

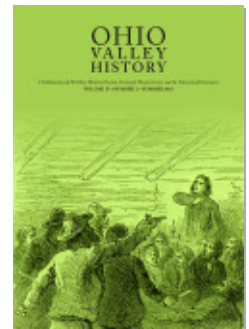


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Disorder at the Derby

Race, Reputation, and Louisville's

1967 Open Housing Crisis

Samuel Abramson

“I ain’t going to lay down in front of a horse myself, but there’s a lot of cats that will,” Dick Gregory told the protesters sitting in the street. “If it comes to closing the [Kentucky] Derby, we’ll just have to close it up.” Gregory made his living as a comedian, but he had also allied himself with African American civil rights causes throughout the 1960s. Now, on April 11, 1967, he spoke to protesters in Louisville, Kentucky, following a rally demanding the city adopt a comprehensive, enforceable open housing ordinance. “We’re going to march and march until the people of this town learn they’re not dealing with animals,” Gregory said, adding that a disruption could “keep those out-of-town folks from enjoying a city we can’t even enjoy ourselves.”¹

All through an unseasonably cool April, civil rights protesters would threaten to disrupt the Kentucky Derby if the city did not adopt an open housing ordinance. “No Housing, No Derby” became the slogan. *Washington Post* columnist Shirley Povich described a “clear and present fear” around town that the “fair housing demonstrations that have raged in the city for weeks will spill over onto the Derby scene.” Few cities were as associated with a single event as Louisville with the Derby; it was the city’s annual bourbon-soaked weekend in the national spotlight. If housing supporters wanted attention, they had certainly targeted the right weekend.²

Louisville’s 1967 open housing crisis contained familiar elements from other southern civil rights sagas in the 1960s: African American student protesters; downtown business boycotts; a white citizens’ council and claims of outside agitators; backroom negotiations at the eleventh hour; marches that devolved into name-calling, violence, and arrests; even an appearance and rousing speech by Martin Luther King Jr. Few such crises, however, involved a city’s signature event like the Derby. By early May, many Louisvillians were less concerned with residential segregation than they were with the national embarrassment that might stem from the accompanying protests. They simply wished to sip their juleps and place their bets in peace. Out-of-towners had not flocked to renowned hotels like the Seelbach and the Brown to watch civil rights demonstrations on Saturday. A Derby disruption would jeopardize the image the city had crafted for itself. “To Kentuckians,” *New York Times* columnist Arthur Daley wrote, “that would [be] akin to profaning the temple.”³

While scholars have since unpacked how civil rights narratives and institutionalized racism were not exclusive to the American South in the mid-twentieth century, a widely held regional myth was the reference point for Louisvillians at the time. For decades, Louisville, a city caught between regional reputations, had fancied itself an “All-American city,” a progressive haven in the Upper South impervious to the civil rights debacles that haunted places like Little Rock and Birmingham. Its residents thought of their hometown as culturally southern yet free of the racial stigma that plagued many southern cities. During the open housing crisis of 1967, activists would challenge the myth of Louisville as an exceptional city with an already concluded civil rights narrative. Ultimately, Louisville’s successful effort to preserve its reputation on its most important weekend exposed broader racial and social issues that had existed all along.⁴

When open housing supporters threatened to “close up” the Kentucky Derby, they threatened Louisville’s sporting, cultural, and economic centerpiece. First contested in 1875, the Derby was more than just the “greatest two minutes in sports” for Louisvillians. Prior to the famed horse race, the city hosted the Kentucky Derby Festival, a two-week slate of events that included a steamboat race on the Ohio River and a downtown parade featuring themed floats and marching bands. Race day itself blended glamour and grit, the once-a-year jauntiness of wearing seersucker and oversized hats with a free-for-all, open-bar picnic. From its inception, the Derby marketed itself as a tribute to a bygone era, embracing both the debonair and the plain-clothed. Historian James Nicholson notes that Kentucky “had been a slave state and remained a racially segregated society after emancipation, but the Commonwealth also retained its reputation of being more racially progressive than the deeper South.” This reputation spanned into the twentieth century and functioned as “an asset to promoters of the Kentucky Derby.” The Derby offered its audience “a taste of the Old South without having to travel to the geographically and culturally distant Deep South.” Natives and guests, whites and blacks could all congregate underneath Churchill Downs’ twin spires on Derby Day, yearning for a simpler, more leisurely time.⁵

With this image came controversy. By marketing itself as a place to appreciate vestiges of the Old South, early Derbies conjured images of sprawling plantations and affable slaves. Even into the twentieth century, Kentucky’s famed horse farms still “resembled old southern plantations, complete with a black labor force and presided over by a Kentucky colonel,” a figure that “never really existed, but that could nonetheless be celebrated in Louisville at Derby time.” White Derby-goers in the 1920s and 1930s had no qualms with reciting the line, “’Tis Summer, the darkies are gay” in *My Old Kentucky Home*, the Stephen Foster-penned tune celebrating life on an antebellum plantation. Derby festivities toned down references to white gentility and black servitude in the post-World War II era, but broader tributes to antebellum ways persisted. Local African American

activist Raoul Cunningham, who grew up in Louisville in the 1940s and 1950s, later described the Derby as “a major event that reflected Louisville at the time: segregated.” He recalled that “the owner of [Louisville’s long-running African American newspaper] the *Defender* had a box, but most blacks did not,” adding that “the restrooms were also segregated” at Churchill Downs and “blacks were primarily at the track’s infield before college students took it over.” The city was selectively southern during Derby week, trading in its “All-American City” reputation for a brief period to honor the myths of “Old Kentucky.”⁶

When the parties ended and the visitors departed Louisville every May, the city’s progressive visage endured; the “No Housing, No Derby” movement was an aberration for an urban area proud of its “self-image as a model for its southern neighbors” at the “forefront of racial change.” School desegregation in response to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision proceeded peacefully in the fall of 1956, without National Guard escorts or politicians standing in school doorways. It buoyed Louisville’s standing, and some in the national press “showered praise on the city...cementing [its] image as a progressive leader for the region.” In response to a first school day without a major incident, the *New York Times* declared that “when the history of this proud southern city is written, this day will undoubtedly go down as a historic landmark...even in the South...integration can be made to work without violence.” The local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored



Aerial view of downtown Louisville, looking toward Indiana, 1961.

