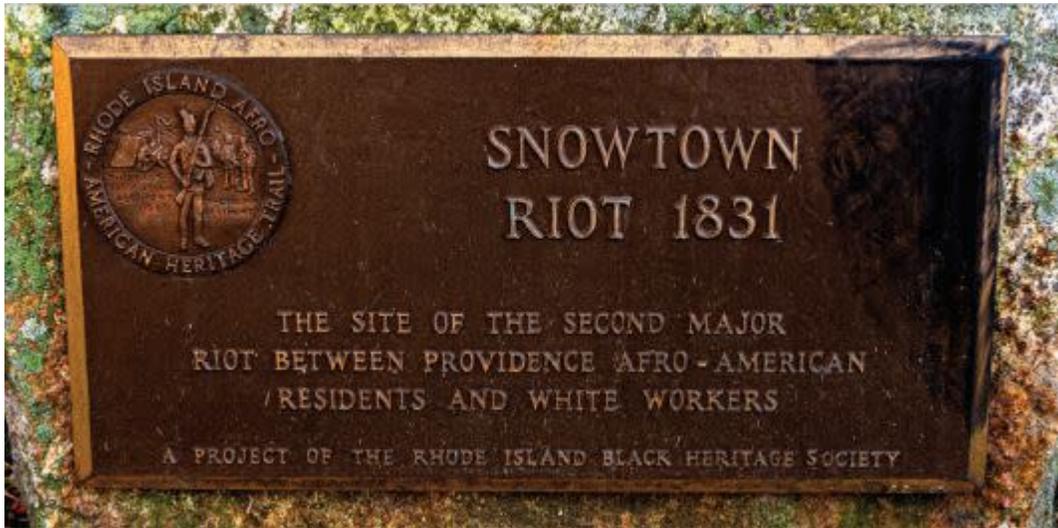


The RI history we don't talk about: Hard Scrabble and Snowtown



Recently, conservatives have been campaigning to keep critical race theory (a theoretical framework that states that race is a social construct designed to oppress people of color) from being taught in schools. Although it is not taught in most public education systems to begin with, these attempts to prevent people from learning about the more shameful and horrific parts of American history highlight just how *necessary* it is to learn them.

While many people learned about Tulsa and Rosewood last year after the murder of George Floyd, it's likely most of us don't know the stories of countless other incidents just like these — some of which happened in Rhode Island. Among those are the cases of Hard Scrabble and Snowtown. In the early 19th century, in Northeast Providence lay the neighborhood of Hard Scrabble. It had a few poor white residents but was primarily a Black community. Exactly where it used to be located is debated by historians; some say it was where University Heights apartment buildings are now, others that the statehouse has since been built atop of it, and others that it is currently covered by railroad tracks.

On October 18, 1824, A white mob attacked and destroyed Black homes in the neighborhood after a Black man refused to get off of the sidewalk when approached by some white people. The mob claimed they were targeting places of "ill repute," but in reality destroyed indiscriminately, using axes and their bare hands, and setting some homes on fire. Approximately 20 Black homes were decimated, and some of the furniture from these homes was stolen and auctioned off at the Pawtucket Market. There are mixed reports about the repercussions for rioters, but the common conclusion seems to be, even with sources that report a rioter was found guilty, all the rioters got away with the mass destruction without consequence. Likewise, local leaders openly voiced their support for the rioters, and racist pamphlets were spread around mocking the victims of the attack.

Many of the victims of the Hard Scrabble attacks took up residency in the nearby neighborhood of Snowtown. That lasted seven years. In 1831, another white mob attacked and destroyed Black homes after the shooting death of a sailor, despite that the owners of the homes destroyed had no relationship to the shooting. The violence lasted days and eventually a militia was called in to stop the rioting. Providence officially became a city in response to the destruction of Snowtown because with city status,

Providence could create a police force. The motivation was less to protect the victims of these assaults so much as “to maintain order.” There are no records suggesting the Black Americans who had their homes and businesses destroyed received any kind of reparations.

I did not learn about this in school; I graduated from high school in 2018. I think it’s safe to say that most if not all of us who received our education in Rhode Island did not either.

There are markers for each event. The one for Hard Scrabble rests in the traffic island where North Main Street meets Canal Street. In 2009 Richard A. Lobban Jr., then a professor in African studies at the Naval War College in Newport and board member of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, remarked that “Unless you are jogging or cutting the grass, which is one-tenth of 1% of Rhode Islanders, you wouldn’t see it.” The marker for Snowtown is slightly more visible. However, scholar and activist Ray Rickman, former state representative and former president of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society remarked of it, “No one knows it’s there.” He added that at only a mere 6 inches above the ground, it’s “like a bad headstone.”

Knowledge of the recurring history of white mobs destroying Black communities across America is crucial to how we view our current systems. One of the most significant ways that wealth is acquired is through generational wealth. When Black Americans’ homes and businesses are repeatedly destroyed, it makes what was already so difficult to obtain even harder, resulting in the disproportionate poverty faced by Black Americans that lingers to this day.

The destruction and displacement of Black communities is just one way that systemic racism is interwoven into the very fabric of how this country works and who benefits from it to this day. We cannot fix what we cannot know, and those trying to ban the discussion of racism in schools are aware of this. It’s why they’re trying their damndest to ensure that the majority of Americans never know.