

City of Detroit

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

TO: Richard V. Marks

DATE

FROM: Lonnie SaundersSUBJECT: The Linwood Avenue - New Bethel
Church Incident of March 29, 1969

A. Account of Ralph Williams (New Bethel Church Janitor and Trustee Board Member) 13512 Kentucky Phone: 931-3112

I Background Data and Chronology of Events

Time of Interview: About 6:00 p.m., 3/30/69

The meeting of the Republic of New Africa group was attended by some 250 or more men and women, with about 4 young children and two infants also observed. Mr. Williams was the only person present with any connection with the church. The meeting started at about 8:00 p.m. and officially adjourned at 11:25 p.m. However, there were groups of stragglers within the church for several minutes after adjournment. Mr. Williams had informed certain RNA members that he was instructed to insure that the church was empty and the lights turned off by 11:30 p.m. He met with some resistance.

Mr. Williams noted at one point that there were about twelve men, armed with rifles who served as guards for RNA officials. He had observed that all others in attendance had been carefully searched upon entering, with no discovery of weapons resulting.

Shortly after 11:30 p.m. (approximately) Mr. Williams noted that the group of armed guards were collected in two separate groups--one near the mid point of the middle aisle and a second group near the extremity of the rostrum which was closest to the side--rear exit from the church on to Linwood Ave. Mr. Williams was in the eastern most church aisle one-third to one-half the distance separating the rostrum from the lobby, but nearer the rostrum. Mr. Williams and the group of guards who were nearest the Linwood exit left almost simultaneously, with Mr. Williams having the shorter distance to walk. Mr. Williams, stood at that point, in the eastern portion of the lobby which gave him a perfect view of all that occurred between the church entrance and the intersection of W. Philadelphia and Linwood Ave. He said he was attempting to recognize some of the people who had left the church. A few minutes before, he had locked the church doors so they could not be entered from the street, while permitting freedom of egress.

Within the first minutes following stationing himself in the church lobby, Mr. Williams observed a police scout car turn right off Linwood Ave. into W. Philadelphia; it stopped suddenly in front of the church's main entrance. A police officer emerged and as soon as he reached the curb of the sidewalk he fired at the church doors with a rifle resembling a pump gun. The bullets struck the vertical metal member separating the panes of glass in the doors. A second officer followed closely, shattered glass in one door with his rifle butt, activated the door handle, and both officers entered, while occupants of the church lobby and those still inside the nave of the church scattered in all directions. Some crawled under church pews. Mr. Williams and others ran into the basement through the nearest entrances--on either side of the rostrum. They were herded together and forced up the stairway

into the lobby. At this point Mr. Williams observed one white officer deliberately shoot a Negro male with hands aloft, who had moved too slowly in response to orders. Previous to running from the lobby to the basement, he observed a white officer deliberately shoot another male Negro "as he came from between some chairs." The wounded Negro crawled underneath some benches for some distance, leaving a trail of blood. Mr. Williams also observed 3-4 Negroes sprawled face downward in the lobby with hands outstretched to the side and white officers holding the ends of rifle nozzles against the back of their heads and necks.

There was much ripping of beads from around the necks of those who wore them and near--choking of people. One person carrying a green bible was berated; the abuse seemed to center around possession of the bible, in some way.

About 4 of the 25-30 officers observed in the lobby were Negroes who merely stood with pistols drawn, participating in no other manner.

Mr. Williams at no time observed shooting by anyone within the church. He heard considerable gunfire from the first floor while he was in the church basement.

Mr. Williams estimated that he was taken from the church to Police headquarters at about 1:00 a.m. to basement detention quarters. Prisoners were seated on a cement floor and cold air streamed in from the outside. Mr. Williams was refused permission to use the toilet, in response to his urgent request. Mr. Williams was the first prisoner released by Judge Crockett--upon the request of Rev. Franklin. Police had not processed prisoners to the point where his turn at interrogation had been reached. They have not questioned him at this date.