

## **Shots in the Back: Exhuming the 1970 Augusta Riot (Bonus - Could Charles Oatman's Death Happen Today?)**

**Sea:** Hey, it's Sea Stachura, host of Shots in the Back.

In the fall of 2019, my students at the Jessye Norman School of the Arts started learning about the Augusta riot. And the first thing that we decided to talk about was the death of Charles Oatman, because he was the spark that lit the uprising. And he was the subject of the first episode.

History can feel nebulous for a lot of us — including kids. So I wanted them to think about whether they could connect the Augusta riot with what we're seeing today. Their lives, their understanding of what happens in the world. Basically, could what happened to Charles 50 years ago happen again today?

So I asked them that exact question in December of 2019. This was six-months before Minneapolis police killed George Floyd, and a couple of months before three Brunswick, Georgia-area residents killed Ahmaud Arbery. My student, Tiara Dugger, had an answer right away. She was 17 at the time.

**Tiara:** The thing that's different from back then from today is, like, the fact that our technology is way different. And the way, like, we convict people and how we gather evidence and all that other stuff, that's way different. We have a lot more protocols put in place so things like that won't happen.

**Sea, with kids:** You know, but then I think of Sandra Bland.

**Tiara:** Oh, my gosh. Oh, my God. I completely forgot about that.

**Sea:** Sandra Bland was a 28-year-old Black woman who was pulled over by a Texas state trooper. His name was Brian Encinia. And the reason he listed for stopping her was [“failure to signal a lane change.”](#) The traffic stop got heated when Encinia demanded that she stub out her cigarette. She refused. He tried to pull her from the car, and eventually slammed her head into concrete. And then he arrested her for kicking him. Bland wasn't able to make bond and she missed her first day at her new job. She spent three days in that cell by herself.

Three days later, EMT's wheeled her body from her cell. The sheriff's department [ruled her death a suicide](#) by hanging.

**Tiara:** It is also kind of weird that there weren't any cameras where she was. Because it's like — you're in a county jail, there should be cameras everywhere just in case something weird happens or something like that. And you have no evidence of what happened. That's kind of fishy to me.

**Sea:** But Aidan Allen questioned the reliability of technology.

**Aidan:** You know, a camera isn't always going to be playing when something's happening. A camera — there's going to always be a blind spot in those cameras. That's sometimes... Technology doesn't always help sometimes.

**Sea:** Guards were supposed to be supervising Charles Oatman and Sandra Bland when both of them died. Charles was in a crowded jail cell for six-weeks. Sandra Bland was in a cell by herself for three days.

And people wondered, why would she kill herself? And where were the guards?

In our first episode of *Shots in the Back*, people like former-city council member Grady Abrams and the Rev. Claude Harris echoed these questions. And they held the guards fully responsible for what happened to Oatman. A few of my students agreed with that.

Kaleyah Turmon is 12 years old. And she had a really hard time wrapping her head around the guards participating in this — either passively or actively.

**Sea, with kids:** There were guards, there were jailers who were walking past the cell of Charles Oatman and the four other people who were in the cell with him.

**Kaleyah:** So like, they just kept walking — like knowing what was happen.

**Sea, with kids:** Remember, it was a jail that was built for 50 people and there were 150 people.

**Kid:** Oh.

**Tiara:** That kinda — that just makes it even more suspicious about....

**Kaleyah:** So they just walk by hearing all that, like, suffering and stuff — they just walk by it all. I couldn't ever. Even if I didn't — even if I was like in their place, like as, like horrible in the head as them, I still couldn't, like, stand that.

**Atticus:** Oh yeah. That would be like break me.

**Sea:** That's Atticus Dillard-Wright. He and Aidan Allen join in.

**Aidan:** Well, you also got to think — their position. Maybe they have to do that, like...

**Kaleyah:** Have to walk by somebody getting murdered?

**Kid:** I don't know.

**Kid:** No, they can't...

**Kaleyah:** They — they can't just like, keep walking by the cell, hearing their scream and all that.

**Atticus:** It's their job to make sure that no prisoners die. It's their job to keep the prisoners safe and make sure that all parties stay until they are due to be released or they are due to be on trial.

**Sea:** That didn't happen for either person. Protestors of both victims shared a central message: value us as human beings.

The officer who arrested Bland was eventually charged with perjury and fired from the department. A judge later dropped those charges, because the officer had agreed to end his career in law enforcement.

As for Oatman's case, no charges were ever brought against any of the guards. And we'll tell you about that in a later episode.

