

*After first-hand experience,  
Greensboro wouldn't be without them*

# Negro Police In A Southern City

October 1947

**I**T might have been a scene in the municipal court of any Southern city. The defendant, a Negro man about forty years old, was accused of assault and battery, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest. The police officer who had made the arrest gave his testimony briefly and clearly. There was dignity and assurance in his bearing, in the way he wore his uniform, and in the way he presented his testimony. One by one the witnesses—all Negroes—appeared before the court and testified. They held their heads high and spoke without hesitation. The defendant himself then pleaded drunkenness as an excuse for his acts. He was found guilty as charged and given a stiff jail sentence. The case was closed.

It might have been a routine case in the municipal court of any Southern city—except for one or two things. In the first place, the city was Greensboro, N. C. In the second place, the Negro witnesses were frank and cooperative and seemed eager to see that justice was done. This is not always true in Southern courtrooms. In the next place, the policeman knew what was expected of him and gave it simply and succinctly. His knowledge of proper courtroom procedure is not always found among policemen, in the South or elsewhere. In the fourth place, the judge and the spectators were serious and attentive as the case was presented; they seemed to find it quite important that a Negro had attacked a member of his own race. And, finally, this case was not just any case in any courtroom because the policeman was a Negro.

This scene couldn't have taken place even in Greensboro four years ago, for there were no Negro policemen there then. True, there had been talk of employing Negro policemen. In fact, the idea had been discussed for about fifteen years. But it had never been put into practice because too many people felt that "it just wouldn't work." The reasons why it wouldn't work seemed to them self-evident.

They had other arguments, too: Greensboro's white policemen wouldn't work on the same force with Negroes; it wouldn't be possible to find Negroes who were intelligent and dependable enough to trust with so much responsibility; and finally, of course, there was the inevitable protest that using Negro policemen wasn't in keeping with Southern tradition.

But those who championed the proposal weren't to be put off so easily. Negro policemen were being used with great success in Charlotte, Raleigh, Winston-Salem, and other Southern cities. There were plenty of highly qualified Negroes who were willing to apply for the job if it were authorized. Far from opposing the idea, most of Greensboro's Negro population was enthusiastically in favor

of it. These were the answers that Negro leaders and progressive white citizens took to the city manager, the chief of police, and the city council.

In order to get a clear idea of the situation, it might be well to pause here and take notice of a few pertinent facts about Greensboro. In 1940 Greensboro had a population of about 59,000. It is one of the few cities in the nation having an army camp within the city limits and within walking distance of the center of town. At the time with which we are concerned, the camp served as an overseas replacement depot and housed between thirty and forty thousand men, both white and Negro. So, when the use of Negro police was being urged, especially difficult police problems existed in the city. These problems did not disappear overnight with the end of hostilities, for the camp later served as a separation center. The authorities knew that if a test were to be made it would be under trying conditions.

There were also favorable circumstances for proponents of the plan. Of Greensboro's 59,000 people, 16,000, or 27 per cent, were Negroes. Though Negro spokesmen had been urging the use of Negro police for fifteen years or more, the potential voting power of the Negro population had never been effectively used to help bring the move about. But in 1943 a relatively large number of Negro voters were registered. What is more, they were kept informed of the efforts their leaders were making and the response those efforts were receiving. In short, the strength of the Negro ballot was brought to bear on the question. This does not mean that the Negro vote was the only important factor in the campaign for Negro police. But, more than any other one thing, it assured the proposal a fair hearing and serious consideration by city authorities.

Those who favored the employment of Negro police were also fortunate in having a man like City Manager Henry A. Yancey to deal with. Mr. Yancey, who is now city manager of Charlotte, had previously managed three Southern cities with Negro populations ranging from 27 to 42 per cent. His record was one of scrupulous fairness to all citizens, regardless of race or economic status. Nor was the idea of using Negro policemen new to him. He had come to Greensboro with a good deal of information on the subject.

"I must admit," says Mr. Yancey, "that I was cool to the proposal at first. This was not for any reasons of prejudice on my part; I had only recently left Durham, where I had already put the plan into effect. I simply wasn't convinced that the Greensboro public was sufficiently prepared for such a move."

But it wasn't long before Mr. Yancey decided that the proposal at least warranted an experiment, and in October, 1943, the City Council, upon his recommendation and that of the chief of police, authorized the appointment of two Negro officers on a trial basis. This is how Mr. Yancey describes the result:

"The white population accepted the action with scarcely a comment; it is certainly true to say that there was no protest. The Negroes received it with great acclaim, and the press, both local and in the surrounding states, hailed it as a 'step forward.'"

