

African American Connecticut Explored Inquiry Resource: High School

For original text, see “The New Haven Black Panther Trials,” *African American Connecticut Explored* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools	
<i>History</i> : Change Continuity and Context; Perspectives; Causation and Argumentation <i>Civics</i> : Civic and Political Institutions; Participation and Deliberation; Processes, Rules, and Laws	
Words to Know	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Black Panther Party• interrogation• implicate• acquittal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Federal Bureau of Investigation• nationalists• conviction

The New Haven Black Panther Trials

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By Yohuru Williams

In the summer of 1970, the people of New Haven, Connecticut, braced for what local papers billed as the trial of the century. Members of the New Haven chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) were accused for the murder of a 24-year-old New York Panther named Alex Rackley.[1] The murder and trial shifted attention away from efforts by the Panthers and other organizations to address issues of economic and political equality in New Haven.

Founded in Oakland, California in 1966, by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was soon a national organization. Consistent with the BPP mission, which called for an end to police brutality, the Panthers began armed patrols monitoring police.

After several high profile confrontations with police, the Party dropped self-defense from its name. BPP also began a series of “Serve the People” initiatives designed to soften its image and highlight its community service programs. The change in focus did little to deflect law enforcement’s interest in the party, most notably the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Director of the FBI would later refer to the Panthers as “the single greatest threat to the internal security” of the United States.

Fear and paranoia within the Panther organization led to efforts to identify police informants. In New York, national Panther "Field Marshal" George Sams, Jr., recruited local party member and 24-year-old Florida native Alex Rackley to accompany him on an inspection visit to New Haven. In New Haven, Sams accused Rackley of providing information to New York City police about New York Panthers accused in a bombing plot against the city. Sams ordered Rackley bound and gagged for interrogation. Over the next three days, the New Haven Panthers tortured Rackley. They hoped to extract a confession. Sams ordered Ericka Huggins, of the New Haven Party, to tape the interrogation for National headquarters.

Formed in the winter of 1969, the New Haven Panther Party was born in the shadow of violence. Huggins relocated to the Elm City following the murder of her husband. Huggins husband, John, was a fellow Panther and New Haven native. Jon Huggins was murdered on the campus of UCLA in December of 1968. Working with other Panthers in New Haven, Ericka Huggins was busy selling the party newspaper and engaging in community service. There were dozens of volunteers who helped to staff the Panthers programs and who also regularly attended political education classes.

The Panthers community work continued the focus of earlier Black Power organizations in the city such as the Hill Parents Association (HPA). HPA focused on community service initiatives as the key to improving the condition of blacks and Latinos within the city. After a riot took place in the city in the summer of 1967, the Hill Parents Association was virtually driven out of existence by a campaign of police harassment. This left a void that the BPP would later help to fill.

Like the HPA, the New Haven BPP under intense scrutiny by local, state, and Federal law enforcement. In fact, the Rackley murder resulted in part from efforts of the BPP to discover potential spies and informers. The BPP blamed spies for creating disruption within the organization and engaging in activities that made the BPP look bad in the community. The Panthers concerns were not without merit. In areas where the Panthers was active, the FBI, along with various state and local law enforcement agencies closely monitored their activities. They also recruited informants to infiltrate its ranks. The Bureau targeted groups like the Panthers whom FBI Director J Edgar Hoover labeled as "Black Nationalists and Hate type organizations." Unfortunately, in New Haven, the result of these efforts would have tragic results.

Among those arrested for the Rackley murder were New Haven Panther recruits Warren Kimbro and Lonnie McLucas. New Haven Prosecutor Arnold Markle also sought to implicate Ericka Huggins as well as national party chairperson Bobby Seale. Markle claimed that the Panthers executed Rackley on Seale's orders. Kimbro, who had been one of the local party's dedicated organizers agreed to testify against the Panthers. He joined Sams in saying that he tortured Rackley at Seale's request. Kimbro was one of the prosecution's star witnesses. The state elected to try McLucas first. Jury selection began in May 1970 against the backdrop of growing national interest in the case.

In an effort to help pay for the defense of those accused, the BPP planned a three day fundraising campaign on the New Haven Green. The BPP invited nationally recognized speakers to appear. Speakers included Youth International Party leader Abbie Hoffman and anti-war activist Dr. Benjamin Spock. Panther supporters planned to descend on the Elm City on May Day weekend to protest the coming trial. Fearing the potential for violence and fueled by the rhetoric of activists who claimed the protesters intended to “Free Bobby” and “burn Yale,” state, and local authorities teamed with Federal law enforcement to prepare for battle.

