

# The 1979 Greensboro Massacre:

## A Lesson in Truth & Reconciliation in the United States?

### Overview

Constitutional Rights Foundation is proud to have partnered with [Carolina K-12](#), a program of UNC-Chapel Hill's Carolina Public Humanities, to develop lesson plans about moments and themes from North Carolina history that resonate through the past and present of the United States.

In this lesson, students learn about the Greensboro Massacre of November 3, 1979. First, they read a short backgrounder on some of the events of that day, as well as their aftermath. Then, in a jigsaw discussion activity using a mix of primary and secondary sources, they learn more about the context of the massacre, what happened, the groups involved, and how it was reported and remembered. Finally, in a jigsaw discussion format, students discuss the documents they examined, hear about issues raised in the other documents, and discuss what lessons this chapter in U.S. history may provide for the country today.

Many places around the world — and around the United States — have had moments and eras of what many people refer to as “hard history.” This is history that is an ugly chapter from the past that can be hard for the present generation to face. Hard history leaves a mark on groups and communities, even on entire countries.

This lesson also includes an optional extension activity in which students propose a mandate and some elements of a structure for a local, regional, or national truth and reconciliation commission on an issue of “hard history” that matters to them.

This lesson is a supplement to any lesson or unit on the following topics: the civil rights movement in the United States, struggles against racism and racist violence in the United States, political and social movements in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, communism and anti-communism in the United States, and apartheid and efforts at reconciliation in South Africa.

For a reading and classroom activity on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was one of the models for the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see this article from the Summer 2020 issue of CRF's *Bill of Rights in Action*, [South Africa: Confronting the Country's Apartheid Past](#).

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe the context, events, and outcomes of the Greensboro Massacre.
- Identify the main groups involved in the Greensboro Massacre.
- Analyze primary and secondary sources to gain understanding about how the history of this event has remained contested and contentious.
- Consider what lessons the Greensboro Massacre and its aftermath in the community may offer for the U.S. today.
- (Optional) Propose and outline the mandate of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for a city, state, or for the United States on an issue of “hard history” that matters to them.

## Materials

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- [Google Slide](#) for Focus Discussion activity
- [Handout A: The Greensboro Massacre](#) (a background reading one-pager)
- [Handout B: Guiding Questions for Document Analysis](#)
- [Handout C: Primary and Secondary Sources Related to the Greensboro Massacre](#)
- [Handout D: Extension Activity - Creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)

## Preparation

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In order to participate effectively and meaningfully in this lesson, students should have some background knowledge about the struggle for civil rights in the United States, as well as a basic understanding of the Ku Klux Klan as a violent hate group. It will also be important to let students know that the lesson includes sensitive content and material, some of which may be upsetting or difficult to hear about and discuss.

## Procedure

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### I. Focus Discussion

- A. Show the [Google Slide](#) that features one of the most famous photos from the massacre, as well as a series of questions to help students analyze it. Please note that the photo on the slide is of a man with one of the victims of the massacre after the victim was shot. Please consider your own students and community in deciding the best way to use this photo, including if you need to warn students about it.
- B. After giving students a chance to look carefully at the photo on their own, start walking them through the questions in a whole-class discussion.

The first set of questions that appear on the slide are:

- Describe what you see.
- What do you notice first?

If students are having a hard time being specific or really looking closely at the photo, you can also ask them:

- What people and objects are shown?
- What other details can you see?

The second set of questions that appear on the slide are:

- What's happening in the image?
- When do you think it was made? What clues help you narrow that down?

If students need more prompting to examine it more closely, you can add the following questions:

- Why do you think this image was made?
- Who do you think was the audience for this image?
- What's missing from this image?

Note: These analysis questions are adapted from the [Library of Congress's Teacher's Guide for Analyzing Photographs and Prints](#).

After analyzing the photograph, you can tell students that it was taken on November 3, 1979 during an event that came to be known as the Greensboro Massacre, and that this is what you will be examining today.

## II. Background Reading

- A. Distribute/assign [Handout A: The Greensboro Massacre](#). Have students read the handout and annotate the text by jotting down questions in the margins, circling unfamiliar terms, and underlining the main points of the text. If teaching remotely, the PDF of the reading can be assigned through whatever LMS you are using and have students make annotations either electronically or with pen and paper.
- B. Once students have read the text, open up discussion for clarifying or comprehension questions.

