A Report and Analysis on
The Cincinnati Courthouse Riots of 1884

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The month of March 1884 was a very tumultuous time for the people of Cincinnati. Recovering from natural disasters and in the midst of political and financial crises, the focus of the city was turned toward the murder trial of William Kirk, whose body was discovered in a culvert in late December 1883. The first of two men tried for his murder, William Berner, a German immigrant, had confessed the crime and provided an account of it in detail, leading many spectators to believe that he would be convicted and sent to the gallows. After the jury found the defendant guilty of manslaughter rather than first-degree murder, however, the people of Cincinnati became enraged, leading a “lynching party” of ten-thousand people to storm the Hamilton County jail, searching for Berner and other accused murderers. Over the course of three nights, thousands of people, faced against the city police, the sheriff, as well as members of the state militia and the army reserves, destroyed parts of the jail and burned down the county courthouse into a pile of ashes and rubble. After the dust settled, fifty-six people had been killed and two hundred others had been injured.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the courthouse riots surrounds the origins of the insurrection: why did the outcome of the Berner trial cause so many lawful citizens of Cincinnati—from all backgrounds—to take to the streets and commit so much violence in the heart of their city, going as far as destroying their county courthouse? The answer to this question is not simple, nor does it come from a single origin. The answer comes largely, however, from the failure of the local justice system, coupled with a general sense of indifference toward law and politics, as well as a very influential and sensationalistic press, all of which together slowly built up the anger and energy in Cincinnati that lead to violent protests.

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1 History of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio; Their Past and Present (Cincinnati: S.B. Nelson and Co., 1894), 367.
Before explaining these more direct causes of the courthouse riots, one must first grasp a broader picture of Cincinnati, its unique features, and its people in the year 1884. Nicknamed “The Queen City,” Cincinnati prided itself in being the capital of the West as it held a convenient location along the Ohio River. In 1880, the city’s population stood at 225,000 and was increasing at a rate of 18% per decade. The city was found not without its problems in the 1880s, much like the large cities of the East Coast, and especially suffered problems with growth and crime. The central, historic portions of Cincinnati, collectively known as “the Circle,” were home to many workers, including Irishmen and Negroes, many of whom had schoolchildren that also kept industrial jobs in their spare time. Unfortunately, the very diverse nature of the Circle created tension among its dwellers, and “the close proximity in which the various racial, ethnic, and religious groups lived fostered outbreaks of group violence,” with rows and rhetoric between Catholic and Protestant immigrants commonplace in the 1870s and 80s.

Indeed, the city center was notorious for its high crime rate and poor living conditions, the first of which was widely believed to have been caused partly by the legality of prostitution and gambling in the Circle. A study of records by the Cincinnati Enquirer revealed that, in the six years leading up to the riots, there had been a total of 56,784 arrests. But yet, despite this and a relatively astronomical number of homicides, it was often complained that Cincinnati had far too small a police force to control the streets, especially in comparison to other large cities across the

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Cincinnati Enquirer, 9 March 1884.
country. Sanitation fared just as worse in the Circle, an area that exceeded the citywide average of nine inhabitants per dwelling. The city had just recovered from a mild outbreak of smallpox in 1883, and the list of grievances by public health officials far exceeded the budget allotted to address them. An 1874 article entitled “The Smell of Cincinnati” described the Circle’s streets as having “An atmosphere heavy with the odors of death and decay and animal filth… Narrow alleys, dark and filthy, ordered by sluggish black streams of stinking filth, traverse this quarter in every direction.” It is clear to see that the city center was a rather undesirable place to live, and indeed, in the years preceding the riots, the more affluent and prominent members of the population had similar ideas and emigrated away from the urban core and into the surrounding hills known as “the Hilltops”—an area regarded as safer and more tranquil than the Circle. The large industrial owners and the politicians and other members of the upper class in Cincinnati resided in the Hilltops, shifting the political power away from the Circle and its people and undoubtedly leading many in the city to feel indifferent if not completely distanced from their government.

Time was when Cincinnati needed but twenty-five policemen to guard its moral safety...now, with...a police force of three hundred men...its streets reek with crime. Not a thoroughfare in its limits but has been stained with human blood. In the decade yet to close over eight hundred arrests have been made of the men who, with knives, pistols, or other deadly weapons, have, with more or less success, attempted the lives of fellow-creatures.