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People (NAACP) agreed, branding Louisville's integration as "an outstanding example of what can be done to effect an orderly transition to desegregated schools in the South."⁷

When it came to integration and a moderate image, however, Louisville had well-defined limitations. In her book, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980*, historian Tracy K'Meyer details how a city eager to accept praise for its civil rights gains erected clear barricades to integrating local neighborhoods. Louisville veered from the Jim Crow South in terms of political participation, granting African Americans voting access by the end of Reconstruction and fostering a strong, loyal base of Republican African American voters who took "a more active political role than African Americans in any comparable southern city" and "provided the basis for interracial cooperation with black leaders and groups throughout the movement era." But if many Louisville whites yielded on integrated schools, restaurants, downtown businesses, and other public spaces, they remained "openly hostile to the breakdown of Jim Crow in private spaces—especially housing." The tradition of segregated housing persisted despite the ruling in *Buchanan v. Warley*, a 1917 U.S. Supreme Court case that declared prohibiting the sale of property to African Americans in Louisville as unconstitutional. A combination of "policies of government agencies, financial institutions, and real estate professionals, together with public pressure," ensured that Louisville residential patterns mirrored those of the rest of segregated America well into the post-World War II era.⁸

No incident reflected the limits of Louisville's civil rights tolerance quite like the Wade case, which involved an African American family purchasing a home in an all-white neighborhood in suburban Louisville. With the assistance of Anne and Carl Braden, a prominent white couple in progressive Louisville circles, Andrew and Charlotte Wade purchased the Shively neighborhood home in 1954. Immediately, the Wades endured threats and harassment. Neighbors burned crosses, threw rocks, and fired shotguns; the tension culminated in a detonated bomb that destroyed part of the house. In the community, meanwhile, "the white moderates and liberals who so readily praised Louisville for following the Supreme Court edict to integrate the schools" expressed "little sympathy for the Wades and even less for the Bradens." While the Wades had plenty of allies, particularly in the African American community, opponents accused both couples of partaking in "a Communist plot to weaken America and deprive whites of their rights." A grand jury investigation and subsequent trial piggybacked on "the national and regional red scare and the local history of anti-Communist attacks," successfully linking Carl Braden and his associates to a Communist-inspired conspiracy. Braden was found guilty of sedition and sentenced to fifteen years in prison, though he was released on bond and only ended up serving seven months after a Supreme Court decision invalidated local sedition laws.⁹

After the trial and Carl's release from prison, the Bradens remained in Louisville, suffering "hate mail and harassing phone calls" and feeling "abandoned by white liberal friends...and black civil rights organizations." According to scholar Catherine Fosl, the couple "lived in a subculture that validated interracial friendships and civil rights gains" and subsequently "overestimated progressive trends in Louisville and vastly underestimated the hostility their act would provoke." As accused seditionists, the "taint of Communism" would render the Bradens as "symbols of a demonic internal subversion in their hometown" for "years to come." Having dealt with months of violence and harassment, the Wades eventually sold the home in Shively and moved to Louisville's West End, concluding that they could "never feel safe surrounded by such avowed racists."¹⁰

The episode spoke to the limits of civil rights progress in Louisville. Fundamentally, many white citizens—even those who identified as liberal or socially progressive—felt socially and economically threatened by the idea of African American families moving into their neighborhoods. These citizens believed that African Americans moving in next door threatened both white suburban privilege as well as neighborhood property values. It did not seem to matter that those African Americans might be lawyers, doctors, or chemists—the saga with the Wade and Braden families "threatened the white civic elite's control of the pace of change" and revealed the limits of "acceptable integration" within public and private spaces. As K'Meyer observed, the picture in the national media of the harassment of "a pioneering black family and the persecution of the white citizens who had tried to help them" strongly contradicted "the image of a forward-moving leader in southern race relations." As the forthcoming open housing crisis demonstrated, Louisville's precedent for fierce resistance to integrated neighborhoods would resurface again.¹¹

Louisville's 1967 open housing crisis was not the city's first experience with a tense and prolonged civil rights struggle. The local drive for open access had its roots in the 1950s, when African Americans wanted equal access to lunch counters and drugstores. After the Board of Aldermen voted down a bill banning citywide discrimination in all public facilities in 1960, protesters responded with a combination of student-led marches, sit-ins, and boycotts, resulting in violence, arrests, negotiations, and even an appearance by Dr. King. "We had a plan, and we knew how to disrupt city life and send everything haywire downtown," Cunningham recalled. When downtown demonstrations yielded little progress in 1961, open accommodations supporters vowed to descend upon Churchill Downs if lawmakers did not address their concerns. As with the 1967 crisis, open accommodations leaders in 1961 believed that threatening disorder as Louisville played "host to the world" would increase the likelihood of passing an accommodations ordinance.¹²

Ultimately, they backed off their plans. Upon hearing the news that protesters would skip Derby Day demonstrations, the *Defender* published an editorial complimenting the 1961 movement's principals on their judgment. Accommodations leaders, they said, had "both the force and the right to shame Louisville before because of continued segregation," but had instead exhibited "high statesmanship" in choosing "not to damage our city at this time." *Defender* editors agreed that the city needed open accommodations, but keeping the peace and avoiding widespread embarrassment amid the city's "most advertised event" took precedence.¹³