*Note to teachers:* Don't feel that you need to answer many questions beyond what's covered in this primer because many of the details surrounding the events of that day, as well as the short- and long-term consequences, will be addressed in the primary and secondary source analysis.

- C. If students have questions that have so far not been answered, note them on the board or the screen, so that they can be revisited after the document exploration activity. Hopefully many of them will have been answered by that portion of the lesson.

*Note to teachers:* This reading could also be assigned for homework the night before this lesson in order to give students more time to analyze and discuss the documents and/or to free up time to do the extension activity in class. If assigned in advance, begin the class with the clarifying discussion about the text itself.

## III. Jigsaw: Primary & Secondary Sources Related to the Greensboro Massacre

- A. Tell students that they are going to examine a range of documents related to the massacre in order to get a better understanding of the context in which it took place, what happened on the day of the killings, the groups involved, and how the deadly day was reported and remembered.
- B. Give each student a copy of [Handout B: Guiding Questions for Document Analysis](#). Explain that they will answer these questions for the document or documents they will be analyzing.
- C. Divide students into seven groups. Each of the groups will be the expert on one of the seven documents included in [Handout C: Primary and Secondary Sources Related to the Greensboro Massacre](#). Assign and distribute to each group one of the seven documents included in Handout C. Students should read their assigned document and then work together to analyze its significance using Handout B. Students should also prepare to present the document in their Jigsaw group, where they will also be hearing about the rest of the documents.

Now form groups of (at least) seven students, making sure that each group has at least one representative from each of the previous document expert groups. In this new group, have students report out (in order) about the document on which they are the "expert." Experts shouldn't just summarize their document, but also share with the group how they and their fellow experts thought the source did (or didn't) help to shed additional light on the causes, events, and/or effects of the Greensboro Massacre.

## IV. Assessment/Closure

Once all of the documents have been presented and discussed, bring all students back together for a final debriefing and to see what questions students may still have.

Some possible final questions for discussion:

- Which document did you find most helpful in better understanding what happened on the day of the Greensboro Massacre?
- Which document did you find most helpful in better understanding why many people in Greensboro were so bitterly divided about the events and impact of the massacre on the community?
- Although it stressed the KKS/Nazis' violent track record and some of the questionable tactics of the CWP/WVO marchers, the GTRC stressed that "the single most important element that contributed to the violent outcome of the confrontation was the absence of police" (see Document 5). Ask students if they can identify other contemporary or historic examples of protests where either the presence or absence of the police proved to be a key factor in shaping a violent or nonviolent outcome?
- What is the significance of marking the site of the massacre? Why was this important?
- What do you think of a truth and reconciliation commission as a mechanism for confronting "hard history" at the local, state, or national level?
- What lessons do you think other communities — and the country — can take from Greensboro's experience after the massacre?

For a written assessment, students can be asked to create a written response to any or a selection of the above questions.

## Extension Activity

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Since this may be the first time students hear about the work of a truth and reconciliation commission, it's an opportunity for them to delve deeper into one approach that can be taken as countries and communities contend with their own "hard histories."

Distribute [Handout D](#) to students. Give them a few minutes to read parts of the mandates (assignments) of two truth and reconciliation commissions, the GTRC and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Take some time to discuss the excerpts from the mandates, considering questions like:

- What does it mean?
- What does it suggest?
- What is different about these ideas? Why does that matter?

Then give students time to work independently on the additional questions on the handout. These questions are designed to help them to start thinking about issues or places they think merit a truth and reconciliation commission and to begin an initial outline of what such a commission might look like.

If they need additional examples of the kinds of events/issues/time periods that might be addressed by a TRC, you can offer some ideas. These might include current events such as the poisoning of the drinking water in Flint, Michigan, overmarketing & overprescribing of opioids that contributed to the opioid crisis, the disproportionate number of unsolved murders of Native American women in the U.S., and incidents of police brutality. Or students may want to take a more historical approach and consider investigating events from U.S. or world history such as the murder of abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy in 1837, the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, or the Rape of Nanjing of 1937.