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10 Kenny, Cincinnati illustrated: a pictorial guide to Cincinnati and the suburbs, 41.
11 Miller, Boss Cox's Cincinnati, 60-73.
13 Miller, Boss Cox's Cincinnati, 41-57.
14 Cincinnati Enquirer, 9 March 1884.
The above quotation, from a *Cincinnati Enquirer* article published in March 1884, exemplifies the distress that Cincinnatian citizens felt with what they called an absence of law and order. The article, entitled “College of Murder,” says that it was nothing less than the “laxity of laws” that gave the city “its crimson record.” Three weeks later, at the time of the courthouse riots, the small and overcrowded county jail was home to twenty-three men accused of murder or homicide, many of them having been awaiting trial for many months, and others having been tried multiple times for their accused crime; indeed, only four people had been hung for the crime of murder in the six years prior to the uprising.

Yet, while the crime rate continued to increase in Cincinnati, the authorities did little to combat this—nor did they have much incentive to do so. The local government was controlled by a Republican political machine headed by lawyer Thomas C. Campbell—who happened to act as the defense attorney in the Berner trial—and strengthened by a bipartisan alliance with the Democrat John R. McLean—publisher of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Elections were widely thought to have been rigged to the advantage of incumbents, and City Council meetings often featured “a keg of beer with cheese, bologna, and crackers” to satisfy the “flagging spirits of the toiling legislators.”

New findings of corruption within the city government were commonplace in the 1870s and 80s, including in the few weeks before the Berner verdict. A devastating flood had swept through parts of Cincinnati’s inner Circle in February, flooding homes and businesses as the Ohio River crested at 71 feet, compared to a typical, seasonal depth of 25-30 feet. The clean-up process began quickly after the water receded, but in early March an embezzlement

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15 Ibid.
16 *History of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio; Their Past and Present*, 367.
17 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 9 March 1884.
18 Oscar Ameninger, *If You Don’t Weaken* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1940), 49, quoted in Joseph S. Stern, Jr., “It was the Best of Times; It was the Worst of Times,” 6.
19 *History of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio; Their Past and Present*, 306.
scheme was revealed concerning local politicians spending funds meant to aid flood victims—a scandal that rocked public anger toward elected officials.\footnote{John Carry, “The Violent Old Days,” \textit{Cincinnati Magazine}, October 1972, 16-17, http://books.google.com/books?id=C-sCAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA16&dq=cincinnati%20magazine%20riot%201884.}

What many in Cincinnati found to be the most startling form of corruption, on the other hand, was found within the courts themselves, with the presence of what were known as “criminal lawyers.” It was said that, when one was on trial for a serious crime, “a notorious lawyer took up the defense…and invariably exonerated his clients. …The worse the offence the more certain was the acquittal.”\footnote{Clara Longworth de Chambrun, \textit{Cincinnati: Story of the Queen City} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1939), 265.} As it turned out, the most infamous and influential of the criminal lawyers was Berner’s attorney, T.C. Campbell, who employed various tactics to improve Berner’s situation in the court. The defendant was originally intended to be tried with his supposed accomplice, Joseph Palmer, a mulatto, but Campbell had arranged with the courts to have them re-indicted and tried separately, perhaps under the idea that, at the time, with racial tensions abound, “it was natural to suppose…that the populace would be content to let a white man escape, since the negro, Palmer, was certain to be hanged.”\footnote{\textit{History of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio; Their Past and Present}, 367-368.} During the jury selection process, Campbell carefully examined each potential juror, making countless peremptory challenges (a feature of the court that allows prosecuting and defense attorneys to cast off potential jurors for what they may consider a predisposed bias). By the time the case’s opening hearing was held, Campbell had examined 568 potential jurors—only twelve of whom, of course, were selected for the jury.\footnote{Steven W. Plattner, “Days of Dread,” \textit{Queen City Heritage} 42, no. 1 (1984): 17, accessed 7 October 2011, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ejournals:sfx991042728870642.} It therefore comes as no surprise that the people of Cincinnati would feel that the trial was fixed when Berner’s verdict was revealed, especially considering that both Berner and
Palmer separately confessed to the murder of Mr. Kirk with the intent of robbing him of a large sum of money he carried in his pockets, along with describing the roles each other had in the crime.