Activists waged the accommodations battle for two more years before the Board of Aldermen finally passed an ordinance desegregating all public accommodations in May 1963. Its passage sparked national praise for the "first city in the South to pass a public accommodations law." Despite years of protests, violence, and stalling, Louisville emerged from the accommodations crisis with its racially progressive reputation and the perceived sanctity of the Derby intact. Four years later, city officials confronted another civil rights protest; this time, however, the threats to spoil the Derby and embarrass the city were quite real.¹⁴

In early April, local NAACP head W. J. Hodge encouraged African Americans to boycott the upcoming Derby if city lawmakers did not respond to calls for a housing ordinance. "We regret such measures have to be taken, but we have no alternative in light of weak and vacillating leadership of the mayor and the stubborn inaction of the Louisville Board of Aldermen," Hodge had said. The passing of a week did little to change this perception. Hours before Gregory spoke to marchers who sat in a downtown street as an act of protest, the Louisville Board of Aldermen had, as anticipated, rejected the housing ordinance recommended by the City-County Human Relations Commission by a vote of nine to three. The vote ensured a tumultuous month leading up to the Derby; after several months of relatively subdued campaigning and discussion of the housing issue, the "No Housing, No Derby" campaign began in earnest. Four weeks of turmoil forced the city to gaze upon its unresolved racial issues in unprecedented fashion.¹⁵

The origins of the open housing crisis lay in the March 1962 establishment of the Human Rights Commission (HRC), a city-county agency that prioritized "trying to better conditions for Negroes in public accommodations, employment and housing." In August 1962, the commission began assessing integration in Louisville's neighborhoods with an eye toward drafting a housing ordinance. With the passage of the public accommodations ordinance in May 1963 and a job ordinance in February 1965, the HRC turned its attention more squarely to the issue of housing. It approved a voluntary compliance housing law and recommended its passage in July 1965; the following month, the Board of Aldermen passed the ordinance. Voluntary compliance seemed like progress for open housing, but the municipal government's inability to enforce the ordinance rendered



Left to right: Orville Schmied, Rep. William Cowger, Mayor Kenneth Schmied,
and Elmer John Schmied, c.1967-1970.

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it hollow and ineffective. When HRC officials ordered two local real estate dealers to cease discriminating against African Americans buyers in September, they had no enforcement authority.¹⁶

Frustrated open housing supporters, including the HRC, the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, and the newly minted Committee on Open Housing (COH) continued to pressure local officials all through 1966, urging swift action. By the time the Board of Aldermen officially addressed the ordinance on December 27, 1966, the open housing crisis had escalated. An advisory committee formed by Louisville Mayor Kenneth Schmied labeled the existing voluntary ordinance as ineffective, and both the HRC and civil rights and clergy leaders had approached aldermen and the mayor's office in the fall to reiterate the need for a stronger law. Schmied argued that the proposed punishments were too harsh and that the ordinance gave the HRC too much power. Rev. Alfred Horrigan, chairman of the HRC and president of Bellarmine College, a local Catholic liberal arts institution, responded by calling upon the aldermen to stop "foot-dragging" and display "statesmanlike leadership" on the housing issue.¹⁷

In spite of Schmied's insistence that no resolution would come with the lurking threat of demonstrations, unsatisfied COH leaders met with officials from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Louisville on February 24 to plan protests.

More local organizations and local politicians weighed in on the open housing crisis as it gained momentum in March. As supporters became more impatient with the mayor's occasional and halfhearted efforts, Schmied continued to posture for a watered-down ordinance. On March 30, Dr. King led protesters in an attempt to enter a Concerned Citizens Council (CCC) meeting that had been convened to discuss opposition to open housing; the incident resulted in numerous arrests. An unapologetic King declared there was "no more powerful way to dramatize and expose social evil than to tramp, tramp, tramp." Four days later, as Schmied urged Board of Aldermen President J. W. Young to act quickly on the housing issue before the city climate deteriorated further, protesters changed tactics and began marching in all-white South End neighborhoods, where resistance to open housing was more entrenched than anywhere in the city. The marches triggered a month of uncertainty and confusion in a crisis that had slowly escalated through the winter.¹⁸

Hodge's April 5 recommendation that African Americans and "others of goodwill" boycott the Derby arrived on the heels of several nights of protests in the South End. Leading the protests was Reverend Alfred Daniel King, better known as A. D., a younger brother of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A veteran of civil rights activism in his own right, A. D. King had moved to Louisville in 1965 to lead a local church. In the initial series of South End protests, the marches encountered epithet-spewing hecklers, often armed with eggs and waving Confederate flags; as the frequency and size of open housing marches increased through the month of April, so too did harassment rooted in decades of opposing integration in Louisville neighborhoods.¹⁹

Each day seemed to bring a larger South End demonstration in a more volatile environment. The April 8 march foreshadowed the ugliness of what lay ahead. Many of the marchers were African American teenagers who proceeded through all-white neighborhoods as hecklers pelted them with eggs and rocks, often resulting in black eyes and broken noses. One white teenager dangled an effigy resembling an African American man with the head of a monkey. Protesters sang freedom songs, chanting "Ain't gonna let no crazy white folks turn us 'round," as trailing neighborhood teens poked and prodded the effigy before setting it ablaze and triumphantly draping a Confederate flag over a "For Sale" sign. Hecklers, who often became so enraged that they simultaneously tangled with police and protesters, taunted African Americans with chants like "Hey nigger, bet you'd like to be white, I'll let you be white for a quarter, but you can't be, because you've got an odor." Despite the harassment, Cunningham, who participated in some of the South End marches, said activists were prepared for the abuse. "When we marched in South Louisville, that caused some resentment, [but] you've chosen to [march] and adopted nonviolence as a tactic...if you can't take it, don't come," he said. Television cameras captured the bewildering scenes for citywide viewing.