A word of caution: These are inevitably difficult, controversial, and often painful topics, so it's important to approach them with sensitivity when discussing with your students. You know your students and your community best; we offer these ideas here knowing that you will judge what will work best for you and your students.

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## The Greensboro Massacre

When most people think of the role of Greensboro, North Carolina, during the struggle for civil rights for Black people and people of color in the United States, they likely remember the city as one of the main birthplaces of the lunch counter sit-in movement. In 1960, four Black students from North Carolina A&T University, after months of planning with women attending nearby HBCU Bennett College, famously sat down at the downtown F.W. Woolworth's lunch counter, rather than accept being served in the standing-only area reserved for Black customers. It was an important moment in what became a nationwide push by non-violent youth protesters for desegregation of all kinds of public facilities.

But not long after that, on November 3, 1979, Greensboro was the site of an event less well-known than the lunch counter sit-ins: a deadly clash at a protest rally. In just 88 seconds of gunfire, five demonstrators were killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party. Eight anti-Klan protesters were injured, as was one Klansman and a news photographer. The killings of that day came to be known as the Greensboro Massacre.

The rally had been organized by the Communist Workers Party (CWP), previously known as the Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO). The organizers had received a permit from the city to hold the event; it was promoted as a "Death to the Klan" rally. The Klan was visibly active in North Carolina at the time. The CWP/WVO had tried to disrupt Klan events in the past, and the two groups were openly hostile to each other.

In the wake of the killings, some of the Klan and Nazi party members were prosecuted. There was a state trial in 1980 in which the accused were charged with capital murder. There was also a federal trial in 1983 in which they were accused of violating the victims' civil rights and having been motivated by racial hatred. All-white juries acquitted all of the men in both of those trials. In the meantime, a lawsuit filed in 1980 by survivors resulted in a judgment in 1985 in which two members of the Greensboro Police Department were held jointly liable with the white supremacist groups in the wrongful death of one of the victims of the massacre. The FBI and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms had also been named in the suit.

As the twentieth anniversary of the massacre came and went, there was still a lot of pain and mistrust in the Greensboro community. And around this time, many other countries had or were setting up *truth and reconciliation commissions*. These were groups of independent experts, scholars, and leaders who worked to uncover the truth about events in violent periods in nations' histories. They also aimed to try to help those countries and their people come back together to make a better future. These examples from around the world provided inspiration to community organizations in Greensboro, so some of them began working to create such a commission for their city.

In 2004, the seven members of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) were sworn in and began their work. Their assignment was "to examine the 'context, causes, sequence and consequences, and to make recommendations for community healing around the tragedy in Greensboro, N.C., on Nov. 3, 1979.'" After two years of work taking statements, reviewing court and other legal documents, and conducting a lot of research, the GTRC issued a final report that was almost 450 pages long. It was the first time that a truth and reconciliation commission model had been applied in the United States.

The primary and secondary sources that you and your classmates will be examining next provide more information about the events of the massacre in 1979. They also show how the massacre affected the community, as well as debates in Greensboro over how — or whether — it should be remembered or addressed.

## Guiding Questions for Document Analysis

**Directions:** You will be working with a small group of your classmates to analyze a document

1. Does this document help give you a more complete picture of the **causes and/or effects** of the Greensboro Massacre? Explain and include specific examples or details.
2. Does this document help you to see or understand why many people thought Greensboro needed the GTRC to help it deal with the events and aftermath of the 1979 massacre? Explain.
3. What more would you like to know about the Greensboro massacre or the TRC after examining this document?



