

Lee Otis Johnson rallied students at Texas Southern University.

Lee Otis Johnson, 1967



FLASHPOINTS ON THE ROAD TO BLACK AND BROWN

# POWER

## SITES OF STRUGGLE IN HOUSTON IN THE 1960S AND 70S

Houston has a long history of segregation and racial violence. From the lynchings of George White in 1859 and Robert Powell in 1928, to the hanging of the “camp followers” who rebelled at Camp Logan in 1919, to the rise of the Citizens’ Council in the 1920s, racist actions have often been treated as if they were far away.

But the social upheavals of the 1960s and ’70s changed the city. In the *Journal of American Studies*, *Jim Crow*, historians explain how the end of Jim Crow in Houston came relatively quickly and, due to a media blackout, without fanfare.

Highlighted in this piece are important milestones that dispel this oft-repeated myth that Houston’s quiet desegregation prevented riots, mass demonstrations, conflict, moments of community indignation (anything that might lead to concrete action on the road to political power) and so on in the city. Many more events have been omitted—the university’s desegregation riot in 1969, for example—but the sites selected do represent key entries into an often ignored history.

by John Pluecker

# 1965

## Black Students Boycott the Public Schools

Whealey High School, 4900 Market Street To protest the slow pace of integration in the public schools, despite its being court-ordered in 1960 and again in 1962, 85 percent of the students boycotted five black high schools in Houston in 1965. Rev. William Lawson, minister of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, organized the students to assemble at the South Central YMCA. In his words, “We had this bunch of kids starting the march, but the good news was the HISD headquarters was downtown on Capitol, so we went down Dowling Street, and while we went down, there were people who came out of the houses and out of the businesses and joined us. So we ended up with at least hundreds if not thousands of people.” The boycott and march were instrumental in making the superintendent of HISD push desegregation along faster.



## Police Attack TSU Students 1967

### TSU Campus

In the late sixties, TSU student radicalization influenced by the Black Liberation Movement along with a group of students called the Black Student Union and the Black Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, led to a series of protests against police brutality and segregation. Students were arrested and beaten to quell the protests. On April 4, 1967, police invaded the campus and broke into dorm rooms and offices. Police fired thousands of rounds and had arrested 480 students and staff. It was probably from a stray police round.



Lee Otis Johnson, 1968  
Emancipation Day celebration in Houston  
Lee Otis Johnson, 1968  
Lee Otis Johnson, 1968  
at TSU during the 1967-68 school year  
action and in the year  
1967 and later expelled from TSU  
the face of the military  
Houston, appearing on television with his  
no-holds-barred  
April 4, 1968, at a memorial service for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Houston  
Louie Welch  
audience booed  
forcefully against  
he was arrested for trumped-up charges of passing a small amount of marijuana to an undercover policeman  
of possession  
Vance, who  
sentence of  
other  
judge who  
became a symbol of  
and  
crack-down



A crowd protests on April 6, 1967, in front of the Harris County Courthouse against the police crack-down on the TSU campus that culminated the next month.



Students jubilantly raise fists.



LEFT: Police amass at Moody Park to stave off the riots. BELOW: Firefighters attempt to put out the flames from a car overturned in the 1970 riots.



### Chicano Protesters Take Over Houston School Board Meeting 1970

Hattie Mae White Administration Building, 3830 Richmond Avenue. The Justice Department filed suit against the Houston Independent School District (HISD), alleging that it continued to segregate its students. In response, HISD instituted a desegregation plan that mixed Mexican-American and African-American students, but left Anglo students largely unaffected. (The League of United Latin American Citizens had previously fought for Latinos to be officially designated as white to prevent their segregation.) To resist this ploy, a number of community groups began to push for Latinos to be recognized as brown, not white (chronicled in Guadalupe San Viquez's 2001 book of the same name). The Mexican American Educational Council organized a *huelga* (strike) of schools around Houston. The conflict came to a head when the HISD board refused to hear from a group of Chicano parents, students, and activists,

including members of MAYO (Mexican American Youth Organization). In protest, the group took over the meeting, grabbed the microphones, and stood on tables as they chanted, "Chicano, Chicano, Chicano," and loudly demanded change. Partially as a result of this action, HISD agreed to the community demands for recognition, and by the end of the year, the boycott had ended.

### The Killing of Carl Hampton 1970

2800 block of Dowling Street

Toward the end of the 1960s, organizers were radicalizing—in the Chicano community with MAYO and in the black community with the People's Party II. Carl Hampton was a leader in Houston's chapter of People's Party II, modeled along the lines of the Black Panthers. According to Charles Freeman, another organizer active at the time, Hampton had returned to the party headquarters on Dowling Street when he saw a Houston police officer harassing a member selling Panther newspapers. The officer and Hampton, (who was carrying a legal, unconcerted weapon) briefly faced off against each other. Hampton and his compatriots then holed up in their headquarters as police gathered. Ten days into the standoff, Hampton spoke to a gathering of community members and student supporters. After this rally, police officers standing on top of nearby St. John's Baptist Church opened fire on the party activists, wounding four people and killing Hampton. The story of Hampton's killing has been largely erased from Houston history; in recent years increasing efforts, largely by black community activists, have drawn attention to what happened, making sure that Hampton and his murder are not forgotten.



Alternative press spread the word about events largely occluded in the two dailies.



### Moody Park Riots

Washington Blvd and Fulton St.

One year after Torres's death, a commemorative event in Moody Park led to violence as the community fought back when police officers tried to make an arrest at the park. All of the anger, pain, and rage of the past year boiled up, and the park became the epicenter of rioting that spread around a 10-block area in the Mexican American Northside. Organizer Travis Morales, who was present at the park, recalls that young people were chanting, "Joe Torres dead, cops go free, that's what the rich call democracy." In the end, 11 people were injured, cars and businesses were burned, and the relationship between police and communities in Houston was forever altered. The riots sparked a process of reform within the Houston Police Department (HPD), and increased communication between communities of color and the HPD led to large numbers of people of color joining the force.



### José Campos Torres Drowning 1977

Buffalo Bayou between Allen's Landing and the McKee Street Bridge

José "Joe" Campos Torres, a 24-year-old Mexican American Vietnam vet, was found floating in Buffalo Bayou on May 8, 1977, two days after his arrest by Houston police officers following an alleged bar fight. The officers had arrested the vet, beat him, and then left him at the jail. The jail staff told the officers that Torres needed to go to Ben Taub because of his injuries. Instead they threw Torres into the bayou, where he drowned. Eventually, after community outcry, the officers, including Terry Denson, were brought to justice. The sentence of a year of probation and a fine of \$1,000 each prompted more community anger and a federal civil rights trial, which resulted in a year of prison time for some of the officers.