

Race and riots in my hometown and in my grandfather's

## **My hometown and my grandfather's were the site of riots connected to race and law enforcement.**

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Last week, when protests, violence, and a [celebration of hope for justice](#) took place in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray in police custody, I found myself back in my hometown, as well as in my grandfather's. Each was the site of riots connected to race and law enforcement.

Twenty-four years ago today, in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, D.C., where I was raised, riots kept many people inside of their homes while others confronted police in the streets. Being a child at the time, my main recollection of [May 5-7, 1991](#), was that I had to sleep on my parents' floor. My bedroom was in the front of the house, and tear gas wafted in from Mount Pleasant Street, the main thoroughfare, two blocks away. One police officer [described the street](#) the night of May 6 as being "like a war zone."



Many Central Americans had arrived in our neighborhood after fleeing their nations' civil wars. Some of them turned to alcohol in an attempt to cope with the trauma they had endured. The neighborhood was also a longtime home to many African Americans, at that time [the city's majority](#). There are, as always in these kinds of situations, debates about exactly what occurred, but the core of it is that a rookie African American police officer

attempted to arrest a 30-year-old Salvadoran man for public intoxication. Some

witnesses said he was about to attack the officer when she shot him. When the riot was over, the man was paralyzed and [about 50 people were injured](#), most of whom were police officers. *(The shooting took place near Don Juan restaurant, pictured above, which still serves Salvadoran fare today.)*

The events in Baltimore last week spurred me and some family members to take a trip we'd been meaning to take to Christiana, Pennsylvania, where my maternal grandfather was born and raised, to see the historical sites related to the [1851 riot in Christiana](#). In what's also called the Resistance at Christiana, a group of [black and white abolitionists](#) fought "a Maryland posse intent on capturing four fugitive slaves hidden in the town." A slaveholder from Maryland was killed as he tried to take the escaped men under [the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law](#). *(The place where the confrontation occurred between those protecting the slaves and those who wanted to re-capture them, above, may not look much different today, apart from the telephone lines).*



[William Parker](#), who had been a slave in Maryland and led a [black self-defense organization](#), was hosting escaped slaves on his farm in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. His wife, Eliza Howard Parker, had sounded a horn to call for help from neighbors when they heard men were coming with federal marshals and arrest warrants.

After the events Parker and his family fled to Ontario, where they continued farming and advocating for an end to slavery, including by [writing his story](#), published by *The Atlantic* in 1866. A memorial at [the Christiana Underground Railroad Center](#) calls Parker "bold as a lion" and honors him as "a leader in the fight for the freedom of his people."



Fellow abolitionist [Thaddeus Stevens](#) represented the 38 people charged with treason for the 1851 incident. A jury acquitted a Quaker man, Castner Hanway, the first to be tried, and after that authorities dropped the charges and all were released. (A statue next to the *Christiana Underground Railroad Center* lists the names of the 38 people charged in the resistance, and says of Hanway, "He suffered for freedom.")



Christiana is about an hour away from Philadelphia, where there was a Black Lives Matter rally in front of City Hall on Thursday evening.

The rally, and later march, mourned the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, as well as others killed around the country, and called for justice for those who have been shot or abused by police in Philadelphia. Several people wore the orange-and-black T-shirts and caps of the Orioles, Baltimore's baseball team. And some signs alluded to the Baltimore riots, such as with "I mourn for people, not

property."

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