## Document 1

*A flyer promoting the November 3 "Death to the Klan" rally*

**DEATH TO THE KLAN**

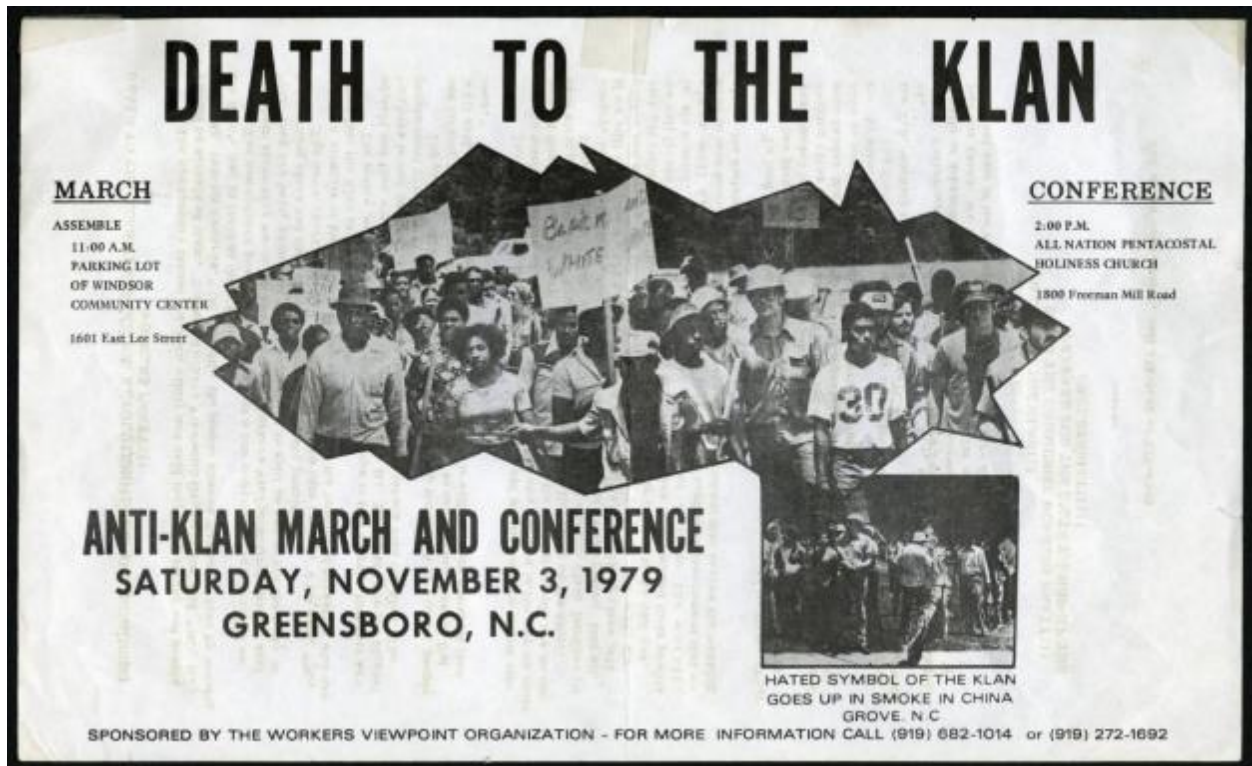
**MARCH**  
ASSEMBLE  
11:00 A.M.  
PARKING LOT  
OF WINDSOR  
COMMUNITY CENTER  
1601 East Lee Street

**CONFERENCE**  
2:00 P.M.  
ALL NATION PENTACOSTAL  
HOLINESS CHURCH  
1800 Freeman Mill Road

**ANTI-KLAN MARCH AND CONFERENCE**  
**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 1979**  
**GREENSBORO, N.C.**

HATED SYMBOL OF THE KLAN  
GOES UP IN SMOKE IN CHINA  
GROVE, N.C.

SPONSORED BY THE WORKERS VIEWPOINT ORGANIZATION - FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL (919) 682-1014 or (919) 272-1692



Source: <https://www.wfdd.org/story/reflecting-greensboro-massacre-40-years-later>



## Document 2

*In an interview with Teen Vogue, Signe Waller-Foxworth recalled the events of that day. She and her husband, Jim Waller, were active in WVO/CWP organizing efforts. This work included extensive organizing to protect the rights of workers in North Carolina's textile industry.*

"I didn't suspect anything untoward would happen," she tells *Teen Vogue*.

What happened next was partially caught on film by TV news crews. A caravan of cars filled with white supremacists drove directly by the rally, which was held in the then majority black community of Morningside Homes. With zero visible police presence, anti-racist activists beat on the passing cars, and before long, white supremacists got out and began shooting at protestors. A few people returned fire, and in the end, five anti-Klan protestors were killed and at least 10 more were injured, including one Klansman. Years later, the public would learn that police had intentionally been missing, despite knowing about the potential for violence that day.

