

The Orangeburg Massacre

The shootings occurred on February 8, 1968, two nights after an effort by students from an almost all-black college to bowl at the city's only bowling alley. The owner refused. Tensions rose and violence erupted. When it ended, 28 students were injured and three were dead. [Click here for Event Schedule and Directions.](#)

Learn about the Orangeburg Massacre here.

The shootings occurred on February 8, 1968, two nights after an effort by students from an almost all all-black college to bowl at the city's only bowling alley. The owner refused. Tensions rose and violence erupted. When it ended, nine students and one city policeman received hospital treatment for injuries. Other students were treated at the college infirmary. College faculty and administrators at the scene witnessed at least two instances where a female student was held by one officer and clubbed by another. In total, 28 students were injured and three were dead.

After two days of escalating tension, a fire truck was called to douse a bonfire lit by students on a street in front of the campus. State troopers—all of them white, with little training in crowd control—moved in to protect the firemen. As more than 100 students retreated inside the campus, a student tossed a banister rail which struck one trooper in the face. He fell to the ground bleeding. Five minutes later, almost 70 law enforcement officers lined the edge of the campus. They were armed with carbines, pistols and riot guns—short-barreled shotguns that by dictionary definition are used “to disperse rioters rather than to inflict serious injury or death.” But theirs were loaded with lethal buckshot, which hunters use to kill deer. Each shell contained nine to 12 pellets the size of a .32 caliber pistol slug.

As students began returning to the front to watch their bonfire go out, a patrolman suddenly squeezed several rounds from his carbine into the air—apparently intended as warning shots. As other officers began firing, students fled in panic or dived for cover, many getting shot in their backs and sides and even the soles of their feet.

Survivor Robert Lee Davis recalled in his oral history project (link to video) interview: “The sky lit up. Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! And students were hollering, yelling and running. I went into a slope near the front end of the campus, and I kneeled down. I got up to run, and I took one step; that’s all I can remember. I got hit in the back.”

Later, Davis lay on the bloody floor of the campus infirmary, head to head with victim Samuel Hammond, a friend and quiet freshman halfback who was also shot in the back, and watched him die. Victim Henry Smith, a tall, slender ROTC student who had called his mother at two a.m. to tell her about the “shameful” beating of the female students by policemen, died after arriving at the hospital with five separate wounds. Victim Delano Middleton, a 200-pound high school football and basketball star whose mother worked as a maid at the college, died after asking her to recite the 23rd Psalm for him and then repeating it himself while lying on a hospital table with blood oozing from a chest wound over the heart.

Of 66 troopers on the scene, eight later told the FBI agents they had fired their riot guns at the students after hearing shots. Some fired more than once. A ninth patrolman said he fired his .38 caliber Colt service revolver six times as “a spontaneous reaction to the situation.” At least one city policeman—he later became police chief—fired a shotgun.

[Image Gallery](#)

This brief synopsis of the event was pulled from the 2003 Nieman Report “Documenting the Orangeburg Massacre,” written by Jack Bass. The entire report can be found [here](#).

The full, historically-accepted account of the tragedy in Orangeburg, chronicling the tensions leading up to the fatal night of February 8, 1968, can be found in *The Orangeburg Massacre*, co-authored by Jack Bass and Jack Nelson.

Read more and buy it from Mercer University Press