

## THE CINCINNATI POLICE GATLING GUN

VERY FEW RECORDS EXIST ABOUT CINCINNATI POLICE GATLING GUNS. THE CITY HAD SEVERAL, AT LEAST ONE WAS ASSIGNED TO THE POLICE DEPARTMENT, OTHERS WERE ASSIGNED TO THE CINCINNATI WORK HOUSE.

GATLING GUNS, BLACK POWDER REVOLVERS AND SURPLUS MILITARY UNIFORMS WERE PART OF THE SUPPLIES THAT THE CINCINNATI POLICE POSSESSED.

A review of the City Auditor's Report for 1879 indicates expenditures to the Pettibone Mfg. Co. for belts, etc. The J. J. Tower Co. supplied whistles, and the J. J. Sayer Co. supplied badges. The police payroll disbursements list one superintendent of police, one inspector, one clerk, 20 lieutenants, 20 station-keepers, 300 patrolmen, court officers, sanitary force, and other employees. The inventory for the year lists a variety of city property including the following: Awnings-8, Belts for revolvers-53, Belts and tassels-249, badges-350, Gongs (alarm)-10, Hand-cuffs (pairs)-3, Lanterns-11, Medicine cases-4, Whistles-330, Wreaths-250. Ordnance consisted of One Gatling gun, carriage and equipments. 9550 metallic cartridges. 100 navy revolvers. 75 bullet molds. 54 cap boxes. 1000 round pistol cartridges.

The officers and men of the force had been organized into a military battalion. The battalion was divided as follows: Five Companies, One Gatling Gun Squad, One Color Guard and One Marker. Each company had no less than 54 men assigned to it. The Gatling Gun Squad had 6 men.

According to the 1903 Cincinnati Police Annual Report the Gatling Gun is listed as obsolete. Below is a photo of a Gatling Gun Squad, behind the gun is a storage wagon. The Lieutenant in charge of the squad is listed as Mark Langdon.



THIS IS THE ORIGINAL PHOTO, SHOWN BELOW IS THE SAME PHOTO WITH THE DISCOLORATION REMOVED.





LIEUT. MARK LANGDON.  
LIEUT. JOSEPH THORNTON.    LIEUT. EUGENE DIEHL.  
Second District.

THIS PHOTO IS FROM THE CINCINNATI POLICE BOOK OF 1890.

**The gatling guns were used during the Cincinnati Court House Riots. Several items below list the gatling guns during those riots.**

FROM THE WEBSITE CINCINNATI LAW LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

<http://www.hamilton-co.org/cinlawlib/about/history.html>

**On March 28, 1884 riots broke out in Cincinnati over the verdict that had been rendered on a murder trial involving a livery stable owner who had been killed by two employees. The trial of the first defendant ended in a verdict of guilty of manslaughter and a sentence of 20 years imprisonment. A crowd numbering more than 10,000 gathered but Sheriff Morton Lytle Hawkins refused to turn over the prisoner and established defenses for the Jail. Unable to get to the prisoner, the mob centered their hostilities on the courthouse. On March 29<sup>th</sup> the mob ransacked the Courthouse and set it on fire. The courthouse and law library were total losses. National Guard, then called the Militia, armed with two Gatling guns, restored order. Shots were exchanged and a lawyer, John J. Desmond, serving as Militia Captain was killed. Captain Desmond's picture is in the Law Library and a statute of him is located in the Courthouse Lobby.**

<http://www.safepassageohio.org/civilrights/timeline.asp>

#### **1884 COURTHOUSE RIOT**

**March 28, 1884 sees the outbreak of worst rioting in the city's history. The riot was triggered by mass anger caused when a jury found William Berner, a young German American, guilty of manslaughter rather than murder, for his role in killing his employer. (At the same time his African American accomplice, Joseph Palmer, awaits a separate trial. Their trials had been separated by Berner's defense attorneys because "everyone knew Palmer's race doomed him to death.")**