Signe never expected the police not to show up, she says. As soon as the shooting began, Signe said she fled with her son toward shelter in a nearby home.

"I felt like I had been running forever," she says. "I just hoped he could run faster."

From her hiding place, Signe imagined that the caravan of Klan and American Nazi Party members had simply shot their guns into the air. But when she eventually emerged, Signe said it "looked like a battlefield." Her husband, Jim Waller, was among the five killed that day.

Jim was unarmed. So were three other anti-Klan protestors — Michael Nathan, César Cauce, and Sandra Smith. William Sampson, who helped organize local textile mills like many others in the area, was shooting back at white supremacists when he was fatally shot.

Source: <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/the-greensboro-massacre-of-1979-explained>

## Document 3

*The killings in Greensboro were reported on the front page of The New York Times the following day.*

# FOUR SHOT TO DEATH AT ANTI-KLAN MARCH

Ambush at a North Carolina Rally  
Starts Gunfight With Leftists

By TOM STITES

Two carloads of whites opened fire yesterday on demonstrators opposing the Ku Klux Klan in Greensboro, N.C., killing four persons and wounding eight. The police arrested 12 men they said were associated with the Klan and charged with murder.

"As the marchers were getting ready to move out, two vehicles pulled up, a van and a sedan, and about a dozen men jumped out and commenced firing automatic weapons and shotguns," said Charles Travis of WGHP-TV in nearby High Point, who was reporting on the march.

"The demonstrators started returning the gunfire," he said. "I saw two or three of them pulling handguns. I don't know how many there were. People were scrambling and ducking and diving for cover. It went on for about two minutes. It was continuous shooting."

### First Such Killings in Years

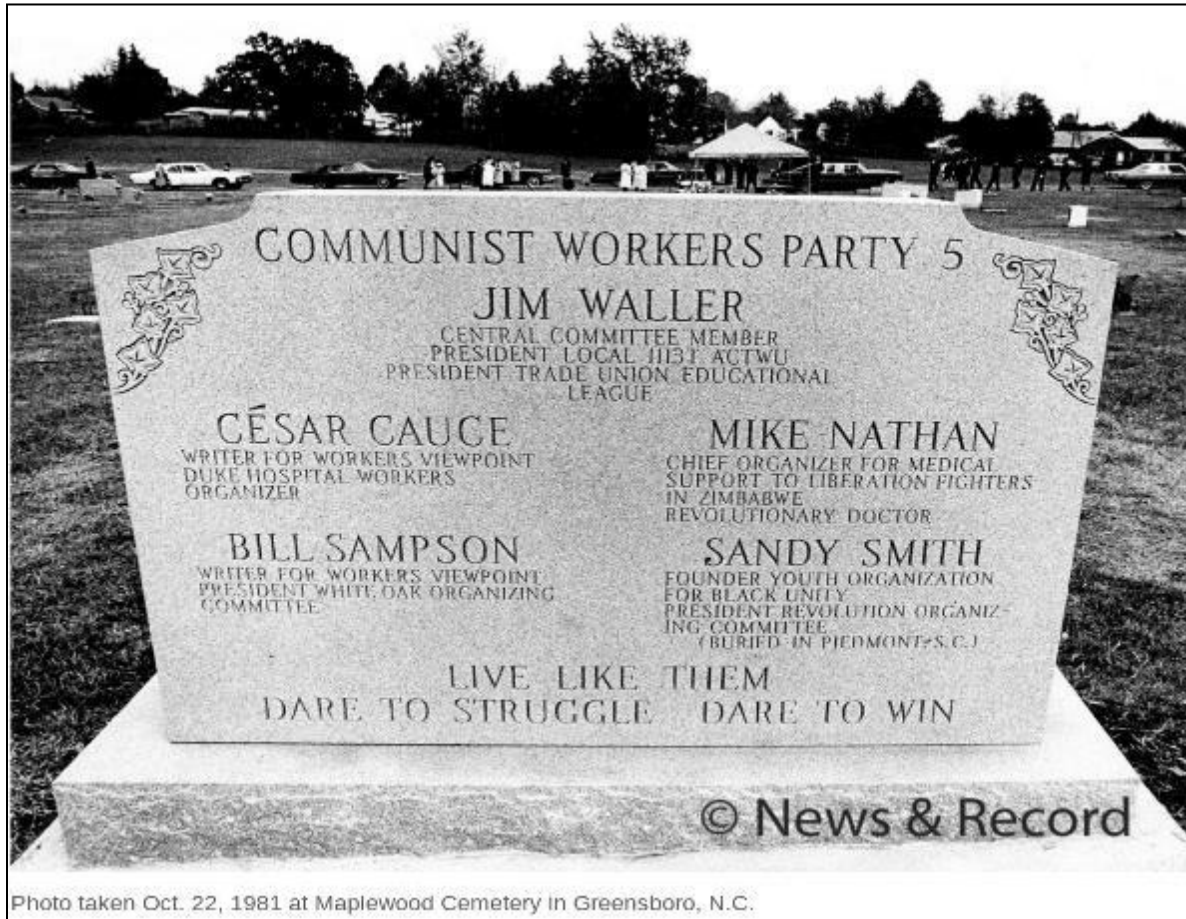
The deaths were the first in Klan violence in at least five years, according to Steve Suitts of Atlanta, executive director of the Southern Regional Council, a nonprofit organization that follows social and economic trends of the region. In a telephone interview, Mr. Suitts called the shootings the most violent civil-rights in-