**Aidan:** It's a case of people, individual people, with biases. And, and high parts in the law enforcement, basically calling the shots like Charles Oatman and Sandra Bland. It's a case of people being like they don't really care about — and don't really do anything about — and just put them aside and...

**Sea, with kids:** And when you say people, you mean like the public at large?

**Aidan:** Well, like...

**Sea, with kids:** Like nobody really cared what happened to Sandra Bland, or do you mean people like?

**Aidan:** Those in law enforcement. And like the, judges and the people who are actually doing — suppose to be, like, doing something about this. And it's kind of like, this one cop is kind of — maybe he's a little ban-hand or whatever and, and he's just not thinking right. But he did this and affected someone's life, because either he has a bias or he's just not thinking right at that time.

**Sea:** Bias against black people is still a recurring issue in America. According to the Stanford Open Policing Project, Black and brown people are disproportionately stopped and searched by police. And police search their vehicles for a lot less cause than they do for white drivers.

So, let's get back to our original question. Could what happened to Sandra Bland have happened in 1970? And could Charles Oatman's story happen today?

Kaleyah and Tiara respond. Kaleyah starts.

**Kaleyah:** I mean, I think that the Charles Oatman thing could have happened like to this day. Because, then again, you still have people who just don't care. Like, whatever is happening, they don't feel like it's any of their business because it's not them or it has nothing to do with them. Or like it's not affecting them. But, yeah, it could have happened today. But I don't — it might have been stopped because, I mean, we have like better, like we were talking about, technology and stuff and like cameras and all that. But I think it would have been stopped if it happened today. But then again, it could have still happened.

**Tiara:** Could that I — I think the Sandra Bland thing could have happened back in the 70s. But Charles Oatman? No. Like he wouldn't, that wouldn't be...

**Sea, with kids:** Couldn't happen today?

**Tiara:** No, like they — that wouldn't have happened, because I do recall you saying that he's disabled. So there are laws and stuff in place to keep stuff like that from happening, like...

**Sea, with kids:** Hold up a second. What I'm asking is not could Charles Oatman died...

**Tiara:** Could have died.

**Sea, with kids:** It...

**Tiara:** Could it have happened, OK.

**Sea, with kids:** Could Charles Oatman's situation, where he gets put in a jail with adults — even though he's not an adult — and beaten to death...

**Tiara:** Oh, no.

**Sea, with kids:** And, and then the police say, "oh, he just fell off of his bunk."

**Tiara:** No.

**Sea, with kids:** That couldn't happen today?

**Tiara:** No, it could not. Because, you know, there are — I would've just seen it in TV shows and stuff like that. There are separate holding cells, cells for people who are over the age of 18 and who are under the age of 18. Like, they're minors. So you get put somewhere else and not like, whoa, you know, not like with the general consensus of people.

**Sea, with kids:** I hate to tell you this, but there actually was a place for youth to stay. He should have been in the Youth Development Center.

**Tiara:** Yeah, that definitely couldn't have happened today.

**Sea:** I was surprised by Tiara's remark and I wondered if her opinion had changed post-George Floyd and Amhaud Arbery. So I picked her up and we drove around some of the Augusta neighborhoods where the riot took place.

**Sea, with Tiara:** Yeah. So apparently, like behind us was a department store and a liquor store.

**Tiara:** Like where the funeral home is?

**Sea, with Tiara::** The department store was set on fire.

**Tiara:** Huh? So the liquor store — was the liquor store also burned down? Or was it just...

**Sea, with Tiara:** I think it was just ransacked.

**Sea:** She says she can't even remember being so optimistic about Black lives in the hands of law enforcement.

**Tiara:** I don't know why I would have said something like that. Probably because I couldn't foresee something like this happening. Just the blatant disrespect for

humanity. Like, I don't, it just — it baffles me because I'm like: wow, I really, I really had that much trust in, you know, our federal system to where they wouldn't purposely want to harm us and just disregard us as human beings. But now it's like, oh, I see how you really are. Y'all had me fooled. Like, wow. It's interesting.

What changed? I would probably say this situ — this entire situation, the quarantine — all that stuff changes my perspective entirely. And it just, it made me more cautious when I go outside. Who I'm around. When I'm walking down the street. My friends walking down the street like... I hate having to fear for my own friend's lives like that — and even my own, and my own family's.

**Sea:** Tiara's younger brother is 8 years-old. She has no idea how she or her mom can keep him safe. It doesn't seem possible.

Thanks for listening to Shots in the Back: Exhuming the 1970 Augusta Riot. It's a production of Georgia Public Broadcasting and the Jessye Norman School of the Arts. For more of our reporting, visit [GPB.org/Shots](http://GPB.org/Shots).

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