Neither housing supporters nor neighborhood opponents seemed interested in backing down. In a matter of days, a conflict previously characterized by public barbs and peaceful protests had snowballed into one of the most frightening, racially-charged episodes in Louisville history.²⁰

Before the April 11 vote, members of the HRC executive committee spoke to aldermen at a caucus in a last-ditch effort to sway them in favor of the housing ordinance. Citing a Louisville Urban League report, HRC chair Rev. Horrigan asserted that having no housing ordinance dissuaded African American professionals from moving to Louisville. Six examples from the report included an African American chemist forced to live in a more modest house than he preferred, twelve miles from his job, and a survey of African American college students who said they were not interested in moving to Louisville due in part to the housing issue. Horrigan pointed to each example as “just one more compelling point about why an effective open-housing ordinance is so important for the economic well-being of the community.” Schmied and Horrigan hoped these final words would sway undecided aldermen and put an end to the marches and threats of Kentucky Derby protests.²¹

But the aldermen were not convinced. As anticipated, the proposed ordinance failed by a vote of nine to three. “Take a man’s word, the outside demonstrations are what did it,” Alderman Harry Herling said. The chair of the Aldermanic Committee outlined the board’s reasoning and recommended that “this ordinance be rejected and that no further action be taken until our community regains its composure and the outsiders have gone home.” The aldermen pointed to the city’s racial progress, noting that “our Republican administration has done more in the last five years for civil rights than in the previous century” and that city officials “were able to draw up and implement the first public accommodations law in the South.” This comment drew mocking laughter from open housing supporters present in the chamber. Protesters, according to the statement, had “poisoned the atmosphere so that no rational thought or action is possible.” Concluding pleas urged a “calm atmosphere, free of further threats... if the outsiders are interested in public welfare and open housing, as they profess, they will heed this request and go home...if they refuse...they will be exposing their motives for what they are.”²²

Predictably, the statement infuriated open housing supporters, who believed that obeying the pleas for calm was a do-nothing solution that would only benefit open housing opponents. Gregory’s fervent speech on the evening of the ill-fated vote was the first direct reference to stopping the running of the Derby itself. Following his prediction that the movement had supporters willing to lay down on the track, Gregory, A.D. King, and a number of housing leaders, accompanied by scores of police officers armed with riot gear, marched through the streets of downtown Louisville. They chanted “Hey, ho, freedom!” as onlookers spilled out

onto sidewalks to watch them pass. It marked the first significant march outside of a residential neighborhood. Housing opponents trailed the marchers and showered them with jeers of “Two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate!” and “Lock ‘em up!” Marchers and opponents spanned the length of a city block, filling up Fourth Street from sidewalk to sidewalk.²³

On the morning of April 12, the NAACP announced a boycott of downtown businesses in response to the ordinance’s rejection. Hodge said the NAACP intended to distribute 30,000 pamphlets and target businesses associated with officials who opposed the ordinance. The boycott asked African Americans not to buy from any establishment in an area covering nearly eighty square blocks. That evening, a crowd of 1,500 open housing opponents threw rocks, tomatoes, bottles, and even firecrackers at 150 marching supporters. The scene turned ugly enough that city law director Eugene Alvey issued a plea to South End residents to keep their children away from the marches.²⁴

The HRC had remained relatively even-tempered in its support of housing until the aldermanic vote, but, like many housing proponents, its members had lost patience. They convened on April 13 for a two-hour meeting and issued a five-page statement in response to the aldermen’s decision. They deemed the board’s decision “seriously deficient because of its complete failure to make any explicit reference to the main issues of human freedom and dignity” and spoke out against the characterization of open housing supporters as “outsiders.” Louisville, it claimed, was not “an isolated 19th-century Southern village in which all persons whose grandparents were not born in the local county are regarded with suspicion and hostility as ‘foreigners’ and ‘outsiders’...we are a great, modern, metropolitan community.” With this observation, commission members called Louisville’s identity into question, asking how a self-proclaimed “All-America City” could harbor such a provincial view on the origins of its own residents. Open housing opponents, they argued, wanted to expand and accept critical acclaim for the city’s reputation without having to make the adjustments that actual growth required. “Does anyone seriously propose that we wish to create the image of a community which insists that the newcomer does not have a right to speak and actively participate in community affairs until after he has served a probationary period of residence?” the commission asked. It was a fair question to pose.²⁵



Dick Gregory (b. 1932).
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Louise Reynolds, 11th Ward Alderman, Louisville Board of Aldermen
and J. Mansir Tydings, January 1965.

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Police resorted to using tear gas on hecklers in a South End march on April 18. Earlier they had arrested fifty singing protesters before marching began, attempting to chase off those who had gathered more than two hours prior in anticipation of the march. One white heckler asked his friends, “What is a SPONGE?” He replied to his own question with “a Society for the Prevention of Niggers Getting Everything.” When the hecklers defied orders to retreat and even tossed bottles and stones in response, police released twelve canisters of “invisible tear gas.” The tear gas canisters “exploded with small pops and showers of sparks,” prompting the coughing crowd, most of whom were teenagers, to disperse.²⁶

With the open housing crisis and its “ugly spring ritual” of evening protests hurtling toward the Kentucky Derby, officials began to worry. If the mayor and aldermen did not act, according to HRC executive director J. Mansir Tydings, Louisville would be “on a collision course...I am scared to death and can see [what will happen at] the Derby and the parade...people are going to get hurt.” Derby Festival officials watching the nightly scenes admitted that postponing or canceling the Pegasus Parade was “a possibility ever since the [open housing] situation developed.” Officials decided to gauge the situation over the next ten days and reconvene. They joined a growing number of Louisvillians who desired “restoring order if not sanity to the city.”²⁷