That, amid the accounts and confessions presented, a jury could not convict Berner of murder in the first degree added to the strife of Cincinnatians. This was not the first such case where the verdict defied the predicted and most logical outcome. The account of L.A. Phillips, a juror in the Berner case, showed that he and his fellow jurors were told that they would remain in the jury-room for up to a month if they could not come to a verdict, and could face further imprisonment as punishment. He further describes that “the room was small, dirty, and badly ventilated. Some of the members of the jury were not over clean…. The food was the same daily.”24 Phillips insisted that he was the only person to vote for Berner’s conviction of second-degree murder instead of manslaughter after the first ballot, but said that he changed his ballot after several days out of hopelessness and a desire to reunite with his family.25

Campbell himself faced a lot of heat during the courthouse riots, as a mob of people on the second day of the protests (29 March 1884) formed outside his home, ordered him to leave town within twenty-four hours, and warned that it had possession of sixty bombs “filled with dynamite” and “furnished by an Irish organization.”26 The fact that he was involved in organizing the city’s political machine while being a practicing attorney strikes as a possible conflict of interest; the growing decay and decline of the city’s reputation certainly led citizens to question the people in charge of internal affairs, and question whether the string of election fraud and government corruption could be tolerated any further. Thomas Campbell, while not the only one to blame, was made into the scapegoat of the riots, further ruining his image when he told a

24 *New York Times*, 31 March 1884.
25 Ibid.
26 *New York Times*, 30 March 1884.
reporter after the first night of rioting. “‘The public have been misinformed, and much unfair criticism of the jury has ensued in consequence. I tell you that if I so will instead of having him found guilty of manslaughter his acquittal was possible.’”27 Campbell backed this statement by asking readers to look to “‘the fact that in my address I frankly claimed there were ten men of the jury with me,’” but then turns about-face and claims that “‘the jurymen who have not been weakened or won over in the course of the trial…are seldom captured with the speeches of advocates.’” Nevertheless, he maintains confidence in his influence over juries by stating that the Berner trial “‘was the first case in which I ever permitted a jury to convict a client of mine,’” and that he could have had him acquitted if so felt that he was deserving of such.28

The effects of criminal lawyers such as Campbell were felt and complained about by many in Cincinnati, including the prosecuting attorney in the Berner jury, who, after the verdict was read, could not see how Kirk’s death could be the result of manslaughter, and despairingly told the Enquirer, “‘Look at the array against me. Five of the best lawyers in the city. The law does not allow me to comply any legal assistance except outside. All that the best local knowledge of the city was master of was brought to bear to save the prisoner.’”29 And while officials and members of the greater public did not necessarily approve of corruption in the courts and in law enforcement, the point again is that no one attempted to make changes in the everyday functions of the city to fix the frauds and negligence until the issues were brought to a breaking point. For a city whose population and sphere of influence doubled over the previous twenty five years, the needs of the growing city soon outgrew what services and infrastructure were available from what was previously known as the “walking city.”30 Times were certainly different in an older

27 Chicago Daily Tribune, 30 March 1884.
28 Ibid.
29 Cincinnati Enquirer, 25 March 1884
30 Miller, Boss Cox’s Cincinnati, 60-73.
Cincinnati: members of all classes lived together in the same neighborhood, and neighbors knew and trusted other neighbors more easily with a sense of smallness—including in government. An editorial in *Harper’s Weekly* warns of the consequences of the voting public, “content to ‘stand by’ their party, violence, and riot and rape and murder,” to “permit the whole initiatory duty of politics to be performed by venal politicians” and suggests that “the danger of a popular government is not the ignorance and recklessness of the criminal classes; it is the indifference of the intelligent classes.”

