man who shot the policeman? He was a lieutenant in the colored regiment, a white man; I do not know his name.

2234. He was with the colored men shooting at the police, was he? Yes, sir; I do not know how the fuss began, though I was within two hundred yards of it when it began. I do not know that it amounted to anything, I only heard the report that the policeman was shot.

By the CHAIRMAN:

2235. Who was killed first, the colored man or the policeman? The colored man, one or two of them; then the soldiers came down South street, and went after the policemen as fast as they could.

May 30, 1866