As the evening marches continued, both sides prepared to resume negotiating. Heeding the call from a *Courier-Journal* editorial to transfer the crisis “from the streets...to the conference room,” members of the Louisville Urban League suggested a meeting involving the mayor, the Board of Aldermen, HRC officials, other civil rights figures, and real estate leaders. In the first meeting, open housing advocates contended that protests would cease if the Board of Aldermen made it clear they were committed to acting on the housing ordinance. Horrigan claimed the meeting served as “an opening wedge” and a “glimmer of hope,” while activist Hulbert James said it resolved nothing. Furthermore, a miscommunication at the initial meeting led one alderman to mistakenly believe that housing leaders were placing a moratorium on protests. A. D. King and the leaders had not, in fact, agreed to a moratorium, and were furious when the board released a public statement on the issue that was subsequently reported on local radio and television. Several nights of peace did not mean a moratorium; housing supporters claimed they had reached “a point where we can’t stop demonstrating...we are afraid that they will get past the Derby...and then tell us to go to hell.”²⁸

Through the course of the month and the nightly demonstrations, the local press had sided with the protesters; editorials attacked hecklers and leaders for vilifying a peaceful movement that simply desired open housing and equal treatment. With the Derby on the horizon, the tone of housing editorials suddenly changed. The *Courier-Journal* published a piece on April 28 questioning whether proposed demonstrations at the Derby might be “self-defeating.” Editors agreed with the need for an open housing ordinance, but they feared the ugly scenes associated with the demonstrations had made Louisville “the focus of attention for the whole country,” and that “disorders in or around Churchill Downs would provide sensational material for the TV cameras.” The piece also pointed to the “celebrated glamour of the Derby” and Churchill Downs’ excellent record in civil rights, a record dating back several decades, well before the city passed public accommodations and employment ordinances in the 1960s. Demonstrations held while “thousands of visitors gathered in Louisville for a holiday event” could “damage the whole embattled civil rights movement nationally.” This opinion, issued by proponents of open housing, was the first of several editorials published that week as a warning against infringing on Derby traditions.²⁹

Encouraged by a spell of relative calm, Derby Festival Committee chairman Thomas Ballantine announced on April 28 that the annual Pegasus Parade would proceed as planned the following week. Three days later, however, after meeting with police and the city safety director, the festival committee reversed its decision. In spite of six months of preparation, the parade, a Derby week hallmark, was cancelled to “protect the best interests of participants and spectators.” Privately, festival organizers reportedly blamed housing demonstrators for the cancellation; one businessman feared “what would happen with horses if

someone set off a cherry bomb or a firecracker during the parade.” Derby Festival Executive Director Addison McGhee expressed the “disbelief” of many when he said that a “small city has completely capitulated to a dissident minority.” In a week when anticipation would normally build for the weekend Derby festivities, local leaders dreaded what might ensue, as the nation watched, in such a volatile atmosphere.³⁰

On the Tuesday before the Derby, five teenagers hopped the Churchill Downs grandstand railing and wandered onto the main track, awaiting the ten-horse field from the day’s first race. It was a trial run of how to bring the weekend pageantry to a standstill. The teens gathered in the homestretch and “formed a ragged line across the inside half of the track, waving their hands as horses ran close behind them” and ducking under an inside railing with seconds to spare. Photographs showed security officers arresting the teens as they ran from the grandstands toward the horse barns. They were charged with “disorderly conduct, malicious mischief, trespassing and banding together to commit an unlawful act.” No one was injured, but the incident left several jockeys who were forced to swerve from the protesters confused and irritated. One claimed that while he did not have anything against the protesters, but if “one of those beasts hits them, they wouldn’t be back...if anyone else gets in front of me, I’ll run ‘em down.” Another said that if the protesters “wanted to stay there, they could have...I wasn’t going to detour around them.” The incident also drew criticism from some activists; as Raoul Cunningham recalls, “to run across a racetrack is almost suicidal...I don’t think you’d be the victim should anything happen, nor do I think you’re a martyr. It was not endorsed by anyone in their right mind.”³¹

Attention turned immediately to whether housing leaders had planned the incident. One *Louisville Times* article singled out Dick Gregory for the comments he had made about jumping in front of horses three weeks prior. While housing leaders denied direct association with the teenagers who ran on the track, SCLC project director Hosea Williams acknowledged them for doing “a great thing... they shook this town today, they brought to light on a national arena our problems here in Louisville.” Shirley Povich observed that even with a high level of security, there was “no absolute guarantee that the Derby cannot be wrecked as a race by one impassioned demonstrator in a crowd of more than 80,000.” The Derby was “the pride of Louisville and all Kentucky,” he noted, but there “was warning Tuesday of what could happen on Saturday.”³²

The day after the on-track demonstrations, the *Courier-Journal* printed another editorial discouraging Derby Day protests. Editors agreed that the city needed an open housing ordinance but viewed charging into the path of race-horses as an extreme, unwise strategy. The crowd would be “so dense, the atmosphere so charged with excitement that a minor incident could easily blow up into a tragic event.” Open housing, they argued, had “nothing to gain and a great

deal to lose by demonstrations at Churchill Downs on Derby Day.” The *Defender* issued a similar message. Derby, claimed the editors, was “neither the time nor the place to run the risk of sparking a riot,” and another protest risked losing “many potential supporters of open housing” and tarnishing a “local source of pride” that “people of all origins and colors have helped to make...world famous.” Having supported open housing protesters all through April, local newspaper editors now balked with a possible Derby disruption in the offing.³³

Churchill Downs management offered no comment on the incident, and Mayor Schmied released a statement Tuesday evening reiterating that the Derby would proceed as scheduled and that officials would “use every means at the disposal of the City of Louisville to insure the normal running of the Kentucky Derby...one of the world’s greatest sporting events.” As protests and pray-ins continued daily in the same South End neighborhoods, the Board of Aldermen held a closed-door meeting, and Churchill Downs officials pondered the degree to which they wanted to increase Derby Day security. The track received a visit from uniformed Ku Klux Klan members offering to “help the police keep order.” KKK leader Justin Smith predicted “thousands” of Klan members would attend and suggested that officials “either bar Negroes from Churchill Downs or find some other way to control them...the Kentucky Derby is an important national event, and we don’t see that it has anything to do with open housing.” Police refused to let them in and declined the offer, stating firmly, “we don’t want or need any help from them.”³⁴