It is as if the city of Cincinnati was itself a ticking time-bomb, waiting for the perfect catalyst to form and create popular resentment. As there was no reaction to the corruption throughout the city, this popular resentment was built up ever so slowly; the Berner trial was not the true cause for the rioting, but only the climax in the story of Cincinnati’s row with corruption. In fact, it did not take long after the riots for legislative change to be proposed; on April 1st, the Hamilton County Bar Association resolved to appoint a committee to revise criminal laws for the state of Ohio and push for the passage of a bill that was, at the time, in consideration which would have drastically reduced the number peremptory challenges of jurors allowed to defendants.

A survey of the causes of the Cincinnati courthouse riot cannot be complete without examining two other aspects that are, to an extent, related in this situation: the influences of the media in Cincinnati in 1884, and the mob mentality present which takes control after the Berner verdict is read. The media during the time of the riot consisted mainly of the newspaper, which was widely read and respected. Especially in Cincinnati during the late 1800s, newspapers were oftentimes not unbiased and instead presented the news in the view of the editor and publisher’s political opinions—the “yellow press,” as it was known as, working to hook readers and drive up

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31 *Harper’s Weekly*, 12 April 1884.
32 *The Boston Globe*, 2 April 1884, 2.
subscription figures. The *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the most widely-read daily in the city, was known for its hyped-up headlines and sensationalistic stories—all of which likely contributed to the increased tension surrounding the murder trial of William Berner. One month before the riots broke out, the *Enquirer*, to name an example, published a story about the upcoming presidential election and the progress made on finding candidates for each of the major parties. “WARMING UP. For a Great National Conflict,” the front-page headlines read, “The Preliminary Skirmish for Position is at Hand, And the Prize to Be Fought For is the Presidency…John Sherman Is Call For as the Republican Moses, Which Will Make Ohio the Battle-Ground, and Next October Decide the Sanguinary Struggle?”

For the sake of completion, it should also be noted that the *Enquirer’s* same issue featured a brief account of a “Scene in a Far West Restaurant,” in which a man was refused water because there was such little demand for it to be carried in comparison to “prime Kentucky whisky.” Several weeks later, a brief in the Cincinnati periodical claimed that the day previous had been “Another dull and stupid sort of day. …Generally speaking, the market was very dull and stupid. There was listlessness and a don’t-care-for-any-thing appearance about the list that was not assuring to holders of stocks.”

The style in which the *Enquirer* was written sensationalized both the major events as well as the trivial events that would never have a place in the newspaper of today. It is if the newspaper was not a source for objective information but rather entertaining as well as biased pieces that easily influence large sums of people, and, perhaps, the *Enquirer’s* languid and careless attitude concerning the stock markets may well also be representative of the attitude of Cincinnati as a city. To readers of such news items: if the newspapers refuse to find any active interest in government or even the

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34 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 25 February 1884.
35 Ibid.
36 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 11 March 1884.
business of the day, why should they bother caring? And, of course, this logic goes to show that whenever an event is not portrayed with indifference but instead a passionate voice, readers will react more strongly than they might otherwise.

The Cincinnati paper, breaking out of its indifference, however, certainly made its point known about the ongoing crime waves immediately before the Berner trial opened. On 9 March, the newspaper published the aforementioned article, “College of Murder,” a piece that criticized the “social disorganization” in Cincinnati’s law enforcement and profiled various people at the county jail accused of murder—including Berner and Palmer—and even featured mug shots and eyewitness accounts of the accused crimes. The headlines of the special report made a satire out of the recent crime spike, describing it as an educational institution, with “Every Class Full, and No More Applicants Are Wanted. Forty Enthusiastic Students Promenade the Corridors, All of Whom Wish Professorships as Demonstrators of Anatomy,” and that, upon trial, “Some Will Graduate in Cincinnati and Some in Columbus [the site of the state penitentiary]. Hence the Hanging Festival Will Be a Small Affair,” alluding to the fact that few accused murderers were convicted and hung.\(^\text{37}\) Attention should also be paid to the language used in articles such as these: the Enquirer and many other newspapers identify Berner and others like him in the jail as “murderers” before their conviction, assuming them to be guilty until proven innocent as opposed to the presumption of innocence, a right of any and all persons accused of a crime.\(^\text{38,39}\) The language in “College of Murder” can be likened to the cry of an outraged citizen whose rights have been stripped away, although this is most likely exactly what the author intended—for people to see outrage in how the legal and law enforcement systems were operating in Cincinnati, and, upon protest, for authorities to take notice and make choices to correct what are

\(^{37}\) Cincinnati Enquirer, 9 March 1884.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) New York Times, 25 March 1884.
believed to be deficiencies in the system. The timing of this eye-opening article certainly made
more citizens aware of and curious in the outcome of the Berner trial, and ultimately fueled
many into decrying the courts after the defendant was found convicted of a charge lower than
first or second-degree murder.