In advance of reports that anticipated anywhere from 50,000 to 500,000 demonstrators, Connecticut Governor John Dempsey mobilized the Connecticut National Guard. Also, U.S Attorney General John Mitchell asked the Pentagon to deploy 4,000 marines and paratroopers in close proximity to the city. Yale University President Kingman Brewster publicly expressed reservations that a Black revolutionary could receive a fair trial in the United States. While encouraging faculty to cancel classes, he also kept the University open as a resource to house and feed protesters. Aside from a few minor skirmishes, however, the protests remained peaceful with radical students, antiwar protesters, and a variety of other activists swelling the ranks of the Panthers supporters.

During the McLucas trial that began in July, Kimbro and Sams emerged as the state’s star witnesses. Neither, however, proved especially convincing on the stand. Kimbro acknowledged that he fired the fatal shot that killed Rackley after Sams handed him a gun telling him that orders had come down from national to “ice” Rackley. While both testified that McLucas fired a safety shot into Rackley’s chest to finish the job, neither could establish McLucas’ guilt for the murder. After the trial closed in early August, the jury took several days to acquit McLucas on all charges except conspiracy to kill which earned him a twelve-year sentence.

When the second Rackley murder trial—with Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale as co-defendants—began in October 1970 the tide had turned in the Panthers favor. The prosecution’s lackluster performance in the first trial pointed to a similar outcome in the Seale and Huggins proceedings. Huggins and Seale were also favored with a strong legal team. Catherine Roraback, a Connecticut civil rights attorney best known for arguing the 1965 Supreme Court case that legalized the use of birth control in Connecticut, represented Huggins. Charles Garry, Huey Newton’s attorney from his 1967 trial for murder, represented Seale. The seasoned lawyers were accustomed to taking on radical causes. The team was able to mount a successful defense based on the state’s weak evidence. Prosecutor Markle struggled to produce witnesses other than Sams who would testify that Seale gave the order to kill Rackley.

Given the immense publicity generated by the legal proceedings and the May Day protests, efforts at seating an impartial jury took four months. Even with McLucas’ conviction, the case against Huggins and Seale was porous. The narrative of events established by all the witnesses including the prosecution’s own contradicted the state’s case against Seale and Huggins. Kimbro, who testified first, proved unable to tie Huggins to the shooting. He also acknowledged that he had never seen Seale at the Panther headquarters as Sams had alleged.

The defense in the meantime was able to call into question not only Sams' accuracy but his mental health. Garry was able to show that Seale had expelled Sams, a diagnosed mental patient with a long history of violence, from the Party for beating up several members. In spite of his expulsion, Sams was still able to pass himself off as a Panther Field Marshall. Shortly before Seale's scheduled arrival in New Haven to deliver a speech at Yale's Battell Chapel on May 19, 1969, Sams and several other agents from the national offices showed up on the inspection visit. Testimony for both sides clearly illustrated that Sams initiated the torture of Rackley and ordered it recorded on tape for national headquarters. More importantly, only Sams testified to Seale's alleged directive to kill Rackley.

Prosecutor Markle's attempt to call a New Haven Police detective to the stand to support Sams' claim that Seale entered the headquarters backfired. A diagram displaying where the detective had been parked on the night in question disputed his testimony and hurt the prosecution's case. The prosecution finally rested in late April. The case went to the jury on May 29. After five days of intense deliberation, the jury reported that it was hopelessly deadlocked 11 to 1 in favor of an acquittal for Seale and 10 to 2 in favor of an acquittal for Huggins.

As Lonnie McLucas' counsel Michael Koskoff conceptualized the problem, the prosecution's downfall was its attempt to implicate Seale. "They already had a confession from two shooters," Koskoff explained, "They could do no better than that. [State's Attorney] Markle...got sucked in by the politics." Citing the prejudicial nature of the publicity generated by both trials, on May 25, Judge Harold Mulvey dismissed the charges against Huggins and Seale. "I find it impossible to believe," he explained in issuing his ruling "that an unbiased jury could be selected without superhuman efforts—efforts which this court, the state, and these defendants should not be called upon to either to make or to endure." [2]

Although the trial ultimately ended in acquittals, the legacy of the New Haven trials is mixed. The trial revealed the vast array of law enforcement techniques and resources used against the Panthers, from paid informants to illegal electronic surveillance.

Celebrated for keeping New Haven calm during May Day, it was later discovered, for example, that the New Haven Police had extensive wiretaps on the Panther headquarters in violation of state and Federal law. More importantly, the New Haven police may have failed to act to prevent the Rackley murder and facilitated the transport of Rackley to the place of his execution via the use of a paid informant's car in the hopes of making a strong case against the Panthers. In the early 1980s, the city settled a massive lawsuit with the victims of the wiretaps including several members of the Black Panther Party.

