



# HALLIE Q. BROWN

COMMUNITY CENTER

August 15, 2023

## **Dear Friends of Hallie Q. Brown Community Center,**

If you have been anywhere near the internet in the last couple of weeks, your social media, texts and email have probably been filled with memes, Tik Toks, Tweets, hashtags, etc. of hats flying in the air, Wakandans emerging from portals, #BlackAquaman and a folding chair, among other things of what has been dubbed the Alabama Sweet Tea Party, Rumble on the Docks and the Montgomery Riverfront Brawl.

Now, if you're reading this with a quizzical expression, allow me to catch you up. On August 5th, the Harriet II Riverboat was returning to dock and disembark its passengers, but in its reserved and designated space (due to the gangway access

and mooring requirements), a private pontoon boat belonging to a white family was sitting, prohibiting the safe docking of the Harriet. The Harriet remained away from the dock for 45 minutes attempting to get the family to move using the boat's PA system.



The family responded with obscene gestures, obscene language and taunts and then left the boat, leaving it in the Harriet's space. The Black Co-Captain from the Harriet, Damien Pickett, went onto the dock and began physically pushing the boat out the way. The family returned and began arguing with Pickett when one of them ran up and punched him. Pickett took off his hat, threw it up in the air (presumably to an upper walkway) and started to defend himself. However, he was outnumbered four to one. Quickly, a Black man came down from one of the upper walkways to try and pull them off of Pickett; a 16-year-old Black young man dove off the Harriet, swam to the dock and climbed out of the water to help; the Harriet got close enough that several Black crew and patrons jumped onto the dock and ran to help. At one point a middle-aged man was using a folding chair to deliver his own brand of justice. And chaos ensued. You can watch some of the video [here](#) and [here](#), and there are others from different vantage points if you search the internet.

Right after the incident, the internet exploded in a catharsis of humor, amazement and even

righteous anger (still tinged with humor), because what people saw was a racist incident meeting justice, and they responded in the best possible way and social media did not disappoint. The swimmer was referenced as Black Aquaman, Lil Namor, Scuba Gooding, Jr. and Sharkus Garvey among other things. Memes with historical figures like Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, and Harriet Tubman all holding folding chairs have populated the internet.



Satirical video reenactments of the fight, and songs about the brawl and other clips have sprung up as well. All across social media, a sigh of relief in the form of laughter has been heard, because another racist assault didn't end with another dead Black person, ended with three white men being arrested (so far) for clear criminal activity.

Now, there have been jokes about the historical significance of what happened on the Riverfront, such as the first Black man to swim to a fight; but in reality, there really is tremendous significance to the events which transpired that day. But to understand that, we have to take a broader look at the Riverfront and Montgomery itself.

Montgomery, Alabama, also known as "the Heart of Dixie," was the first capitol of the Confederacy and a major port for the Transatlantic Slave Trade. By 1861, over 435,000 enslaved Black people, nearly 45% of the population of the state resided there. Slave plantations were the center of the Alabama economy as the southern plantations were producing 75% of the global cotton supply. It was a central hub of the Slavery economy. Enslaved Black people would arrive via train or riverboat and would be chained together and paraded down Commerce Street before being sold in the Slave auctions. Its foundation and especially that very riverfront, are deeply rooted in Slavery and one of the most horrific periods of American history.

But Montgomery is also a significant part of the birth of the Civil Rights movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott began there after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat despite the law requiring her to do so. A year later, the Supreme Court struck down that law. A decade later, Montgomery would be the site of Bloody Sunday, when state troopers attacked Civil Rights marchers, led by John Lewis, as they marched across the Edmund Pettus bridge from Selma to Montgomery. This incident sparked national outrage and led to the passing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.



So this place was not merely a dock, but a point of significance in our history and our heritage—a site of the injustice visited upon us for mere whimsy, for intentional intimidation, for racism.

It is, perhaps significant, that this would happen at the beginning of Black August, when we commemorate the struggle for Black liberation and remember the countless organizers, activists, and freedom fighters who sacrificed their freedom and lives in support of this.

You see, in that pontoon boat, there was represented the same white people whose privilege, self-importance and racist attitudes gave them leave to enslave and sell, abuse and otherwise hold power over our ancestors. And while those things are illegal today, that same entitlement still persists and, emboldened by indicted politicians and certain "small town" songs, spurred these boaters to not merely ignore the Harriett returning to the dock, but to intentionally block their space and shout obscenities. Moreover, it led this group of white folks to think that it was okay to attack not just a random Black man, but the co-Captain of the boat for doing his job. That same entitlement led them to believe they could act with impunity and without consequences...



How wrong they were.

First, it was the Black man who came down to pull them off the co-Captain, then it was the young Black man who swam, fully clothed and with shoes on, to the dock and emerged ready; after that, it was a whole group of staff, passengers and bystanders...it was the community. It was the Black community and its allies coming not only to help this man, but to make a statement.

There was a time in this country, less than a hundred years ago, when a Black man could be killed by a white man, for whatever reason, and there were no consequences, no arrest, no trial, no justice.

There was a time in this country, less than fifty years ago, when a group of white people attacking a Black man would result in the police showing up to ascertain how it was the Black man's fault and what punishment he should face.

There was a time in this country, less than 5 years ago, when the police would have shown up to a situation like this and it would have ended with at least one Black man dead, NOT the police standing behind the defenders and arresting white people.

That time is no more. That was the statement made in Montgomery that day. And that is what makes this so significant. This will not end up in the history books (despite it being the first time a Black man swam to a fight), but it is a turning point in our history. A moment when our community rose up and responded to racism as one voice and said "no more!"



August was chosen to commemorate Black liberation because it is a special month for Black power building. Revolutionary moments such as the Watts Uprising, Haitian Revolution, Nat Turner Rebellion, Fugitive Slave Law Convention, and March on Washington all happened in August. Additionally, many revolutionaries, such as Marcus Garvey, Marsha P. Johnson, and Fred Hampton, were born in August.

More than fifty years after the first Black August, groups continue the Black August legacy of commemoration by amplifying the history of resistance and creating spaces for Black people to come together in community and honor the legacies of freedom fighters who are still imprisoned or have been wrongly executed.

On August 5th, another example was added to the fold.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JP'.

Jonathan Palmer  
Executive Director

For more information and details on the history of Juneteenth and other significant periods of history, please visit our [Addressing Systemic Racism](#) page on our website.