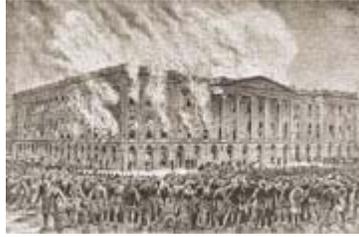
**Community leaders call a protest meeting at Music Hall. Nearly 10,000 people show up and transform themselves into an angry mob, which stormed the jail hoping to lynch Berner and Palmer. The next night the mob re-forms and burns the Court House-the symbol of justice-to the ground. The governor sends militia to clear the streets, but not before fifty-six people die and more than two hundred are wounded.**

Saturday, September 04, 1999

## Sheriff risked neck to stop lynching

**Mob stormed jail, courts in 1884**

BY **RANDY McNUTT**  
The Cincinnati Enquirer



**A mob, angered by a grotesque spree murders, set fire to the courthouse.**

(Enquirer file/Cincinnati Historical Society)

| [ZOOM](#) |

In the good old days of a bad old year, Sheriff Morton Lytle Hawkins invited Cincinnati to a hanging:

*You are hereby permitted to witness the execution of Joseph Palmer. In the jail yard on Friday, Oct. 10, 1884, between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.*

The death of a killer would have been the final act in a grotesque spree of violence and murder that gripped Cincinnati in 1884. It reached its peak on March 28-30, when thousands of citizens, frustrated and demanding justice, stormed the jail, trying to lynch Mr. Palmer and his accomplice, William Berner. Sheriff Hawkins and others fought to defend them. The incident — one of the bloodiest in Ohio history — left more than 50 people dead, 250 injured and the courthouse sacked and burned.

Mr. Palmer avoided the hangman until several years later, but he would become known as the cause of the Courthouse Riots and the last prisoner executed in Hamilton County.

Now, 115 years later, an overheard conversation has led a local historian to piece together long-forgotten accounts of the riots, and help the sheriff gain permanent recognition for his bravery.

Steve Barnett, a law enforcement historian and director of community relations for the sheriff's department, has persuaded the Ohio Bicentennial Commission to commemorate Sheriff Hawkins with a 4-by-4-foot cast-aluminum historical marker, to be erected on a grassy patch between the north and south buildings at the Hamilton County Justice Center, on the site where deputies set up temporary headquarters during the riots.

One side of the marker will honor the sheriff, the other will explain the riots. A ceremony will be held on the site early next year.

## **Courthouse burned**

The violence began on March 28, when 8,000 people gathered at Music Hall to hear speeches about criminals committing murder and not paying for it. Such talk jolted otherwise sensible men to new heights of fury. When somebody yelled, "To the jail!", the mob picked up ropes and guns and set out to hang Mr. Palmer and his accomplice, who were charged in the death of a livery owner.

The only thing that stood between the growing mob and the county's prisoners that night was Sheriff Hawkins — a Civil War hero — and 150 deputies, local police and state militia.

"Nobody anticipated a riot that night," Mr. Barnett said. "But things got out of hand. All the buildings around the courthouse were filled with the dead and wounded.

"The crowd attacked the jail first, pouring oil into it to force the sheriff to open the cells. But he held his ground. When the rioters didn't do enough damage to satisfy themselves, they commenced a full onslaught of the courthouse. They really did a number on it."

Rioters burned the courthouse to a blackened shell. County records were destroyed. The jail, in a separate building on Sycamore Street, was heavily damaged. It was connected to the courthouse by a tunnel that the rioters attempted to storm. Both buildings sat on the site of the present courthouse, across the street from where the marker will go.

Mr. Barnett, a former history teacher, knew little of the riots until he heard two deputies discussing Sheriff Hawkins' exploits. Intrigued, he sifted through material in back rooms of the courthouse for evidence of Cincinnati's darkest days. He discovered original riot photographs, related books, yellowed newspaper accounts — even the invitation to the hanging.

