

**Newspaper coverage of the fire-bombing/shooting  
at the COFO "Freedom House" in Columbia, MS  
in the wee hours of Saturday, July 31, 1965**

It's interesting to compare these three articles. The first two are fairly thorough, though it seems clear from the second one that Police Chief Johnson was trying to pin the fire on us. The third, however, from Columbia's own paper, is a travesty -- little detail, no mention of the shooting, and a strong implication that there was more than one credible version of how the fire started.

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***Tupelo Journal, date unknown***  
(from a clipping saved by Dick Atlee)

**Bullets, Fire Riddle Columbia COFO Office**

COLUMBIA (UPI) -- A building housing civil rights workers was heavily damaged by fire and riddled with bullets before dawn Saturday, but no injuries were reported.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation joined local authorities in probing the attack by night-riders on the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) "Freedom House." Five workers inside the building at the time said the attack occurred about 1:30 a.m.

Police Chief E.E. Johnson confirmed the bombing occurred, but declined further comment pending completion of an investigation. An FBI spokesman said an effort was being made "to determine if there was any federal violation" and to assist local officers.

Richard Atlee, a white COFO volunteer from Pennsylvania, said he was the only person awake when the attack occurred, and he aroused the others -- three more whites and a Negro -- in time for them to flee the flames.

Atlee, 20, of Monroeville, Pa., said he was sitting in the front room writing a letter when he first heard a noise from the outside -- a rap at the door -- but he looked outside and saw nothing.

I went to bed and heard a 'ka-plump' sound like something being thrown on the porch," the University of Chicago student said. "Within seconds, fire was coming through the wall which separates the front room from the porch."

Atlee said he awakened the others and began hearing "what I thought was firecrackers, but we found the bullet holes in the walls later."

"It seemed they (the attackers) would wait until they could hear us scuffling around inside, and they would begin firing again," Atlee said.

Officers said several plastic bleach bottles which had apparently contained gasoline were found on the front porch, along with a number of buckshot "and larger pieces of lead shot."

Atlee said he never saw anyone outside during the shooting "but I heard a car at one point." He said several shots were fired after they fled to the outside "and I just fell to the ground to get out of the way."

He said local police "apparently were on a routine patrol and arrived on the scene within minutes."

Atlee said he and the other workers counted 14 bullet or buckshot holes in a front window screen and seven holes in the back side of the building.

Inside the building with Atlee were Negro Curtis Styles of Biloxi; and white volunteers Sara Shumer of Berkley, Calif., Ann Marsh of BOWLSBURG, Pa., and Samuel Gross of New York City, a student at Columbia University.

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### ***Hattiesburg American, July 31, 1965***

(retrieved from <http://newspaperarchive.com/hattiesburg-american/1965-07-31/page-1>)

## **CR Headquarters burns in Columbia**

COLUMBIA -- A mysterious early-morning blaze swept through local headquarters of civil rights workers today but no one was injured.

A report from the highway patrol indicated the blaze was started with a fire-bomb and another source gave a similar report.

Fire Chief J. D. Salters said when he reached the place shortly before 2 a. m. he found no fragments of glass on the small front porch, but the smell of gasoline was strong on the charred porch.

The chief added that evidence was the blaze began inside the one-storied structure about the same time it started outside [*this appears to have been an attempt to blame us for the fire*]; that mattresses on the floor, also a couch, were charred. Salters said the four whites and one Negro who slept in the place had no bedsteads.

Richard Atlee, of Pennsylvania, one of the four whites in the house, said he was awakened by a thud on the front porch and went out and looked around. He said he thought he heard a car pull away but saw no one, closed the door and a few minutes later there was a series of explosions that shot flames through the house.

Atlee and the others got out safely, taking a few things with them. They estimated about \$500 worth of equipment was destroyed by the fire.

In addition to Atlee, the white civil rights workers staying in the house identified themselves as Ann Marsh, also of Pennsylvania; Sara Shumer of Berkeley, Calif., and Sammel [*sic*] Gross of

Syracuse, N.Y. The Negro said he was Curtis Styles of Biloxi.

Styles said he had been working in Columbia about a month, while the other four said they had been here about 12 days. They said they were connected [CR fire -- (continued from Page 1)] with the Freedom Democratic Party.

The frame residence was owned by Roberta Dukes of Columbia.

A fireman said the place was "gutted" from end to end. [*hardly!*]

The building is located on Nathan St. in the heart of the Negro quarter.

Sheriff John Homer Willoughby said five hours after the fire that he hadn't heard of the incident. Chief of Police E. E. Johnson could not be reached for comment.

Agents of the FBI were on the scene investigating.

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### ***Columbia-Progress, August 5, 1965***

(photocopy of clipping from Mayor E.D. McLean's files at the Marion County Historical Society)

### **Blaze Damages Home On Nathan**

A fire of more than passing interest was brought under control Friday night by Columbia's efficient fire department. There was some damage, but generally speaking the firemen were credited with saving the house.

The alarm went in about 2:00 o'clock Saturday morning. The building is a house at 623 Nathan Avenue, one block from Owens street and near Lafayette street. It was occupied by a group of out-of-towners. Cause of the fire is not known. There are several versions.

The records show that the group occupying the house are representatives of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party here to encourage Negroes to vote and otherwise help them. Residents listed are two white women: Ann Marsh, Goalsburg, Pa., and Sarah Shumer, UCLA, Berkley, Calif.; two white men: Samuel Gross, Columbia University, N.Y.; Richard Atlee, Monroeville, Pa.; and one Negro, Curtis Styles, 709 Main Street, Biloxi, Miss.