

## **Episode 144: New York Draft Riots**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

Just as Abraham Lincoln could finally relish good news with the victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, he had to deal with serious issues from within. On July 13, 1863, massive violence broke out in New York City in response to the new conscription laws. These draft riots lasted for four days until the crowds were finally subdued by state militia and Union troops.

New York City contained many Southern sympathizers and before the war there was a strong business tie to the cotton industry. Thus, the overall fervor to go to war was milder here than in other parts of the Union. There were also fears among the many middle- and lower-class workers that if the Union won the war, freed slaves would swarm the city and add even more competition for jobs. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, did little to assuage these fears.

The city also contained thousands of new immigrants, many of whom spoke little or no English. The corrupt political operations that ran much of the city found ways to get these immigrants registered voters so that they could vote in local elections. These newly registered voters now found themselves subject to the national conscription act. The act seemed particularly injurious to the immigrants and other lower class workers because wealthy white men could pay their way out of being drafted and black men were exempt because they were not considered citizens. The resentment and anger finally boiled over in mid-July.

As numbers were drawn for draft selection on July 13, a mob of about 500 men attacked the Provost Marshall's office on Third Avenue where the selection was being held. The New York police were unable to stop the rioters and the violence spread. The mayor's residence was burned as was a hotel that refused to give the rioters liquor.

The rioters, many of them Irish immigrants, took much of their anger out on black people in their path. A number were lynched and an African-American orphanage attacked. Police were able to hold the mob off long enough for the orphans to escape before the building was burned. Heavy rain began as evening came and this helped to put out the many fires and to send many of the rioters home.

They returned to violence the next day, but were met by about 800 militia who had been called in from the forts in New York Harbor and from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. While the rioting continued on a smaller scale, by Thursday July 16 several thousand Union troops had arrived in the city from Gettysburg and things finally settled down. Over 100 people died in the riots, many of them African-Americans. Thousands were injured and property damage ran into the millions. Many African-Americans left Manhattan in the aftermath of the riots, moving to Brooklyn or New Jersey.

Also during this week, Confederates under Robert E. Lee made good their escape back to Virginia as they retreated from Gettysburg. Rains had swollen the Potomac River preventing Lee's troops from crossing for several days and while they awaited an attack from George Meade's Union troops, it never came. Meade was slow in pursuit and his men continued to lick their wounds from the vicious battle earlier in the month. Lincoln was furious, stating that if Meade could attack while Lee's weary men were pinned against the river that the war would be over. Many historians agree, but Meade's inability to press the issue meant that the hostilities would continue for almost another two years.