He obtained Mr. Hawkins' Civil War pension application, death certificate, marriage license and other papers. After months of study, Mr. Barnett felt he knew the dark-bearded sheriff.

He assembled a thick file on the riots and asked Sheriff Simon L. Leis for permission to apply for the historical marker from the Bicentennial Commission in Columbus. Mr. Barnett's 100-page submission, including original newspaper accounts of the riots, impressed the commission with its detail, said spokesman Brian Newbacher.

"The riots are a little-known but important historical event that should be remembered," he said. "The sheriff stopped something that could have been even worse."

## **Sheriff's destiny**

Destiny prepared Sheriff Hawkins for the challenge. At 17, he left school to join Company F of the 34th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, which was decimated during the Civil War. He rose from private to first lieutenant before the war's end, and was wounded in Virginia fighting in 1864.

Upon his return to Cincinnati he joined the *Star* as a reporter and, eventually the *Enquirer*..

In time, Mr. Hawkins left the paper and ran for sheriff. The job proved stressful in Cincinnati's winter of discontent. In February 1884 the Ohio River flooded, cresting at a then-record 71.1 feet and leaving thou sands homeless. A financial panic had left many people out of work and reduced the wages of others.

A number of brutal crimes further upset the city. Body snatchers broke into an Avondale home, killed a family and took their bodies to sell to medical schools. By early 1884, the Hamilton County jail housed 23 murderers.

Newspaper editorial writers and cartoonists stirred anger by exposing alleged injustice and deriding political hacks.

The killing of William Kirk brought citizens' anger to a boil. On March 24, a jury convicted Mr. Berner, 18, a stable worker, of manslaughter in the death of Mr. Kirk, his employer. The victim had been beaten with a hammer, strangled, robbed of about \$300 and dumped in a remote area near Cumminsville.

Though sentenced to 20 years in prison, Mr. Berner was still being held in jail when the riots started on March 28. His accomplice, Mr. Palmer, 19, who had not yet been tried, also was in the jail.

"People were upset with the manslaughter conviction," Mr. Barnett said. "They thought it should have been for murder.

"The feeling I get from reading old accounts is that you could buy justice. Murderers languished in the jail, and many people felt frustrated. Meetings were held at Music Hall and the issue escalated. The crowd — good citizens, not-so-good citizens; white-collar, blue-collar — attended."

### **Speakers built frenzy**

Veteran Judge A.W. Carter told them: "What could be done with a corrupt jury and corrupt lawyers?" The crowd replied, "Hang them all!"

Despite a lack of street leadership, the mob moved toward the jail like a black cloud. Men used guns, rocks and bottles to enter a part of the jail.

"The sheriff had gotten wind of trouble and had moved Mr. Berner out of his cell (dressed as a woman to disguise him) and onto a train with some deputies," Mr. Barnett said. Mr. Palmer remained in jail. "The crowd wanted him badly. When they finally got to him, he claimed they had the wrong man ... and they believed him."

On March 29, the mob broke into the courthouse. Rioters entered the treasurer's office, piled furniture in it and set it on fire. A

Through it all, Sheriff Hawkins battled. He didn't want to shoot citizens, but they fired first. He called for the National Guard. That night, Capt. John J. Desmond, a Cincinnati lawyer who led Company B of the First Regiment of the Ohio National Guard, was killed at the courthouse. His death seemed to rally the jail's defenders.

### **Gatling gun ended it**

On March 30, the Guard set up its Gatling gun, an early version of the machine gun.

"The deadly Gatling gun, the product of a Cincinnati inventor, yielded its thrumming voice to the yelp of the pack," the *Daily Times Star* noted later, "and that weapon, more than any other single agency, was responsible for the return to sanity of the thousands who had been swept off their feet by fiendish desire to kill."

As quickly as they began, the Courthouse Riots ended.

As far as Mr. Barnett can tell, only one man was prosecuted for a role in the riots, and he was acquitted.

Mr. Berner served 12 years in prison, then left for Indiana and obscurity.