Continued on Page 45, Column 1

Source: <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1979/11/04/issue.html> (by subscription)

## Document 4

A grave marker for the CWP members killed in the Greensboro Massacre was dedicated on November 3, 1980. An excerpt from the inscription on the back of the tombstone is included below the photo.



The CWP 5 were among the strongest leaders of their time. Their deaths marked an end to capitalist stabilization (1950-1970s), when American workers suffered untold misery, yet overall remained dormant for lack of their own leaders. In 1980, the deepest capitalist crisis ever, the working class was awakening.

The CWP 5 lived and dies for all workers, minorities and poor: for a world where exploitation and oppression are eliminated and all mankind freed – the noble goal of communism. Their deaths, a tremendous loss to CWP and to their families, are a clarion call to the U.S. people to fight for workers' rule. In their footsteps, waves of revolutionary fighters will rise and join our ranks.

## Sources:

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Back <https://docsouth.unc.edu/commland/monument/928/>

## Document 5

*Although the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not use public funds, its creation and its work were both met with opposition from many in Greensboro, including members of the City Council. In 2005 the council voted 6-3 against the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission project, and then in 2007 they voted 5-4 against a resolution to support the Commission's final report. The excerpt below is from the report's Executive Summary.*

### Involved Parties

#### Ku Klux Klan and National Socialist Party of America (Nazi)

The Commission finds that on the morning of Nov. 3, 1979, members of the Klan/Nazi caravan headed for Greensboro with malicious intent. At a minimum, they planned to disrupt the parade and assault the demonstrators (by throwing eggs), violating the marchers' constitutional rights to free speech and assembly. Further, we believe there is sufficient evidence to conclude that they intended to provoke a violent confrontation and that this was broadly understood among those present in the multiple planning discussions. Those who left their cars to engage in violence did so willingly. More importantly, Klan and Nazi members have admitted since the event that they intentionally came prepared to use deadly force in order to be victorious in any violence that occurred.

#### Workers Viewpoint Organization (Communist Workers Party)

We also find that some, albeit lesser, responsibility must lie with the demonstrators who beat on the caravan cars as they passed. Some CWP members also brought guns to the rally and fired them in the direction of the Nazi-Klan members. However, we find that the CWP fired after the Klan had fired a minimum of two shots and perhaps as many as five shots first. . . .

The Commission finds that the WVO leadership was very naïve about the level of danger posed by their rhetoric and the Klan's propensity for violence, and they even dismissed concerns raised by their own members.

#### Greensboro Police Department (GPD)

Despite the obvious and important roles of the above participants, the majority of commissioners find the single most important element that contributed to the violent outcome of the confrontation was the absence of police.