The media’s handling of the Berner case itself—along with its violent reaction—can be
described as exaggerated and full of emotional appeal, which without doubt also added to the
causes of the riot. On 25 March, the Cincinnati Enquirer responded to the manslaughter verdict
with the headline “HE ESCAPES THE GALLOWS. The Boy Murderer Convicted of
Manslaughter Yesterday,” and the New York Times suggests that “if a verdict of murder in the
third degree is all that could be obtained in that case, a majority of the murderers should be let
off of on charges of assault and battery,” under which case “the city will become terrorized
unless the people take the law into their own hands.”

It should be noted here that the riots at the county jail and courthouse did not begin until after Berner’s sentencing on 28 March, a
Friday, but the widespread news of the verdict, along with ideas of possible future consequences,
were enough to begin the shockwaves through various circles. Political cartoons and caricatures
on the matter were said to have quickly been drawn up and displayed on the windows of
restaurants, saloons, and other establishments, including one describing “The new game of
‘Manslaughter,’” asking citizens to “Behold how good and how pleasant it is to have pure
‘justice’ prevail in our community!” while showing nooses hanging over the heads of jurors who
looked on a scene from the trial. Effigies of William Berner were also hung in the outer
suburbs of Cincinnati and across the Ohio River in Kentucky, and “mysterious marks and
emblems appeared on the fences and buildings in the neighborhood of the city,” all of which was

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40 Ibid.
41 Cincinnati Enquirer, 25 March 1884.
described in detail in the local newspapers.\textsuperscript{43,44} During the roughly four days in between the Berner verdict and sentencing, national attention focused on Cincinnati as the papers described an atmosphere around the city of uncertain fear that some protest would take place, defensive preparations taking place for a possible attack on the jail, and small mobs breaking out against the jurors in the case. On 27 March, the \textit{New York Times} reported the discovery of “corruption in the jury-box” within an ongoing civil suit at the county courthouse, and it was widely publicized that the leaders of Cincinnati were organizing a general meeting on Friday evening to discuss the outcome of the Berner case and what should be done about it.\textsuperscript{45} Everyone knew that something was about to occur on that Friday night at Music Hall, but what exactly that was no one could be sure of, and no one could have expected the gravity of the riots that were to soon take place.

The Louisville \textit{Courier-Journal} may be well to have written that “the press of Cincinnati is largely responsible for the reign of lawlessness in that city.”\textsuperscript{46} Its view on the causes of the riot continues to claim that the local media “has concerned itself more about crime in the South than in Cincinnati; it has refused to see in outbreaks elsewhere anything but total political depravity, race and sectional hatred.”\textsuperscript{47} The newspapers in Cincinnati were instruments of the political machines and parties of the time, with T.C. Campbell having connections to the \textit{Cincinnati Enquirer}.\textsuperscript{48} Even during the riots, the newspapers of Cincinnati, as well as the nation’s larger periodicals, were inconsistent in their first-hand accounts, disagreeing as to how a mob of people formed in front of the Music Hall, and which party—the rioters or the militia—fired the first shot into the county jail that ended what was up until now a bloodless riot. The crowds themselves—