Appeals stopped Mr. Palmer's October 1884 execution, but he finally was hanged on July 16, 1885, in front of 400 invited spectators who needed tickets to enter the jail yard. ("A big social affair," Mr. Barnett said.) An *Enquirer* headline read: "Only One, When There Should Have Been Two."

Mr. Palmer had the dubious honor of being the last man executed in Hamilton County. "Palmer died harder, and consumed more time in dying, than anyone on record," the *Enquirer* reported. "His neck was not broken, and the job was considered bungled." As a result, prisoners thereafter would go to the Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus for execution.

After his term, Sheriff Hawkins returned to the work he enjoyed most — newspapering. He moved to St. Louis briefly, then back to his hometown as the *Enquirer's* managing editor. He was later appointed police commissioner and Ohio's adjutant general.

He died at his Norwood home in 1929, at age 86.

"He was quite a man," Mr. Barnett said. "A real hero who should be recognized. He survived the Civil War and the riots and the newspaper business. So I guess he did something right."

Thursday, March 27, 2003

## Guest Column

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### Riot of 1884 among bloodiest in history

**By Mark Painter**  
**Guest columnist**

Tomorrow is the anniversary of the Cincinnati Courthouse Riot of 1884. The carnage and destruction in 1884 far exceeded what happened two years ago.

In the 1880s, many Cincinnatians thought the criminal justice system was corrupt. There had been rumors of jury bribing, and there were long delays in trials. Murders were common. There were 93 murders in Cincinnati in 1883! (Compare that with 49 in 2001, 65 in 2003.)

A full-page article ran in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, on March 9, 1884, headlined "The College of Murder." The story reported:

"Laxity of laws gives the Queen City of the West its crimson record. Pre-eminence in art, science, and industry avail nothing where murder is rampant and the lives of citizens are unsafe even in broad daylight."

The incident that sparked the riots happened on Christmas Eve 1883. Two men had robbed and murdered their employer, a stable owner, and dumped his body near the Mill Creek in Northside. One man was white, the other black. Everyone thought they would hang, which was the punishment then for murder.

But the first one to come to trial, the white man, William Berger, had a shady lawyer, Tom Campbell, whom the family had scraped together money to hire. The jury returned a verdict of guilty of manslaughter. Manslaughter was a lesser offense, and saved Berger from hanging.

People were outraged, and the newspapers inflamed their passions. Many thought the jury had been bribed.

A protest meeting was held at Music Hall, but it got out of hand. A mob marched on the jail, which was behind the Courthouse. Their intention was to take and hang Berger - and perhaps all the other 23 murderers inside. But the sheriff had already been moved Berger out of town by rail.

In the next few days, 56 people were killed in the rioting - police, militiamen, firefighters and rioters. More than 200 were injured. About 10,000 white rioters took part. The mob held the area around the courthouse for three days, battling with police, militia, and firefighters.

On March 29, the mob burned the courthouse to the ground. William Desmond, a lawyer and captain of militia, was killed by a gunshot as he tried to protect the courthouse. A statue of Captain Desmond now graces the lobby of the present courthouse.

While the courthouse burned, a regiment of militia from Dayton arrived by train. When they saw the scene at the courthouse, they caught the next train back to Dayton.

Because local militia had trouble firing on their friends and neighbors, more state militia were sent in by railroad from Columbus. They stopped the out-of-control crowd. The Columbus troops brought a Gatling gun, which made an impression on the mob.

In the aftermath, more people were hanged, including Berner's co-defendant, and some reforms were made. William Howard Taft, then a young lawyer, was named head of a committee to reform the criminal law. He had been incensed at the "farcical" administration of justice in Cincinnati.

The Cincinnati Courthouse Riot was atypical. Not caused by race or wartime draft or labor strife, it stands as one of the most destructive riots in American history.

