Researchers detail effects of 1968 riots on Baltimore businesses

Andrew Cannarsa, The Examiner
2008-04-01 08:00:00.0
Current rank: # 93 of 12,822

BALTIMORE -
In the aftermath of the riots in Baltimore following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, city residents faced a grim reality.

“What was most distressing to the residents was when they realized, ‘We destroyed our own access to retail,’ ” said David Stevens, executive director of the Jacob France Institute at the University of Baltimore.

Looting and vandalism affected about 1,000 city businesses in the four days of riots. Most of the rioters were arrested within 10 blocks of their homes, meaning they were likely ruining their neighborhood store, said Peter Levy, chairman of the history and political science department at York College of Pennsylvania.

“It was mostly smaller retail stores that were affected. The bigger department stores were left relatively unscathed,” Levy said. “Some [smaller stores] never recovered.”

Levy and Kara Kunst, a graduate student at the University of Baltimore, studied the riots. Knowing most of the riots occurred along East Monument Street, Edmunson Avenue, Greenmount Avenue, Harford Road and West North Avenue, they surveyed the areas and researched land records to determine which buildings were businesses in 1968.

Kunst studied the effects on businesses in the decade after the riots, saying the number of lawsuits filed by insurance companies from 1968 to 1979 was "absolutely impressive."

“The big question was, ‘Was the city responsible for the damage to the businesses?’” Kunst said. “The insurers were paying out a lot of money to the businesses, and they eventually dropped their suits when they couldn’t prove the city could have done more to prevent the riots.”

Some of the owners of the affected businesses — mostly grocery stores, liquor stores, drugstores and taverns and bars — either tried to reopen but couldn’t or abandoned the venture altogether, Kunst said. The city took control of the abandoned properties and sold them below market value to new owners.

One interesting aspect, Kunst discovered, was the role Korean Americans played in the revival of business in the area of West North Avenue, now called Station North.

“That area had been badly impacted by the riots,” Kunst said. “A large number of Korean Americans that bought the shops and started their own corner stores. If you walk around the area, you can still see the influence today.”

acannarsa@baltimoreexaminer.com

Examiner

Looting and vandalism affected about 1,000 Baltimore City businesses in the four days of riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. – Photo courtesy of the Lt. James V. Kelly Collection, University of Baltimore