The legacy of the trial for the Panthers is also mixed. The trial brought national attention to New Haven and the Panthers committed resources to make New Haven a model chapter implementing a range of community service programs including a free health clinic that endured beyond the Panther's stay. While in prison awaiting their trials, both Seale and Huggins brought awareness to prisoner abuses. Seale went to work in earnest organizing prisoners at the

Montville jail, where he threatened a hunger strike to bring attention to the treatment of those incarcerated there. Huggins likewise used her time in prison to highlight the treatment of female prisoners, especially mothers. Nevertheless, the trial also exposed the problems inherent in the Party's organizational structure and the willingness, even if prodded by informants and agent provocateurs, of members to kill, even one of their own, in the name of advancing their revolutionary aims.

Being able to link the Party with such acts further hurt it in the eyes of the public. This also provided many opportunities for law enforcement to justify its campaign of harassment. The FBI hunt for George Sams in connection with the Rackley murder, for instance, had set off a series of confrontations between police and the Black Panthers in Chicago that culminated in the December 4, 1969 pre-dawn raid on Party headquarters there. That raid resulted in the police killings of Chicago BPP leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Police were able to execute the raid with a floor plan of the apartment where the Panthers were staying drawn by Chicago Minister of Defense, William O'Neal, a paid informant with the FBI.

The reverberations of the Panther trials within New Haven had a significant impact as well. The city for a brief moment captured the national spotlight as the epicenter of radical protest. George Sams, Warren Kimbro, and Lonnie McLucas received sentences for their role in the murder of Alex Rackley. After pleading guilty to second-degree murder and agreeing to turn states evidence, Kimbro ultimately served four years of a life sentence earning time off for exemplary behavior. He dedicated the rest of his life to trying to make a difference through community outreach initiatives. Also paroled after four years, Sams has been in and out of prison for a variety of charges. Granted release on an appeal bond in 1974 McLucas served the longest sentence of all those convicted. With the threat of his bail being revoked in 1977 he refused to denounce his work with the Party. He nevertheless told reporters, "But I deeply regret those three days."^[3]

On the positive side, the activities around the trials demonstrated the organizing capabilities of the Panthers and the party's ability to inspire radical change. It also illustrated how the quest for Black Power need not exclude white supporters as black and white activists joined together in a variety of initiatives inspired by the Panther trial to address political inequality, health care, and prisoner's rights issues.

[1] On the Black Panther Trails in New Haven see Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/ White Power, Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (Blackwell Press, 2000); Geoffrey Kabaservice, *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004); Paul Bass and Douglas W. Rae, *Murder in the Model City: The Black Panthers, Yale and the Redemption of a Killer* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Gail Sheehy, *Panthermania: The Clash of Black Against Black in One American City*, (New York: Harper & Row; 1st edition, 1971). On New Haven generally in this period see Williams, *Black Politics/White Power*; Mandi Isaacs Jackson, *Model City Blues*:

Urban Space and Organized Resistance in New Haven (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); See also Yohuru Williams, "No Haven: From Civil Rights to Black Power in New Haven, Connecticut," in *The Black Scholar* 31:3-4 (Fall/Winter 2001): 54-66; Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961); Fred Powledge, *Model City: A Test of American Liberalism: One Town's Efforts to Rebuild Itself* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1970); Allan R. Talbot, *The Mayor's Game: Richard Lee of New Haven and the Politics of Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); William Lee Miller, *The Fifteenth Ward and the Great Society: An Encounter with a Modern City* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1966). On the Black Panther Party as a national organization see Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, Eds, *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Duke University Press, 2006); Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, Eds. *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party*, (Duke University Press 2008). For an account of what was happening elsewhere in Hartford, Connecticut in this period see Stacy Close's outstanding essay, "Fire in the Bones: The NAACP, Civil Rights, and Militancy in Hartford, 1943-67," (*Journal of Negro History*, summer 2001).

[2] "Unbiased Jury Impossible to find, Seale Jury," *Eugene Register-Guard* (Eugene Oregon) May 26, 1971, May 26, 1971, 4a; "Seale Juror Says She Forced Mistrial." *St. Petersburg Times*, (St. Petersburg, Florida) May 27, 1971, 12a.

[3] McLucas quoted in "Panther Lonnie McLucas still fighting to stay out of prison," *South Mississippi Sun*, (Biloxi, MS) October 12, 1977, B-13; see also "McLucas Faces Jail Again in Wake of Court Hearing," *Bridgeport Post*, (Bridgeport, CT) October 4, 1977, 3.