
SECTION VI

“The Half Has Never Been Told:” Brooklyn’s Civil War (1861-1865)

Lesson 18 New York City’s Draft Riots

Grade Level: Middle School

Objectives:

Students will

- Understand the causes of the New York City Draft Riots of 1863.
- Write a journal entry detailing the experience of an African American seeking refuge from the riots in Brooklyn.

Time: One 50-minute class period

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* Headlines
- Worksheet 2: Riots and Refuge

Background:

From Monday, July 13, to Thursday, July 16, 1863, mobs of white people, mostly working class Irishmen, tore through Manhattan’s streets as a mass protest turned into a full-blown riot. The troubles began as a response to the unpopular National Conscription Act which Congress passed in March 1863. The law required all men aged between 20 and 35 to serve in the Union Army but also contained a provision allowing the wealthy to avoid military service by paying \$300. It therefore fell on the Irish working class to fight in a war that many felt they had no stake in, especially as they viewed slavery and emancipation as the war’s focus.

In the chaos that followed, mobs attacked every part of Manhattan including public buildings, businesses, the mayor’s residence, police stations, and the Armory on Second Avenue and 21st Street. The atrocities, however, against Manhattan’s African-American community were immeasurable. St. Phillip’s Church (established in 1818) was destroyed as was the Colored Orphan Asylum (founded in 1836). All 233 children were evacuated. Many black New Yorkers were tortured, lynched, and killed.

During the Draft Riots, Brooklyn became a haven for those escaping the horror of Manhattan’s streets. Weeksville offered protection to the largest number of evacuees. The Committee of Merchants for the Relief of Colored People Suffering from the Late Riots reported that several hundred people descended “in Weeksville, Carresville, new Brooklyn and the whole vicinity extending to Flatbush and Flatlands,” and ran into the surrounding woods to find “safety and shelter.”

“It is a gratifying circumstance that, while, to an unparalleled extent in this country, the spirit of lawlessness has manifested itself in the city of New York, Brooklyn, so nearly allied, socially, politically, and in every other respect with the metropolis, has manifested no organized sympathy, or been materially disturbed.”

—*Brooklyn Daily Times*, July 15, 1863

ATTENTION!

MERCHANTS, BANKERS AND MERCHANTS' CLERKS AND OTHERS

Meet for Organization and Enrolment

At Two O'clock

AT THE MERCHANTS' EXCHANGE,

111 Broadway,

To take immediate action in the present crisis. Military now engaged with the Mob. The Mayor's House being Sacked and Torn Down!!

Attention! Merchants, bankers and merchants' clerks and others... 1863. M1975.386.1. Brooklyn Historical Society.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Ask students: What is a “draft”? Brainstorm a working definition for the word “draft” with the class and provide one or two formal definitions to help refine their understanding of the term.

2. Distribute **Worksheet 1: *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* Headlines**. Have students Think-Pair-Share, assigning one student the headline from the left column and one from the right. Ask pairs to speculate: A) What is the story behind this headline? B) How are the headlines connected to each other?

3. Explain to students that from Monday, July 13, to Thursday, July 16, 1863, mobs of white people, mostly working class Irish immigrants, tore through Manhattan’s streets in mass protest of the National Conscription Act, which made all men between the 20 and 45 years of age eligible for military service in the Union Army. Tell students that because many Irish citizens lived in poverty and could not afford the \$300 fee to avoid military service, they were likely candidates for the draft. They turned their anger against the draft towards black New Yorkers; as a result, many innocent blacks were killed and had their homes ransacked.

4. Distribute **Worksheet 2: Riots and Refuge**. Ask students to examine the documents from the riots. Then ask the following questions:

- Why would anger about the draft spark violence against black New Yorkers?
- Why do you think blacks sought refuge in places like Weesville and Carsville?
- What does the story about Turn Verein in Brooklyn reveal to you about relations between blacks and German immigrants?
- What do you think the aftermath of the riots was like? Would you continue living in the New York City area if you were a black New Yorker?

5. Tell students to imagine that they were a black New Yorker who sought refuge in Brooklyn during the draft riots. Have them write a journal entry describing their experience and their reaction to it.

Linking Past and Present

- Explain to students that “A rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight” became the phrase attached to the draft acts in both the Union and the Confederacy. Discuss if this sentiment is true of any other wars in United States history. Have students research the demographics of the military population. What is the relationship between income levels, race, and military enlistment?