



Race and the Houston Police Department, 1930-1990: A Change Did Come (Centennial Series of the Association of Former Students, Texas A&M University)

Dwight D. Watson

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In Houston, as in the rest of the American South up until the 1950s, the police force reflected and enforced the segregation of the larger society. When the nation began to change in the 1950s and 1960s, this guardian of the status quo had to change, too. It was not designed to do so easily.

Dwight Watson traces how the Houston Police Department reacted to social, political, and institutional change over a fifty-year period—and specifically, how it responded to and in turn influenced racial change.

Using police records as well as contemporary accounts, Watson astutely analyzes the escalating strains between the police and segments of the city's black population in the 1967 police riot at Texas Southern University and the 1971 violence that became known as the Dowling Street Shoot-Out. The police reacted to these events and to daily challenges by hardening its resolve to impose its will on the minority community.

By 1977, the events surrounding the beating and drowning of Jose Campos Torres while in police custody prompted one writer to label the HPD the “meanest police in America.” This event encouraged Houston's growing Mexican American community to unite with blacks in seeking to curb police autonomy and brutality.

Watson's study demonstrates vividly how race complicated the internal impulses for change and gave way through time to external pressures—including the Civil Rights Movement, modernization, annexations, and court-ordered redistricting—for institutional changes within the department. His work illuminates not only the role of a southern police department in racial change but also the internal dynamics of change in an organization designed to protect the status quo.

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