*Judge Mark Painter serves on the Ohio First District Court of Appeals. He is the author of two legal books and a biography, William Howard Taft: President and Chief Justice, to be published this year.*

## [HISTORY OF CINCINNATI AND HAMILTON COUNTY, OHIO](#)

Not only in **Cincinnati**, but in Covington and Newport, were to be seen in the windows of the ... Indeed, the **Gatling gun**, belonging to the **police** department, ...  
[www.heritagepursuit.com/Hamilton/HamiltonChapXXIV.htm](http://www.heritagepursuit.com/Hamilton/HamiltonChapXXIV.htm)

### **370 - HISTORY OF CINCINNATI AND HAMILTON COUNTY.**

How easy the conquest would have been is shown by the fact that the mob reached the cell of Joseph Palmer,\* Berner's partner in crime, and were baffled only by the coolness and presence of mind shown by the prisoner himself. When asked if he was not Palmer, he came to the front of his cell and said: " No, can't you see that I am a white man"" The mob turned away satisfied, and, after some difficulty, were pushed out of the cell room. The gate was closed, leaving the unwelcome visitors in possession of the jail office, and, in fact, of the entire front which faces Sycamore street. How easily the jail could be defended was shown later, when a party of mob forced their way into the gallows yard, and, with a heavy beam of wood, burst the door leading into the corridor of the jail. The police met these men with decision, and took them prisoners as rapidly as they entered the building, reminding each one, with a sound rap on the head, that he was a violator of law. An attempt to burn the building by setting fire to some small wooden houses showed how easily the jail could be defended in this particular.

Altogether, the experience of Friday night was sufficient to convince cool-headed men that, with some very simple precautions, a small force of policemen, well armed, could defend the jail against a mob of many hundreds of men. Inside of this structure, the militia were from first to last useless. They should have been used to defend the courthouse, which faced Main street, and at the rear overlooked the jail. The entire block was practically in a state of siege, and should have been defended at all points. So extraordinary was the defect in the plan of defence-in view of the fact that the sheriff, M. L. Hawkins, was a military man and had seen some services to persuade many persons that the burning of the courthouse on Saturday night was the work not of the mob, but of men in the employ of corrupt officials who desired to efface the records of their crimes. In any case, there is no excuse for the incompetence which left the building, second in importance in the State of Ohio, to the wild vagaries of a mob. The only excuse ever attempted was the statement that the forces in hand were insufficient. If they had been properly disposed there were enough men available from the first. Indeed, the Gatling

gun, belonging to the police department, which was of little or no use during the riots, if it had been handled promptly, would have driven the mob out of Main street at a less cost. of life than that, which followed the desultory and indecisive firing of the militia.

Throughout the three days of disorder the defect in the conduct of the authorities was a lack of energy and decision. As it was, no effort was made to protect the firemen, who might have saved the courthouse; the populace found it easy to throw firebrands into the building. Fired upon by the militia, they simply gathered up the dead and wounded and retired, to return in a few minutes with fresh brands and renewed determination. When the flames had gained such headway that they could not be extinguished, the crowd made their way into the building, by battering down the front gates, and carried on the work of demolition without hindrance. Late on Saturday night, troops began to pour into the city, and the disorder was put down by mere weight of numbers. With the exception of two or three attempts to capture gun stores, and to rifle pawnshops in order to secure guns and pistols, the populace had shown no disposition to attack any buildings except those belonging to the county.

The people had proved themselves capable of the most irrational and insane conduct that had ever been attributed to free citizens of the United States. No disorder known to the history of the country had been so purposeless in its origin; so difficult to quell, considering the number of persons engaged in it, and so devoid of result in the outcome. The courthouse was a ruin. The jail had resisted every attack made upon it. Even an attempt to set it on fire with coal oil had only served to prove how impregnable it was to the assaults of an ill-armed mob. Not one of the prisoners against whose lives threats had been numerous was hurt. Berner, the

\* Some months after the riot Palmer was tried, convicted of murder, and executed. After the terrible experiences of March no jury would have dared to find any other verdict.

