

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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## Elijah Cummings and the Integration of Riverside Park Pool

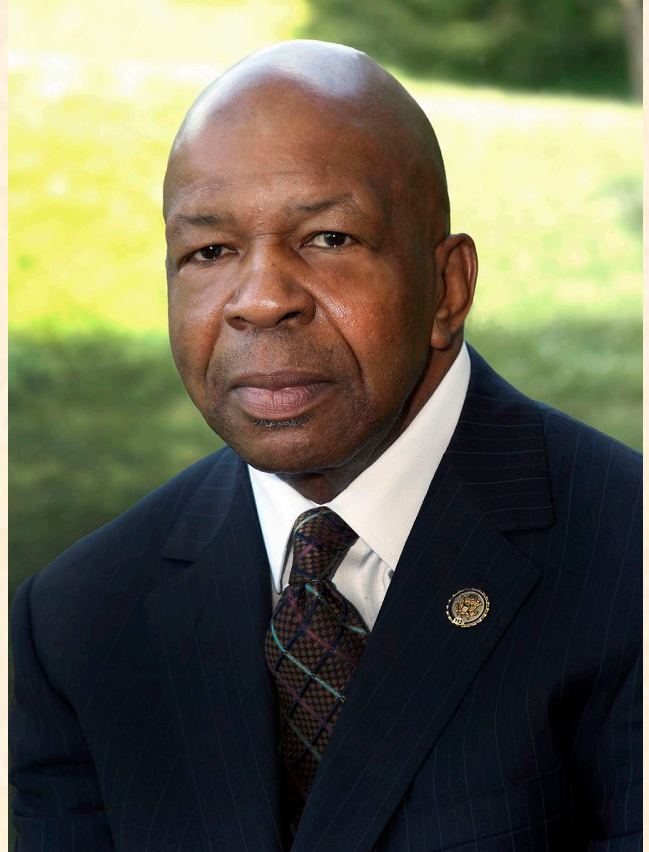
by David Safier

When the late U.S. Representative Elijah Cummings (1951-2019) was 11 years old and living in what is now the Sharp-Leadenhall neighborhood, he was one of a group of Black youth who helped integrate the Riverside Park swimming pool in South Baltimore. In the process, Cummings was hit by a milk bottle hurled by someone in the crowd of people who wanted the pool to be used by Whites only, resulting in a scar over his eyebrow he carried for the rest of his life.

Elijah Cummings' parents were sharecroppers who moved to the Baltimore area in the 1940s. Cummings was the third of seven children. He grew up in the house at 126 West Cross Street, a block east of the current Solo Gibbs Park.

In the summers, Cummings joined other neighborhood youngsters playing in the wading pool at the Sharp Street Community Center at the intersection of Sharp and Hamburg (Today, that's where Hamburg cuts through Solo Gibbs Park, with the basketball courts to the south and the tennis court to the north). It was two feet deep. "The pool was so small, we literally had to wait turns to get in," Cummings recalled. The recreation leader at the community center, Jim Smith, told them he was tired having so many people using such a small pool. "He said, 'There's a big pool, about 10 to 15 blocks away and I want you all to go into that pool,'" Cummings continued, "so he gathered us together, and we marched over to the pool. And we looked and we couldn't believe it. There was an olympic sized pool."

That was the pool at Riverside Park.



### The Scene at the Riverside Park Pool

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, Maryland Governor Theodore R. McKeldin and Baltimore City Mayor Tommy D'Alesandro created executive orders stating that all publicly owned facilities will be integrated. But in the early 1960s the pool in Riverside Park was still being used by Whites only.

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In 1962 11 year old Elijah Cummings was one of about two dozen Black youth who went to swim at the Riverside Park Pool over a series of days. As many as 1,000 angry White people surrounded the pool carrying signs, shouting insults at the young people and throwing rocks and bottles.

Cummings remembered that a woman who accompanied them was hit and cut by a bottle. "I'll never forget her putting her arms around us and the blood dripping on my shirt. She was OK, but she was protecting us." The woman was Juanita Jackson Mitchell, the first Black woman to practice law in Maryland. She was with the NAACP.

"I didn't know what the NAACP was," Cummings said. But seeing how she handled herself, "at 11 years old, I declared in that moment that I was going to become a lawyer." In 1976 Cummings earned his law degree at the University of Maryland School of Law.

Most of the direct quotes from Cummings are from a short talk he gave in the last few years of his life. After he related the Riverside Park Pool story, Cummings continued with a insightful, heart-felt discussion about how experiences with segregation affected him for the rest of his life. [You can listen to it here.](#)

## More About the 1962 Events at Riverside Park

The decision to take a group of young people from the Sharp Street Community Center to the Riverside Park Pool in 1962 did not come out of nowhere. It was part of the larger civil rights movement in the early 1960s, in which Maryland played a part.