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} \textit{History of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio; Their Past and Present}, 367.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{New York Times}, 25-28 March 1884.
  \item \textsuperscript{46} \textit{Courier-Journal}, 31 March 1884.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{48} \textit{The Boston Globe}, 31 March, 1884.
\end{itemize}
which most sources judged to be in a count of over 10,000, although some put the number closer to 8,000—had to shift through the various threats and rumors made through the course of the three-night riot, but the press at first simply told protesters to continue with the rioting in the name of law and order.\textsuperscript{49} On the morning after fighting first took place, the \textit{Enquirer} posted headlines such as “The law of the people is the higher law, after all. The murderers, thieves and thugs should take warning. …The next man who is tried for murder in Cincinnati will stand an excellence chance of drawing the capital prize,” —once again making a competition out of crime, much as the paper did previously in “College of Murder”—but a day later had switched its position, calling the riots a “Reign of Terror” and stating that “Sunday is a good day to turn over a new leaf and begin an era of peace on earth, good will toward men,” as if realizing the negative effects of its own methods of reporting the newspaper by Sunday (30 March) was pleading for the people of Cincinnati to stop rioting.\textsuperscript{50} Overall, the effects of a polarized and sensationalized press in the city led to multiple extremes that contributed to the courthouse riots. The downplaying of many tendencies, including business affairs and increases in various crime rates, helped result in growing indifference among citizens, a carelessness that undoubtedly made many too oblivious to take notice of and react to the city’s problems before they got out of hand. Furthermore, the yellow press of the late nineteenth century also made exaggerations out of news stories, intended to rile up readers instead of objectively inform them. These tendencies of the media, most especially within Cincinnati, contributed to the massive indignation toward the courts after the Berner trial, and ultimately the ensuing riots.

Related in part to the biases and practices of the press in 1884 Cincinnati is the mob mentality—that is, the tendency for people to follow the actions of a larger group, thereby

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Cincinnati Enquirer}, 29-30 March 1884.
enlarging the group in a sort of chain reaction. The story of the mob begins on 24 March in the Hamilton County courthouse as the verdict in the Berner case is revealed to shocked spectators, many of whom hissed and hollered at the jurors for apparently letting the suspected murderer off the hook. The presiding Judge Matthews was even said to have forgotten “the dignity attached to the robes of ermine, and said it was a ‘damned outrage.'” Many of the jurors had to flee the courthouse through rear entrances in order to escape an angry crowd outside; one was reportedly beaten up outside his home. As previously mentioned, threats were made over the next several days against the jurors, and the Chamber of Commerce, led by a group of prominent Cincinnatians, decided to call for a general meeting on Friday evening. The meeting was to be orderly and democratic in an attempt to “to start a legitimate reform movement which would eliminate the allegedly corrupt legal administration and stop the repeated miscarriages of justice.” Unfortunately, the meeting did not go as planned. The meeting’s venue, the newly-built Music Hall, was designed to accommodate four thousand spectators, with up to another thousand on-stage, but for the meeting on 28 March, over eight thousand were in attendance, with the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette reporting that “the men in the aisles and in the balconies were pressed together like sandwiches in a box.” Tensions ran high amid the anger of the Berner verdict, coupled with the massive, overflowing crowd in the building attempting to listen to the speeches; many people could not hear the speakers, and there was also a general sense of confusion as to the ultimate purpose of the meeting. The speeches, given by notable figures in the community, were relatively moderate and attempted to reconcile grievances, but were often

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52 Cincinnati Enquirer, 25 March 1884.
54 New York Times, 30 March 1884.
55 Miller, Boss Cox’s Cincinnati, 61-63.
56 De Chambrun, Cincinnati: Story of the Queen City, 260-261.
interrupted and countered by people shouting out “Hang ‘em all!” and other such slurs. A struggle to maintain order continued for the duration of the meeting, and all that was agreed on was a resolution decreeing that the jurors of the Berner case, “unfit to live in a civilized community,” should be shown “scorn and contempt” as to convince them to leave the city.58

The meeting at Music Hall, flawed by design, was probably not the best choice for city leaders, considering the public outrage that had for the past several days sparked much conversation, violent drawings and caricatures against the jury, not to mention small mobs. The situation was at a breaking point Friday evening after Berner had been sentenced that day to twenty-three years in the state prison; with so many people—all with differing opinions—gathered in one place, any misguided action could quickly lead to widespread violence—just as it did.59 There is no evidence to suggest that indignation assembly was meant to start a riot, of course, but the faults are all the same.60 Many people in Cincinnati were appalled at what appeared to be a growing wave of injustice in the city, and those in attendance came to resolve the issues. Clearly, there were some spectators at Music Hall who wanted more drastic and physical action. Interestingly enough, the New York Times published an article the previous weekend about “dull times in Cincinnati”; trade in the city was at a brand new low, and there was “hardly a line in trade in which the results of the week have not been disappointing.”61 Reasons accounting for the slowdown included the recent river-floods that had inundated parts of downtown as well as continued severe weather, but there was still a sense of mystery and weariness for business to resume at normal levels.62 It seems not unlikely that those involved in business were feeling hardships after the floods, perhaps making the lives of some “dull,” thus