[T]he GPD knew that the Klan had a copy of the parade route and that Dawson\* had repeatedly stated that the Klan had met many times to discuss plans to follow the marchers, heckle them and possibly assault them by throwing eggs. No officer recalls any discussion in any planning meetings of the likely consequences of this assault on already emotionally charged anti-Klan demonstrators in a black

\*Eddie Dawson was a Klan member who was also a paid informant for the Greensboro Police Department. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission acknowledged that police informants are (by definition) involved in criminal activity, but it described the Greensboro Police Department's "decision to pay an informant and fail to intervene when he takes a leadership role to provoke and orchestrate a criminal act, with the full knowledge of police handlers" as negligent.

Source: [https://greensborotrc.org/exec\\_summary.pdf](https://greensborotrc.org/exec_summary.pdf) (pp.6-9)

## Document 6

*In 2015, a state historical marker (see photo below) was placed near the site of the shootings. As the following excerpt from a Greensboro newspaper shows, it was not well-received by all members of the City Council at the time.*

### **“Nov. 3, 1979: A day that still divides city,”**

**by Joe Killian, *Greensboro News & Record* (excerpt)**

... But at an afternoon meeting of the Greensboro City Council earlier this month, the marker sparked a fight so passionate it was as though the deadly clash had just happened.

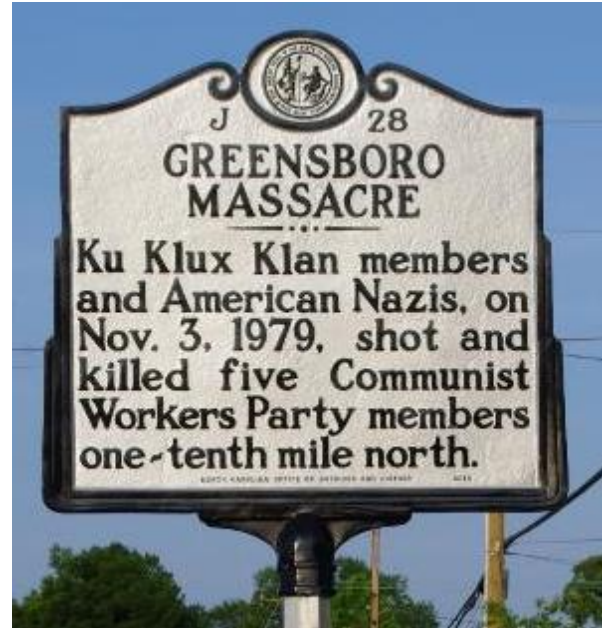
Councilman Tony Wilkins was incensed that the N.C. Highway Historical Marker Advisory Committee unanimously approved a marker without consulting with the council.

“How will this help Greensboro?” Wilkins asked. “You think this will be a positive thing for Greensboro?”

Councilwoman Sharon Hightower, who along with Councilwoman Yvonne Johnson wrote a letter in support of the marker, had a quick answer for Wilkins.

“The fact is, negative things have occurred in this community, in this country, that we can’t turn a blind eye to,” Hightower said. “They might not have impacted you, but they happened.

“Was the Sit-In Movement positive? Not for the four people who had to sit down and endure all that to get served.”



Source: <http://www.ncmarkers.com/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=J-28>

Source: [https://greensboro.com/news/nov-3-1979-a-day-that-still-divides-city/article\\_729b27d0-a316-11e4-9db0-4f4dd8dd7f09.html](https://greensboro.com/news/nov-3-1979-a-day-that-still-divides-city/article_729b27d0-a316-11e4-9db0-4f4dd8dd7f09.html)



## Document 7

*On October 6, 2020, the Greensboro City Council approved an official apology for the massacre. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission had recommended this in its final report in 2006. The apology included the creation of a scholarship fund. In memory of the five people killed in the massacre, five scholarships will be awarded to graduating seniors from James B. Dudley High School who “submit an entry focusing on the issues of racial and social justice that help this community reconcile the remaining vestiges of the events of November 3, 1979,” as well as support ideas that can help the city – and perhaps the country -- to grapple with these issues in the future. The text below is an excerpt from the resolution in which the council issued its apology.*

WHEREAS, on November 3, 1979 members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party attacked members of the Communist Workers Party and their supporters as they gathered to engage in a march across the City of Greensboro. These events have come to be known as the “Greensboro Massacre”;