As officials were mulling the security situation for the weekend, May 3 brought a new development, when the Board of Aldermen announced that the tenets of an open housing ordinance were present in existing legislation, citing a new reading of city-county law. The timing of the discovery was curious; for months, aldermen had remained silent and passive on open housing before defeating a proposal on April 11. Now, three days before the Kentucky Derby and with the imminent threat of protests, officials had suddenly turned conciliatory and found common ground. A.D. King acknowledged the claims but emphasized they “do not offer the answer we are looking for.” His brother, Martin, who arrived in Louisville to a cheering crowd and signs that read “Bet on the human race, not the horse race” called instead for “a very strong housing bill...not one devoid of teeth.”³⁵

On Wednesday night, two hundred protesters participated in a three-and-a-half mile march from Louisville’s West End to the downtown police station, singing freedom songs along the way. Prior to the trek downtown, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a brief speech to a crowd of 500 at a West End church, declaring that housing supporters “don’t mind filling up the jail to get this city right.” At one point, he posed whether Louisville had “earned the right to have a Kentucky Derby” in 1967 and said he hoped the city would be “reasonable enough, moral enough, and practical enough” to adopt a housing ordinance. He concluded by



Martin Luther King , Jr. (1929-1968).

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saying that if “there is a demonstration on Saturday” it would come with the purpose of “drawing injustice out into the open” and as a result of the “stupid moves by the city administration...[if] the other side gets out of hand, blaming the demonstrators would be something like blaming a robbed man for the actions of a robber because he was carrying money.” His colleague, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, spoke more directly, declaring that if “our brothers can stand up in front of the bullets and tanks and bombs in Vietnam, then we are willing to stand in front of the horses.” The speeches galvanized supporters and seemed to make some type of Derby demonstration inevitable.³⁶

Many locals remained uneasy, urging open housing supporters to reconsider their plan. Repeating its 1961 approach, the *Defender* published an editorial titled “An Argument Against Derby Demonstrations.” The editorial cast doubt on what a disruption might achieve, proclaiming a “very small chance of successfully boycotting Churchill Downs without a costly loss of many potential supporters of open housing of all races” and pointing to the successful passage of a public accommodations ordinance because of the “we like Louisville too” behavior exhibited by demonstrators in the past. A Derby demonstration, the *Defender* claimed, would only undermine the housing effort, and was not the “end victory” needed to resolve the broader issue. Editors refused to “provide a trouble-making vehicle for out-of-town extremists of both races who plan to capitalize personally” on the Derby’s cherished traditions, particularly when “world-famous Churchill Downs is and has been voluntarily desegregated.” *Defender* editors knew better than to mention sullyng Louisville’s misleading progressive reputation, so they framed their anti-demonstration argument in terms of hindering open housing

and embarrassing proud locals in the process. The editorial elicited a strong reaction from A.D. King and Hodge, who bristled at the notion that the *Defender* was the source of “all racial progress in this community in the past 30 years.”³⁷

The day before the Derby, Horrigan and HRC officials again questioned the Board of Aldermen’s claims about open housing laws already existing. The HRC cited several recent examples where African Americans sought assistance after they were barred from renting properties in white neighborhoods, only to discover that the HRC was ultimately powerless. Hope for a compromise persisted, but the question posed by housing leaders earlier in the week resurfaced: “if the city had the power for several months to enforce open housing, why didn’t it do so before all the shouting, all the marching, all the bitterness?” A *Courier-Journal* editorial raised a similar question, wondering why “the city’s legal officials wait[ed] until two days before the Kentucky Derby to discover this surprising new interpretation? What assurance is there that City Hall’s spirit of compromise will not fade, once the Derby is past?” Although the “legal move” came “perilously late” and seemed more like a public relations maneuver, the paper argued that it offered “more reason now to proceed with caution rather than with dramatic demonstrations” on Saturday.³⁸

As Derby eve guests enjoyed a night on the town before the race, Louisvillians braced for the worst. Governor Edward Breathitt issued a plea for peace, reiterating that the Derby was not a place where people go “to be swayed politically or ideologically,” but rather one of “pleasure, merriment, food, fellowship, and good humor” in a state with “an excellent record of orderly progress in civil rights.” The Derby, said the governor, was “Kentucky’s friendliest, finest hour in the eyes of people throughout the world,” and the same “genuine Kentucky hospitality” would continue “despite the open-housing problem in Louisville.” Mayor Schmied issued a similar statement pleading for law, order, and respect for Derby tradition, calling on “all our citizens, all our guests, all civil rights leaders who are sincerely interested in not only a fair-housing law, but the welfare of our community to continue to refrain from any disruptive activities...while we continue to work for a solution to this situation.” At the track on Friday—known locally as Oaks Day—“fifteen police cars and four paddy-wagons were parked at the main entrance to the Downs, and about 20 deputy sheriffs—equipped with walkie talkies—were sprinkled through the crowd.” Across the city, caution and dread loomed in equal measure as Saturday approached.³⁹

In the end, housing leaders nixed an on-track incident in favor of an innocuous downtown parade. After extended deliberation, including a nearly all-night meeting on Thursday and another set of talks that lasted until 2 a.m. on Saturday, open housing leaders announced on Derby morning the final decision to call off on-site protests. Ultimately, they decided that a downtown parade remained the best option, citing “the large number of security forces, the dense crowd, and the

fear of alienating many white supporters.” Dr. King emphasized at the news conference that housing leaders would “work even more vigorously” for open housing and framed their decision as “an act of good faith...it is our desire to make it palpably clear that we are not interested in creating a riot” nor, as he accused the press of characterizing it, “disruption for the sake of disruption.” With those words, the open housing threat to the 1967 Kentucky Derby dissipated. King vowed to return to Louisville frequently until the ordinance passed.⁴⁰