### **376 - HISTORY OF CINCINNATI AND HAMILTON COUNTY. .**

Marching down South Court street they drove the mob before them. Company A pushed the mob up Main street. Companies B and F wheeled to the left upon the mob in Court street, and found themselves engaged with the real rioters. At first the snob gave way; then sixteen or twenty rioters separated themselves from the mass, precipitated themselves through the first company, several falling dead in their tracks at the first volley, and were caught by the colored company, the Duffy Guard, and pushed aside.

Ten of this regiment were soon wounded under the fire of the mob, and the command devolved from one officer to another until the third who took command gave the order to fire. With the precision of veterans, platoon after platoon delivered its fire. It was about midnight when the rapid succession of crushing volleys told that, the tables had turned, and many an anxious citizen ejaculated his thanks, as he divined that the mob had met its master. The mob rushed up Court street. Every volley found its victims, and Kinzbach's drug store, at the corner of Court and Walnut streets, was soon filled with the dead and dying. The rush of fugitives into the store and the crashing of bullets through the windows imperiled the lives of the wounded and the surgeons, who were mostly devoting themselves to suffering humanity. It was too much for the mob. The Fourteenth held the ground it had captured, and the Gatling gun was brought up from its post near the jail to support the militia. Then the skirmishing continued. Occasionally some section of the mob, with reckless daring, sprang from behind a sheltering corner to fire; on the troops.

The troops returned the fire, not in volley, now, for the discharge of two or three guns was enough to disperse the crowd, and almost every such episode added to the list of the dead and wounded. Thus the night wore away, and with the gray dawn the firing gradually ceased.

*Stirring Incidents.*-Soon after the Fourteenth Regiment had driven back the mob, a couple of engines were sent for and brought around, under military escort, to Sycamore street. The firemen laid their hose without hindrance, and played upon the burning courthouse for the rest of the night. They were enabled to save the northeast corner of the building, including the recorder's office, the grand jury rooms, the coroner's office.. and the carpenter's shop in the basement. Their success showed that the fire might have been stopped at any stage, but for the violence of the mob.

About 9 o'clock a portion of the mob started down Main street to procure arms and ammunition. William Powell & Company's gun store was attacked, and coal oil barrels were rolled up to the front of the store with the intention of burning it, The result was totally unexpected to the mob. A barricade of empty boxes had been built in the store, and behind this lay several clerks armed with repeating rifles. Guilford Stone had stationed himself at an open window in the second story, The street was jammed with heads when Mr. Stone let loose his batteries. At the first discharge five men fell, two of them dead. Soon the mob was in full retreat. About midnight a telephone message came to the Hammond street police station to the effect that a squad of the rioters had captured two cannon in Power Hall, and was then on its way up Main, from Fourth street, toward Powell's. Lieut. Burke took a squad of police with him, and came upon the rioters as they stopped in front of Powell's to get ammunition. One volley from the " navy sixes," and each rioter was seeking safety in his own individual way. The police ran down and captured several prisoners, and then trundled the cannon up to the Main street barricade, and delivered the pieces to the militia.

It was on this night that Capt. John J. Desmond, of Company B, First Regiment, was killed. \* He was leading a detachment of his company through the court

- In the corridor of the new Courthouse, to the right of the foot of the morn stairway as you enter from the street, is a marble tablet inserted in the wall, which bears this inscription; " in memory of John J. Desmond, attorney at law, and captain of Company B, First Regiment, O. N. G., who was killed near this spot March 29, 1884 while defending the courthouse front lawless violence. This tablet is erected by members of tire bar."

