

Theodore Poston

Submitted June 28, 1936

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Biographies
NEGRO MILLIONAIRES--SOLOMON RILEY

References: N. Y. C. Comptroller's Office, Bureau of Awards
Room 610 Municipal Building

N. Y. Amsterdam News
May 18, 1932
May 25, 1932
June 15, 1932

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Negro Millionaires--Solomon Riley

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"Get out!" Solomon Riley said evenly.

The Tammany politician sputtered.

"Look here, Riley. You can't talk to a white man like that. I'm not one of your shakedown victims. After all, I came here to do you a favor. If I go back and tell the boys--"

Solomon Riley smiled, his bushy eyebrows relaxing.

"I've been talking to white men like I please since I came here from Barbados 26 years ago," he said, "and you can go back and tell the boys this. The City of New York awarded me \$260,000 when it condemned my playground development on Harts Island. I'm going to collect that \$260,000, and I'm not going to kick back one damned cent to anybody."

"All right, all right." the politician retorted. "They did award you \$260,000. But you can't collect one damned cent unless you play ball with the boys. Kick in the \$25,000 now and the Bureau of Awards

will mail you your check in 48 hours. Stay tough any longer and the Hyman administration will be out and Jimmie Walker in--and they'll fight you to a standstill."

The politician changed his tact.

"You can't kid us, Riley. You only paid \$35,000 for that half of Harts Island, improvements and all. You knew that the city would be forced to condemn it to keep the inmates from escaping from the city prison there. We didn't fight the big award because we felt you'd be reasonable.

"Now get wise to yourself. What's 25 grand to you? We've checked up on you, Riley, and we know you've shaken respectable white citizens down for more than a million bucks in the last few years. Now, if the boys hadn't been reasonable, they could've put a crimp in this 'Negro scare' racket of yours years ago--"

Solomon Riley chuckled.

"Now don't you kid me." he sneered, "Call it a racket if you want, but there isn't a damned thing you can do about it. If your respectable white citizens are willing to pay three times the value of an apartment house to keep Negroes from moving into their sections, there's no law in the country can prevent it."

Riley leaned back and chuckled again before continuing.

"I didn't start this 'racket', you know. When I bought that house at West End Ave. and 90th St, right after the war, I was ready to settle down. After all, I'd made a pretty good pile as a diamond broker, my wife had cleaned up on her boarding houses, and Macy's had paid me plenty for that small hotel I ~~owned~~^{owned} in 34th St.

"But your respectable white citizens wouldn't let me settle down. They didn't want no niggers in West End Ave. They raised double hell because I was a nigger married to a white woman. So I moved out of the neighborhood."

Obviously enjoying himself, Riley continued:

"But I got even with the bastards. I rented the house to a bunch of Negroes who were plenty able to take care of themselves when the brickbats started flying. Within two weeks, your white friends were more than anxious to buy me out at a handsome profit."

The politician cut in, impatiently.

"Yeah, we know all about your racket, Riley. We know what you got up in Nassau County when you threatened to open a colored beach next to Brisband's estate. We know that 'East Indian-cult' scare you pulled in the Bronx when you bought that old movie house up on Jackson Ave. We know you used your white wife as a front to buy property in a dozen exclusive neighborhoods so you could shake the residents down--"

"Then you must know" Riley retorted angrily, "that I've not enough money to fight you all all Tammany Hall to a standstill. Tell the boys this. I've just taken title to the whole of Manhattan Ave. between 117th and 118th Sts. I paid \$450,000 for one side and \$255,000 for the other. I'm going to name the block 'Riley Square.' I also bought 881 St. Nicholas last week for \$280,000, and--"

The politician stood up. "And you've bought yourself a flock of grief by trying to be tough." he said, "They told me you were a bull-headed nigger--"

Riley's fist ended the argument. He chuckled as the politician scampered out of the office. It probably didn't matter to Riley that "they" finally got him, that he ~~was forced to settle~~ ^{was forced to settle} the Harts Island award for a mere \$165,000. It probably didn't matter that the courts, the city and the respectable white folks finally hooked him years later when he tried his "racket" at Throggs Neck beach in the Bronx. It probably didn't matter that the bottom fell out of his Harlem investments during the depression, and that he was to die a comparatively poor man in 1935.

His first big clash with Tammany was a memorable occasion-- and he enjoyed it to the fullest.