On Derby Day morning, six hours before the race, a protest of about 140 open housing supporters marched without incident through Louisville’s relatively deserted downtown streets. Marchers encountered only a few hecklers on their route down Fourth Street—the same street where Gregory had urged housing supporters to lay down on the track a month earlier—to City Hall, where they concluded with a prayer and a singing of “We Shall Overcome.” King had already departed for Atlanta and did not participate in the peaceful march, but many younger housing supporters expressed disappointment over the Derby demonstrations being canceled. One student said he didn’t “see any point in this [downtown march]. I wanted to go to the Derby. I personally would have laid down in the track.” Even after the final decision, dissent reigned among some open housing supporters. When the Derby protest ended, many of them convened at a West End coffee shop for their own Derby party. They put aside their grievances for an evening to celebrate Derby Day, just like hundreds of thousands of others around Louisville.⁴¹

Several miles across town, the security at Churchill Downs was “three times the number” usually assigned to the Derby. Despite the damp conditions, festivities proceeded undisturbed. Precautionary measures included 2,500 additional security personnel at the track, with riot-stick-wielding National Guardsmen on both sides of the oval and police officers on bomb detail at the entrance gates. A *Sports Illustrated* writer observed that “the searching eyes of the law seemed to be everywhere” on Derby Day. When an officer questioned the wife of a Kentucky State Racing Commission official about her picnic basket, she replied that it contained only standard Derby lunch fare—“fried chicken and beaten-biscuit ham sandwiches.” Officers “had little to do as they stood in a fine drizzle except to cradle riot batons in their arms.”⁴²

On a soggy late afternoon, the traditional playing and singing of the controversial, recently amended *My Old Kentucky Home* proceeded under unusual circumstances. Columnist Arthur Daley likened the track to having “the chilling appearance of an occupied village” on race day, describing it as an “unnaturally depressing spectacle.” A capacity crowd watched as 31-1 shot Proud Clarion carried Darby Dan Farm’s fawn-and-brown silks to the winner’s circle with a stretch-running surge in the ninety-third renewal of the Kentucky Derby. Officials reported fewer arrests at the racetrack than in most years. The tumultuous month that had threatened the festivities and left the city unnerved had finally ended.⁴³



Charles P. Farnsley (left) and Frank Burke (right), Lyndon B. Johnson
1964 Presidential Campaign, Louisville, Kentucky.

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The 1967 Derby did not signal the end of the open housing crisis. Activists resumed marching in the South End two days later. Volatile protests and housing meetings continued for nearly six months. In November 1967, local voters had their say, ousting several Republicans on the Board of Aldermen who had opposed open housing. The election was, at least in part, an indictment of a governing body that had dragged its feet on the housing issue. Within a matter of weeks, the political climate had changed, and in early December, the aldermen finally approved an open housing ordinance by a vote of nine to three. For Cunningham, who was active in state and local politics, victory at the polls was gratifying; “Demonstrations are a tactic—an important tactic—but the demonstration within itself never attains your goal...Voting did,” he said. A year later, Kenneth Schmied was out of office as well, losing the mayoral race to Democrat Frank Burke in late 1968. Louisville has not had a Republican mayor since Schmied’s defeat.⁴⁴

While the month preceding the Derby was only a segment of a broader movement, the complex struggle open housing supporters faced during that month illuminated many of the larger issues faced by civil rights activists in the context of a one-of-a-kind cultural event. Direct action and proposed legislation—as well as the stalwart resistance to integrated neighborhoods—were familiar components of Louisville’s civil rights narrative; what was not familiar was the

opportunity to articulate these demands by upstaging an iconic event such as the Kentucky Derby. The Derby's involvement for a brief period in the housing crisis personalized the conflict for Louisville, threatening to taint an event normally associated with refinement and leisure.

In the end, of course, the upstaging never happened. By calling off protests, housing leaders did what was best for their movement while the press and politicians pleading for peace did what was best for Louisville's image. The on-track incident the Tuesday before the Derby represented exaggerated fears of radicalism, something that never came close to happening but nevertheless offered leverage to those looking to preserve the city's reputation. The possibility that demonstrations could backfire on open housing supporters led those supporters to exercise restraint. If the leaders acted in good faith, a large part of that action was a cost-benefit analysis of public perception, a result of the well-founded belief that proceeding as planned would harm the open housing movement. Yet a peaceful day with the cameras rolling masked an inconvenient truth: Louisville, a city that had long coasted on its forward-thinking reputation, still faced the same unresolved racial issues as many American cities when it came to housing. The open housing crisis had fused the Louisville traditions of the Derby's yearly weekend in the national limelight with the belief held by the majority of whites that integration stopped with residential zoning. The city avoided humiliation and riots on the crown jewel of its social calendar, but the crisis exposed how some officials wished to preserve the sanctity of the Derby rather than act promptly on a crucial civil rights issue. The tension of April 1967 spoke more to Louisville's reality than the longstanding myths of the first Saturday in May.