WHEREAS, Greensboro’s police department in 1979 (the “GPD”) along with other city personnel failed to warn the marchers of their extensive foreknowledge of the racist, violent attack planned against the marchers by members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party with the assistance of a paid GPD informant;

WHEREAS, the marchers had a legal parade permit;

WHEREAS, the GPD failed to divert, stop or arrest the members of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party, whom police knew were carrying a cache of concealed weapons, as they approached the Morningside Homes Community where the marchers were gathered;

WHEREAS, numerous factors have contributed to an atmosphere of blaming the victims of the Greensboro Massacre rather than encouraging an objective investigation and comprehensive trial process; . . .

WHEREAS, the final GTRC report found that the City of Greensboro must acknowledge the events of November 3, 1979 and recognize that “the single most important element that contributed to the violent outcome of the confrontation was the absence of police”;

WHEREAS, the Report of the GTRC and the Greensboro Human Relations Truth and Reconciliation Review Committee outlined a series of recommendations including but not limited to the creation of a police review board which has resulted in the establishment of a standing commission reporting directly to the City Council and the City Manager called the Greensboro Criminal Justice Advisory Commission (“GCJAC”) and its subcommittee, the Police Community Review Board (“PCRB”), [and] a livable wage for City employees . . .

WHEREAS, on August 15, 2017 in the wake of the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA, Councilwoman Sharon Hightower made a motion that the City Council apologize to the five families who lost loved ones and for the events of November 3, 1979. It was seconded by Mayor Pro-Tem Yvonne Johnson. During discussion of the motion, many Councilmembers made comment as to their heartfelt sadness and desire to support this apology. It passed by a 7-1 majority vote of the City Council; and

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF GREENSBORO:

That the City Council of the City of Greensboro hereby expresses its apology to the victims, the survivors, their families and the members of the Morningside Homes community for the events that occurred on November 3, 1979 and the failure of any government action to effectively overcome the hate that precipitated the violence, to embrace the sorrow that resulted from the violence, and to reconcile all the vestiges of those heinous events in the years subsequent to 1979. . .

Source: <https://greensboro.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4655516&GUID=9DD3B284-7B46-44AF-A538-BB285FC581D0&Options=&Search=>

## Creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Now that you have looked at some of the divisions that separated the city of Greensboro for many years and have learned about some of the work of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC), consider these excerpts from the mandates (assignments) of two truth and reconciliation commissions.

### **Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

There comes a time in the life of every community when it must look humbly and seriously into its past in order to provide the best possible foundation for moving into a future based on healing and hope. . .

Our task was to examine the “context, causes, sequence and consequences,” and to make recommendations for community healing around the tragedy in Greensboro, N.C., on Nov. 3, 1979. . .

-- from “Introduction,” Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Report: Executive Summary

### **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa**

The objectives of the Commission shall be to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past by-

(a) establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights which were committed during the period from 1 March 1960 to the cut-off date, including the antecedents, circumstances, factors and context of such violations, as well as the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible for the commission of the violations, by conducting investigations and holding hearings . . .

-- from South Africa’s “Promotion of National Unity and reconciliation Act 34 of 1995,” the law that created the TRC

There are many places around the world -- and around the United States -- that have had moments and eras of what many people refer to as “hard history,” ugly chapters that can be hard to face and that have left a mark on groups and communities, even on entire countries.

This assignment is an opportunity for you to call for a truth and reconciliation commission on a piece of hard history that matters to you.



1. Identify an event, an issue, or even a time period in your city, state, or country that you think should be addressed by a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC). Explain briefly why you think this event/issue/time period deserves the attention of a TRC.

*Note: The hard history you want to address could be a single, specific event (like the Greensboro Massacre was the focus for the GTRC). Or it could be about a broader time period or series of events (like the part of the apartheid era that was in the mandate of the South African TRC).*

2. Referring to the examples above, draft a brief mandate for your TRC. What is its task? What are its objectives?

3. Who would you like to have among your commissioners? Why?

*Note: TRCs have often included people like clergy, scholars and historical experts, community leaders, legal experts, and others with special expertise relevant to the issues being addressed.*