Finley telephoned Hoadly at 3:00 A.M. to say that he had enough men for the moment. Hoadly then tried to contact the regiments still on the move, wiring: "War probably over." Three regiments already en route could not be stopped, but he was able to contact and halt a fourth.<sup>65</sup>

The people of Cincinnati awoke Monday morning to quiet streets. At 7:00 A.M. Freeman had his men unload their weapons. During the morning reinforcements reported to the jail, which enabled Freeman to relieve the men who had been without sleep since Saturday. Almost 800 more men arrived in the city by noon, completing the deployment of the ONG in Cincinnati. The force deployed as of Monday totaled approximately 2500 soldiers, ten cannons, and one Gatling gun from ten regiments and one battalion of infantry, and three batteries. Only one regiment of the ONG was not on hand.<sup>66</sup>

The city seemed quiet but Finley took no chances. He kept his forces in place around the city: about 900 men at the Music Hall; 1070 men, six cannons, and one Gatling gun at the jail; and over 400 men, four cannons, and one police Gatling gun at the City Buildings. He had two companies support the police at the Hammond Street Station, and one company at the gas works. He also sent two companies to the Plum Street Station, and one to Fountain Square. These preparations, however, did not receive a test, and the men spent a quiet night in their positions. In fact, Freeman's men kept their guns unloaded through the night. The governor put it best: "war over."<sup>67</sup>

Finley immediately began relieving units on Tuesday. The first to leave were those that had arrived first, including the 4th and 14th Regiments. As the soldiers left, the civilians prepared to take over. The mayor's committee began swearing in the special police force to augment the existing force.<sup>68</sup>

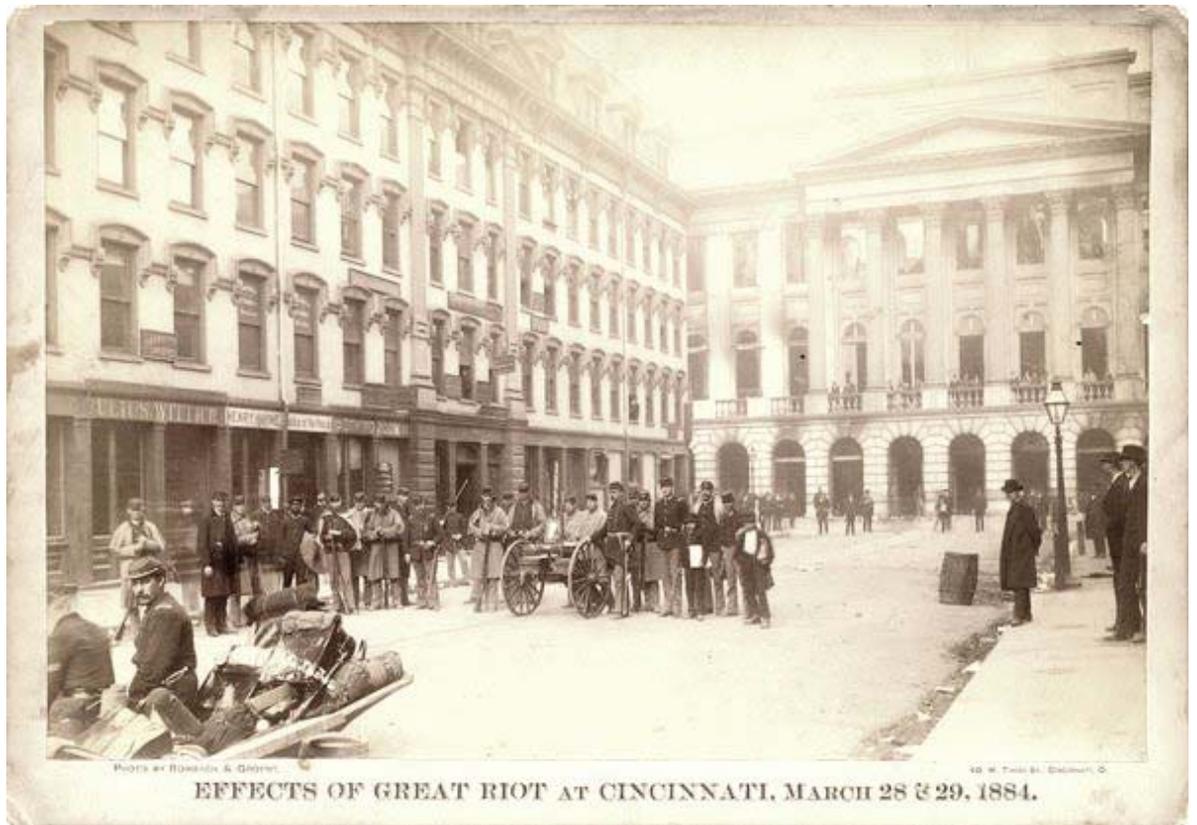


Photo by Borwick & Grover.