1 William Latham, "Mayor Issues Plea to Aldermen: Pass Open Housing Bill," <i>Louisville Times</i> , Apr. 11, 1967; Ben A. Franklin, "Louisville Scene of Rights Protest," <i>New York Times</i> , Apr. 11, 1967.	5 Economic data underscores the Derby's importance, not just for Louisville, but the entire state. According to statistics compiled in 2001, that year's Derby had "a \$217.8 million impact on the regional economy," while the thoroughbred industry had a "\$3.4 billion economic impact in Kentucky, generating over 55,000 jobs." "The Kentucky Derby," Kentucky Derby Museum, accessed Dec. 6, 2010, http://www.derbymuseum.org/derby_edu.html . While it is unknown who coined this phrase, ABC sportscaster Jim McKay often used it on Derby telecasts in the 1960s and 1970s. Famed sportswriter Red Smith described the Kentucky Derby in a 1979 column in the <i>New York Times</i> : "Then comes the week of the Kentucky Derby, and sinless newspapers that wouldn't mention a horse any other time unless he kicked the mayor to death are suddenly full of information about the steeds that will run and the people they will run for at Churchill Downs on the first Saturday of May." Red Smith, "Mile and a Quarter of Memories," <i>New York Times</i> , Apr. 30, 1979; James C. Nicholson, <i>The Kentucky Derby: How the Run for the Roses Became America's Premier Sporting Event</i> (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 4-5, 67.
2 Shirley Povich, "This Morning...With Shirley Povich," <i>Washington Post</i> , May 4, 1967.	
3 Arthur Daley, "Still Shrouded by Mist," <i>New York Times</i> , May 8, 1967.	
4 For additional reading on this topic, see Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds., <i>The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism</i> (New York: Oxford University Press: 2009), and Thomas Sugrue, <i>Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North</i> (New York: Random House, 2008). In 1963, Louisville won the National Civic League's All-America City Award. http://www.allamericacity-award.com/things-to-know-about-all-america-city-award/past-winners-of-the-all-america-city-award/past-winners-of-the-all-america-city-award-1960s/ .	

- 6 Nicholson, *The Kentucky Derby*, 81, 102; Stephen Foster, *My Old Kentucky Home* (New York: Firth, Pond, and Co., 1853). In January 1967, a Kentucky politician asked the Kentucky Human Rights Commission to “investigate the phraseology” and “racial overtones” of the lyric, arguing that “in view of our 1964 Civil Rights Act...[the lyric] is an alienation to the Negro tourist and Negro citizens of the State of Kentucky.” “‘Darkies’ in State Song Deplored in Kentucky,” *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 1967; Raoul Cunningham (President of Louisville NAACP, community activist) in discussion with the author, July 26, 2013; Nicholson, *The Kentucky Derby*, 5.
- 7 Tracy E. K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 12, 43, 55. For additional reading on race and Louisville in the twentieth century, see Luther Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville: African American Migration in the Urban South, 1930-1970* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Benjamin Fine, “Segregation End Here a Landmark,” *New York Times*, Sept. 11, 1956; Roy Wilkins to the editor, *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 1957.
- 8 K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South*, 39, 9, 46, 61.
- 9 K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South*, 65, 67.
- 10 K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South*, 71; Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 139, 167, 176, 198, 199.
- 11 K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South*, 74, 75, 76.
- 12 Cunningham, in discussion with the author; Frank L. Stanley, “Being Frank about People, Places, and Problems,” *Louisville Defender*, May 5, 1961.
- 13 “High Statesmanship,” *Louisville Defender*, May 12, 1961. The *Defender*, founded in 1933, was the city’s preeminent African American newspaper by the 1940s. Frank Stanley, a prominent white liberal in Louisville, published the *Defender* from 1936 to 1973. The newspaper cited a likely backlash from opponents, inadequate security, and a desire to avoid the confusing process of bailing out protesters as reasons for canceling the demonstrations. Cancellation was “for the good of Louisville,” because the protesters “care[s] more for Louisville than all segregated public accommodations put together.” Stanley, “Being Frank.”
- 14 Stanley, “Being Frank.”
- 15 “NAACP Asks Boycott of Derby to Dramatize Open-Housing Drive,” *Louisville Times*, Apr. 7, 1967.
- 16 Vincent Crowdus, “Open Housing Drive Gained Impetus over Past 5 Years,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Apr. 30, 1967.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 “NAACP Asks Boycott of Derby.”
- 20 Ellen Lake, “Hecklers Throw Rocks at Marchers,” *Louisville Times*, Apr. 8, 1967; Latham, “Mayor Issues Plea”; Cunningham, interview with author.
- 21 “Negroes’ Job Refusals Blamed on Housing,” *Louisville Times*, Apr. 11, 1967.
- 22 “More Demonstrations Are Promised City,” *Louisville Times*, Apr. 12, 1967; “Text of Committee’s Report on Open Housing,” *Louisville Times*, Apr. 12, 1967.
- 23 “Board’s Decision Leads to Downtown Protest,” *Louisville Times*, Apr. 12, 1967.
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- 25 Ellen Lake, “Listen to Us—Or Dismiss Us, Rights Unit Asks,” *Louisville Times*, Apr. 14, 1967; “Human Relations Commission Text,” *Louisville Times*, Apr. 14, 1967; “Past All America City Award Winners,” “Human Relations Commission Text.”
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- 30 Delavan, “Cancellation of Derby Parade Sore Blow to Male High Band,” *Louisville Times*, May 2, 1967; Douglas Robinson, “Louisville Is Shocked at the Canceling of Parade,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1967.

- 31 "Five Youths Dash in Front of Horses During Race," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 3, 1967; Jim Reneissen, "Jockeys Won't Swerve to Miss Demonstrators," *Louisville Defender*, May 3, 1967; Cunningham, in discussion with the author.
- 32 "2 Aides Say Dr. King Will Return Today," *Louisville Times*, May 3, 1967.
- 33 "Derby Disorders Can only Harm, Cannot Help," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 4, 1967 "An Argument against Derby Demonstrations," *Louisville Defender*, May 4, 1967.
- 34 Reneissen, "Jockeys Won't Swerve"; Douglas Robinson, "Dr. King Presses Louisville Fight," *New York Times*, May 4, 1967; "Klan Ready to Help Police on Derby Day," *Louisville Times*, May 3, 1967.
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