59 Wallace, American Violence, 466-468.
60 New York Times, 28 March 1884.
61 New York Times, 23 March 1884.
62 Ibid.
giving them a further reason to pick a fight and riot against the authorities in front of the county jail and courthouse. And with such tension among people, it would not take much for a few people to convince many others to join them in protest. “Popular resentment, which had been restrained so long,” the Chicago Daily Tribune claimed, “burst forth into an unreasoning storm, and a large body of peaceable and law-abiding citizens was converted into a lawless mobs of avengers.”63 Essentially, the people could not get the government to work for them, so those in protest had to take the law into their own hands.

The first of the riots began immediately following the meeting at Music Hall on Friday the 28th. The Enquirer described a young man yelling “‘To the jail! Come on; follow me, and hang Berner!’” as crowds poured out of Music Hall, and goes on to claim that “although there might have been an intention on the part of many to organize a mob, this was actually the first time it found vent in a decided expression.”64 Reports from other sources say that there was initially a group of young men, including a few members of the black community, and that these people encouraged the crowd to head to the jail to lynch the accused murderers held there.65 While some of those who went to the jail certainly went with the intention of finding those held in the jail, many more went simply out of curiosity—perhaps expecting some sort of small confrontation, but wanting merely to watch as a spectator.66 It could be described as a game of follow-the-leader, except that there was no leader except for the growing mob itself. When the large group of people—estimated to rise to nearly ten thousand—arrived at the county jail, the sheriff rang the riot bell throughout the city, calling all police officers to the jail.67 Much like the shouting outside Music Hall, however, the riot bell only had the effect of attracting more spectators to the

63 Chicago Daily Tribune, 30 March 1884.
64 Cincinnati Enquirer, 29 March 1884.
65 Miller, Boss Cox’s Cincinnati, 60.
66 Chicago Daily Tribune, 1 April 1884.
67 History of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio; Their Past and Present, 367.
county jail. And with such little leadership and organization, few people—the sheriff included—expected any attack on the jail or courthouse to occur until the night after.\textsuperscript{68} While this might have been the logical idea, it once again took only a few people to initiate the primary attack on the jail doors to allow many others to partake in the violence.

Even after the first night, when it was discovered with certainty that Berner had already been transported out of Cincinnati and that those detained inside the county jail had been evacuated to a more secure location, the rioting did not stop, but only intensified. Handbills were put up on walls overnight, crying out that “Public safety demands immediate action! Organized vigilance committees in every ward! …Serve notice to criminals, criminal lawyers, gamblers and prostitutes to leave Hamilton County within three days and remain away forever or suffer the penalty.”\textsuperscript{69} The circular claimed that “the reputation of this city demands a change, or wickedness will reign supreme.” The “vigilance committees” described in the handbills were meant to take the execution of the law from the police and government and put it into the hands of ordinary citizens—mob rule. Of course, the only result of forming such vigilante groups would be further violence, this time against individuals singled out as perpetrators of crime and corruption. Furthermore, since people had already been riled up after the first night of rioting, it did not seem far-fetched to the organizers of the committees to predict that many people would be willing to join these extralegal parties—it was an easy sale to the people of a city that had seemed to stop functioning.

On Saturday the 29\textsuperscript{th}, crowds lingered at the scene throughout the day in what were mainly peaceful protests against the militia for their willingness to fire upon citizens; that night,

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} Cincinnati Enquirer, 30 March 1884.
however, a larger number of people than from the previous night descended upon the jail and courthouse. The Enquirer expressed the feel of that evening’s riot:

The rage against the jury that had allowed Berner to escape the gallows, and the cumbersome criminal law which had allowed the jail to become populated with murderers, was now turned also against the citizen soldiery, officered by inexperienced officers, which had killed and wounded so many of their fellow-citizens the night before. The enraged citizens, feeling that they were not able to cope with the militia, expressed their feeling in a wanton destruction of the county seat of law and justice.  