49 W. Third St., Cincinnati, O.

EFFECTS OF GREAT RIOT AT CINCINNATI, MARCH 28 & 29, 1884.

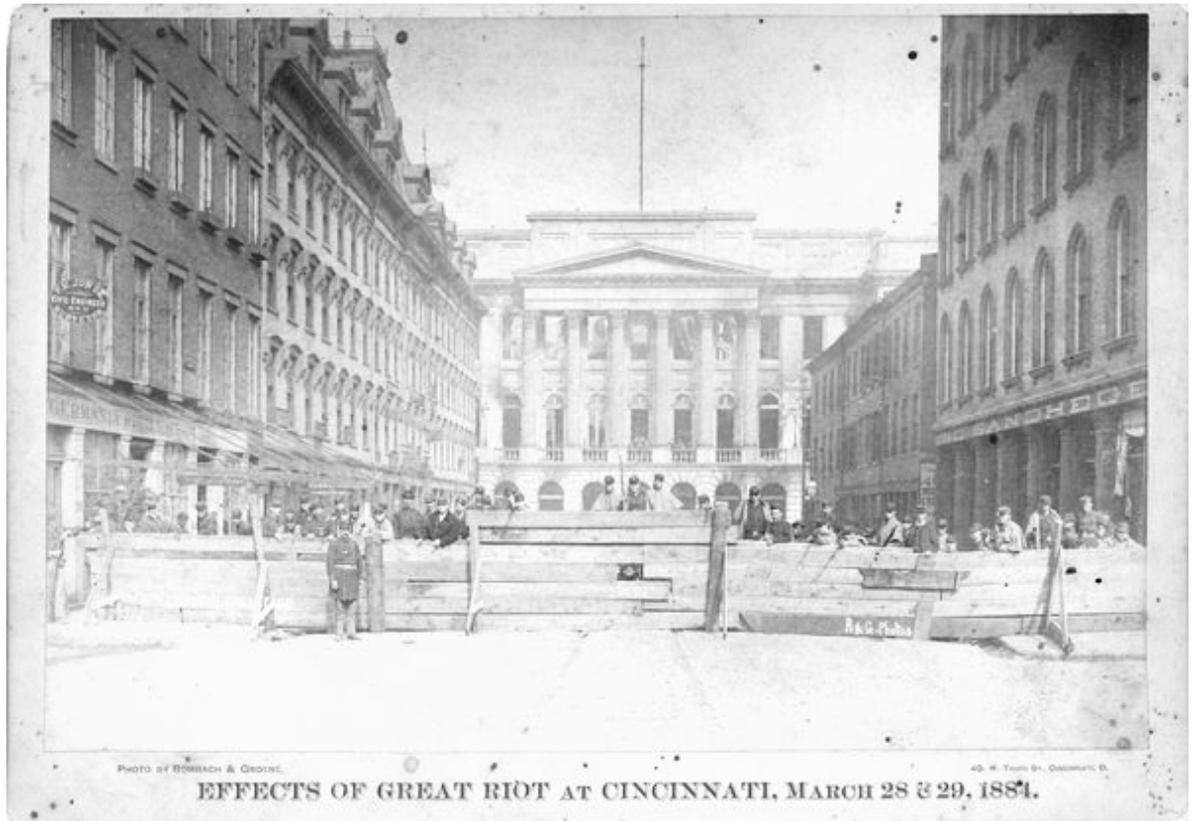


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