"Obviously the ultimate success or failure of the experiment depended in a great measure upon the caliber of the men selected, and we set about to obtain the best possible talent. Naturally all applications were received and considered. Our requirements for appointment had been greatly modified due to the war

emergency, and if we insisted upon a higher standard for Negro applicants than we did for the whites, we were risking the charge of discrimination. However, we overcame this by enlisting the aid of the various Negro groups in securing for us applications from good men, constantly impressing upon them the importance of our first selections. The two appointments were not actually made until the 19th of January, 1944.

"These men were given careful training and instruction by the best officers we had on the force, for a period of six weeks. They were then assigned to the plain clothes department for approximately four months, after which time they were placed in uniform and assigned to duty in the largest strictly Negro section of the city.

"As I have already said, they were appointed on a trial basis. However, on March 1st, 1945, we appointed two additional Negro officers, and since that time two more have been added to the force. This in itself was enough to remove any doubt as to the efficiency and usefulness of these men and established as a permanent policy the use of Negro officers in Greensboro.

"These men were given exactly the same authority that the white officers have. I am of the opinion that there is no legal way to confer less authority upon them. Once they have taken the oath of office, they have all the duties and responsibilities imposed by law. We never entertained the thought of restricting their authority. They have worked only in the Negro sections, and their activity has been governed only by instruction, training, and what good judgment on their part would dictate.

"There have been a few cases where they were forced to give a traffic citation and to make an arrest of a white person, where the circumstances were such that they would have otherwise been guilty of neglect of duty. In each of these cases their attitude and demeanor has been such as to reflect credit upon themselves and the department and no untoward incidents have resulted.

"The work of these men has been excellent, equal in every respect to that of the white officers. They have gained the confidence, respect, and admiration of the white officers, and on a number of occasions they have received special praise and commendation from their superior officers for meritorious conduct under very trying circumstances."

What about the claim of the skeptics that Negroes would not cooperate with officers of their own race? The answer is apparent to anybody who will take the trouble to stroll down East Market Street, which runs through the heart of Greensboro's largest Negro section. East Market has the reputation for being a "tough" district, and, in accordance with the policy of the Greensboro Police Department, the Negro officers work in pairs. "Not that it's necessary," commented one Negro storekeeper. "Why, if one of those fellows needed help, all he'd have to do is crook his little finger and people would come running from all directions." You can easily see that Greensboro's Negroes are proud of their policemen, for as the Negro officers walk past on their tours they are greeted on every side with friendliness and respect.

One thing the casual observer might not realize, however, is the transformation that has taken place on East Market Street in the past four years.

"Before we got Negro policemen," says the Rev. J. J. Green, a Negro minister,

"East Market Street was so dangerous you didn't dare walk down it with your wife. Now the street is unimaginably changed. You don't even hear bad language any more."

The Negroes of Greensboro are not the only ones who are proud of the Negro officers. Police Chief L. L. Jarvis needs little urging to tell you how well they have performed. Chief Jarvis, who began his police career as a rookie cop in 1919, has some pretty definite ideas about police officers.

"I don't like bullies," he says, "and I don't believe a policeman ever gets too old to go to school." The Negro policemen have proved more than satisfactory on both counts. "They've shown tact and common-sense in performing their duties," says the Chief. "All six of them are college men, and they learn quickly and thoroughly."

Chief Jarvis has been consulted many times by officials of Southern cities contemplating the employment of Negro police. He has one answer for all of them. "If the right men are picked and given the right kind of training and support, only one thing can result—a better and more efficient police department." According to Chief Jarvis, any city which has no Negro police is simply denying itself the chance to have better law enforcement.

---

**INCREASE IN NEGRO POLICE IN THE SOUTH, 1945-1954**

Year	States Employing	Cities Employing	Uniformed Policemen	Plainclothes Policemen	Police- women
1945	9	29	131*		3
1946	10	42	208*		5
1947	10	41	196	25	7
1948	11	54	248	23	8
1949	12	62	301	33	7
1950	13	77	369	41	17
1951	13	82	381	44	18
1952	13	96 Cities	471	60	50
		6 Counties			
1953	13	112 Cities	545	87	90
		18 Counties			
1954	13	143 Cities	618	92	112
		22 Counties			

---

*\*Includes both uniformed and plainclothes policemen.*

---

As for the attitude of the white policemen, Chief Jarvis recalls that when the proposal was first made "there were a few who didn't like the idea." But once the Negro officers were actually appointed, the objections melted away into thin air. And since that time there has never been any question of bad relations between the white and Negro officers. Perhaps the fact that the Police Department offers its members a course in race relations has something to do with it.

After four years of using Negro policemen, Greensboro no longer looks on them as an innovation, but has accepted them as a natural and normal part of the life of the city. This attitude is perhaps best summed up by the comment of a local newspaperman.

"Negro police?" he said. "They're not news in Greensboro, any more than white policemen are." He thought a moment and then added, "It might be news, though, to remind our people that we haven't always had them."