This shows another example of the mob rule that took over Cincinnati for several days: the original meaning of the protests—to stand against the Berner verdict and the long string of injustice and corruption in the city—was largely lost after the first night, when the riots then became more of a venue for people to let out their anger toward militiamen and soldiers that would soon arrive to defend the city’s institutions. That night, the Hamilton County courthouse was burned to the ground, along with countless years of official records that would never be recovered. This all came as the result of a simple chain of events: people came together, some to storm the jail and find suspected murderers; when they could not be found, the protesters turned their energy toward the militia, who then fired upon the crowds in defense; this then led to crowds protesting the militia’s actions the next evening. The arrival of federal troops from other parts of Ohio only gave fuel to the protesters on Saturday night, and by Sunday morning, the mayor of Cincinnati said that he would form an official “committee of public safety” and promised that the militia would leave the city as soon as possible, citing that “its presence seemed to incite the mob.” While the mayor asked for citizens’ help in maintaining peace, even asking for a number of residents to help him with “the means to employ 2,000 extra policemen” temporarily, one could almost say that he gave in to, or at least compromised with, the spirit of

70 Ibid.
71 Miller, Boss Cox’s Cincinnati, 60-73.
the mob to seize authority.\textsuperscript{72} Public gatherings after the Berner verdict, culminating in the mass meeting at Music Hall on Friday night, set up a stage for a riot to begin that evening. With such elements of a volatile mob present, it is difficult to say that the riots could have been easily prevented.

The Cincinnati courthouse riots of 1884 sprung out of the verdict in what many thought to be the corrupt trial of William Berner. Roughly ten thousand people took to the streets over the course of three evenings, resulting in the deaths of fifty-six people and the injury of about two hundred others. There were indeed irregularities within the Berner case, especially with the defense attorney Thomas Campbell and the selection and treatment of the jury, but the result of the trial was only one in a string of suspected criminals being acquitted or having charges reduced, all while crime rates skyrocketed in the city. Cincinnati also had other problems with government corruption, all while it attempted to deal with the aftermath of a devastating flood and worsening sanitation. Many in the city were indifferent to these problems, however—an attitude also expressed by the local newspapers—and therefore little reform was proposed around the early 1880s. And when the media did speak out, it applied the personal, “yellow” journalism style of the time to exaggerate and opinionate volatile issues. Furthermore, these issues were not handled in a manner that invited calmness, careful oversight, and cooperation with authorities, but instead were treated in an extralegal manner that brought about a mob mentality and mass violence against the jail and courthouse. In the following months, Joseph Palmer was tried and convicted of first-degree murder and hung in front of a public audience, and Thomas Campbell was indicted for—but found not guilty of—bribery after an official investigation concerning the Berner verdict.\textsuperscript{73} And even long after the riots ended there was a widespread fear among

\textsuperscript{72} Chicago Daily Tribune, 1 April 1884.

\textsuperscript{73} Plattner, “Days of Dread,” 37.
Cincinnatians that violence could once again strike with any conflict, something that indeed happened on a smaller scale several times before the decade passed, over election results, racial relations, and the issue of the eight-hour workday.\footnote{Miller,  Boss Cox’s Cincinnati, 73-75.} The police force in Cincinnati was greatly strengthened and displayed with regular, military-style shows and processions, hoping to stave off further mayhem in the city streets.\footnote{Kocolowski, “Expanding Police Services in Late Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati,” 115-126.} The causes of the Cincinnati riots of 1884 show that violence can come as the result of official neglect, corruption, and misinformation, along with willingness—or even sheer possibility, in this case—of a large sum of people to come together to stand in anger and solidarity. It often arises as a surprise to all the parties involved, even the rioters themselves, and in the case of the Cincinnati riots, served as a wake-up call to government officials to listen to popular opinion and reform their practices and policies. Ultimately, revolts such as these would lead to an era of stronger political machines and bosses that justified their power by acting in the interest of their constituents, but events such as this one nevertheless gave an everlasting warning to the institutions of society to never discount the voice and power of the common citizen.
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