In 1960, Morgan State College students led three weeks of sit-ins at Baltimore department store restaurants. In 1961, CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and the Freedom Riders organized sit-ins at restaurants and other establishments which were restricted to use by Whites only along Route 40, the main north-south highway before I-95 opened. In 1962, the city of Cambridge on Maryland's Eastern Shore was the site of civil rights demonstrations and sit-ins.

The March On Washington where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech took place in August, 1963, almost exactly a year after the events at the Riverside Park Pool.

It was in this context that Jim Smith, a 34 year old Black man who had served as a captain in the military and was the recreation leader at the Sharp Street Community Center, began taking young people from the Center to Riverside Park. As a park employee, he was able to schedule their pool time as part of the Center's recreation program, which meant that the city's Department of Recreation and Parks condoned their visits to the pool. The NAACP was involved as well.

The youth from the Sharp Street Community Center swam at the Riverside Park Pool at least seven times between the middle of August and the beginning of September when the pool was closed for the season. The events were covered extensively in the Baltimore Sun and the Evening Sun, appearing in more than twenty articles. The articles made it clear that the young Black swimmers had every right to be in the pool and were not the cause of the trouble, which

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came from the White crowds which yelled, carried racist signs and hurled objects at the Black youth.

According to the August 17 article in *The Sun*, on the first day James Smith brought 26 youth to swim in the pool, "Police dispersed a shouting, stone-throwing crowd estimated at more than 1,000 persons."

On August 23, *The Sun* reported that the NAACP had requested an immediate conference with the Mayor and Police Commissioner. The next day, the paper reported that the Mayor asked for an end to the tensions. The article said, "The children were participating in a city-sponsored swimming program under the auspices of the Department of Recreation and Parks."

Usually, the White swimmers left the pool when the Black swimmers arrived, but on August 28, some White youth remained in the pool, though they stayed separate from the Black swimmers. However, during a phoned-in bomb scare that day which proved to be a hoax, the two groups mingled, and as can be seen in the photo at right, they swam together. Meanwhile, signs held by people outside the pool read, "Reds push race mixing," "White people have rights too," and "Washington, D.C., is a black jungle, Ocean City next?"

On Labor Day, September 3, the pool was the scene of the worst violence at Riverside Park that summer.

About 1,000 White people gathered at the pool. The police arrested thirteen members of the "unruly mob." A police lieutenant said, "It was the largest and most dangerous crowd at the park so far." According to an article in *The Sun* the next day, quoted below, the situation was too dangerous for the Black youth to walk home, so they were driven back to the Sharp Street Community Center in police patrol wagons.



When the youngsters aged 12 to 16 were ready to leave at about 3:15, police with about 20 dogs formed a semi-circle at the entrance. Two cruising patrol wagons were backed up to the gate and the youngest boys were put aboard for a trip back to the South Baltimore playground on Sharp street where the group originated.

While the younger boys were boarding the wagons, the older ones were discussing the police order that they should ride instead of walk from the pool. Some said accepting the ride would mean loss of integrity for the group.

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“My brother was in the Korean War,” said Michael Brodie, 17, of the 1900 block Walbrook avenue, “and if he had the courage to go through that I want to walk out of here.”

“More walking and less talking,” another boy said.

Police and Mr. Black [from the NAACP] overruled the youngsters, and they boarded the patrol wagons.

An article in *The Sun* on October 19, over a month later, indicated that the violence at the Labor Day gathering was greater than what had been reported in the paper. Juanita Jackson Mitchell, the NAACP lawyer who inspired Elijah Cummings to become a lawyer, said police vehicles were stoned. “Several Negroes were struck by stones and four boys were treated at the hospital for cuts, Mrs. Mitchell said.”

Years later, one of the Black youth who had participated said that was the day Elijah Cummings was injured.

The subject of the October 19 article was a letter Maryland Governor Tawes sent to Mitchell. As representative of the NAACP, she had requested the appointment of a blue-ribbon commission to investigate what she said was inadequate protection of the Black youth during the incidents at Riverside Park as well as unrelated incidents where police had beaten Blacks who had been arrested.

Governor Tawes refused her request to appoint a commission. According to the article: “Declaring his confidence in [Police Commissioner Bernard] Schmidt and his subordinates, the Governor told Mrs. Mitchell, ‘I do not believe that the facts at this time warrant the appointment’ of the special commission.”

