

# The Houston Race Riots: Background Essay

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With the outbreak of World War I, Houston's new ship channel made it the perfect location for two new military posts- Camp Logan on the northwest outskirts of town and Ellington Field. Black soldiers from the Twenty-Fourth U.S. Infantry, led by white officers, were ordered to guard the construction site at Camp Logan.

From the very beginning, the men faced racial discrimination whenever they had passes to go into the city. Most of the soldiers had grown up in the South and were accustomed to segregation but, as officers of the U.S. Army, they had hoped for better treatment. Black servicemen were willing to abide by legal segregation laws but many police officers and public officials saw the presence of black soldiers as a threat to racial harmony. Many Houstonians felt that if these black soldiers were treated the same as the white residents of the city, the black residents would soon expect the same. As a result, police and public officials were harsh in enforcing existing segregation laws. Many black soldiers had racial slurs slung at them or were harassed by police.

On August 23, 1917 tensions boiled over. In the Fourth Ward, a black soldier intervened in the arrest of a black female resident and was also arrested. Captain Charles Baltimore, who was a black member of the military police stationed at Camp Logan, arrived along with other military personnel to ask about the arrest. Baltimore and a Houston police officer got into an argument and the officer hit Baltimore over the head. Baltimore and the other soldiers fled from the police station. The officers fired their guns at him and chased him into an empty house where Baltimore, too, was arrested. Rumors swirled that Baltimore had been killed. Several soldiers at Camp Logan decided to march to the Fourth Ward Police Station and try to free Baltimore. They feared that if a model soldier like Baltimore could be arrested and fired at, none of them stood a chance.

By eight o'clock that night, the commander at Camp Logan had heard the signs of trouble brewing around the camp and ordered that all the guns be gathered up and any spare ammunition be collection. As the officers were carrying out his order, a soldier screamed that a white mob was approaching the camp. From then on it was impossible to restore order. Sergeant Vida Henry led 100 armed soldiers toward downtown along San Felipe Street and Brunner Avenue and into the Fourth Ward. In just two hours, the mutiny killed fifteen whites including four policemen, and wounded twelve more including another Houston Police officer. One of those wounded would later die. Four black soldiers also died, two were shot by their own men. The first was killed at Camp Logan and the other along San Felipe Street.

The soldiers' march broke up after the death on San Felipe and they began to argue over what their next steps should be. Two hours later, the leader of the march, Henry, advised the men that they should sneak back into the camp under the cover of darkness and then shot himself. Today, the former site of Camp Logan is known as Memorial Park.