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Ferguson, Missouri: Difficult Stories

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On Saturday, August 9, a Ferguson, Missouri police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, age 18, a graduate of Normandy High School who was about to begin classes at Vatterott College on Monday, August 11. Details remain murky but there is agreement in the press that the young man was unarmed. Tensions continue to flare in Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch has reported that Benjamin L. Crump, the Florida civil rights lawyer who represented the family of Trayvon Martin, has been hired by the Brown family; additionally, the Post-Dispatch reports, Attorney General Eric Holder has asked for civil rights lawyers in the Justice Department to monitor this case, and the FBI is reportedly working with the St. Louis County Police Department to investigate the shooting. Crump and other civil rights leaders, including Cornell Brooks, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), spoke Monday at a town hall meeting. The shooting and its aftermath has begun to receive national attention, with some coverage in the New York Times, by NPR (among other venues). Vox.com has compiled a list of what is currently known and what remains unclear.

Race has historically been a factor in the shaping of St. Louis and St. Louis County. University of Iowa history professor Colin Gordon has created the digital project Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the American City, which uses digital census geography, archival maps, and historical and contemporary datasets to track migration and demographic patterns in St. Louis and St. Louis County from 1940-2000. Mapping Decline (and its accompanying book Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City) focuses on four themes: white flight; race and property; municipal zoning; and urban renewal.
Ferguson is immediately to the east of Kinloch, the first African-American community in Missouri. In the 1980s the city bought out land in Kinloch towards a proposed expansion of the municipally owned Lambert-St. Louis International Airport, displacing more than 70% of Kinloch’s population. In 1975, in the case of US v. State of Missouri, a US District Court ordered the Ferguson-Florissant School District (Florissant is immediately north of Ferguson) to annex the Kinloch School District and the adjacent Berkeley School District. In the 1976-1977 school year the Ferguson-Florissant Reorganized district underwent desegregation. Thus St. Louis County—and Ferguson—was part of the broader struggles over desegregation which have gripped (and continue to grip) the St. Louis metropolitan area since the Brown vs. Board of Higher Education decision in 1954.

For local coverage of this ongoing story, see the following (though there have been concerns that the media has misrepresented details of the shooting and protests):

- St. Louis American (African-American newspaper)
- St. Louis Post-Dispatch
- KSDK
- KMOV
- St. Louis Public Radio

To learn more about St. Louis and St. Louis County’s history, see these sources (among others):

- Amy Stuart Wells, Stepping over the Color Line: African-American Students in White Suburban Schools (1997)
- Gerald Early, ed., Ain’t But a Place: An Anthology of African American Writings about St. Louis (1998)
- Daniel J. Monti, Jr., Semblance of Justice: St. Louis School Desegregation and Order in Urban America (1985)
- Gerald W. Heaney and Susan Uchitelle, Unending Struggle: The Long Road to an Equal Education in St. Louis (2004)