Dark Days in the Ohio Valley: Three Western Kentucky Lynchings, 1884-1911

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DARK DAYS IN THE OHIO VALLEY:
THREE WESTERN KENTUCKY LYNCHINGS, 1884-1911

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
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Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of History

By
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DARK DAYS IN THE OHIO VALLEY:
THREE WESTERN KENTUCKY LYNCHINGS, 1884-1911

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# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iv  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 1</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Divided We Fall”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 2</th>
<th>BRAVERY AND BRUTALITY</th>
<th>48</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Owensboro, 1884</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 3</th>
<th>“IN THE BROAD, OPEN GLARE OF A SUNDAY SUN”</th>
<th>86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hawesville, 1897</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 4</th>
<th>“A THUNDERBOLT FROM THE CLEAR SKY”</th>
<th>115</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Livermore, 1911</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 5</th>
<th>CONCLUSION</th>
<th>145</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“United We Stand”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BIBLIOGRAPHY 167  

APPENDIX MAP, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND ILLUSTRATIONS 174
This thesis investigates three lynchings of African Americans in Progressive-Era western Kentucky. The first occurred in Owensboro. In July 1884, a masked mob attacked the Daviess County jail. Richard May, an African-American field hand, had been incarcerated for the alleged sexual assault of a local farmer’s daughter. During the lynch mob’s actions that claimed May’s life, the white county jailer was killed protecting his prisoner. Ironically, just two decades earlier Jailer William Lucas had fought for the Confederate States of America during the Civil War.

In nearby Hawesville in September 1897, Raymond Bushrod was also arrested on suspicion of raping a white girl. Rumors swirled throughout the town about a potential mob, with the local newspaper even commenting that “the result of [the community’s outrage] will likely be the first lynching in the history of Hancock County before morning.” Indeed Bushrod was hanged; however, the heinous act took place in daylight in the full view of cheering women and children.

The final case, the April 1911 Livermore (McLean County) lynching, received the widest national–and even international–attention. Residents of Livermore seized William Potter, a local black man arrested for allegedly assaulting a white man, from town law enforcement officials. The lynch mob then shot Potter to death on the stage of the town
opera house. Some accounts state that admission was charged for the morbid spectacle. The horrific event was harshly condemned by the national and international press, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People petitioned both Frankfort and Washington, D.C. for action. Surprisingly, heavy public pressure resulted in the eventual indictment of eighteen prominent McLean Countians believed to have participated in the heinous spectacle. Not surprisingly, they were all hastily acquitted, however. Nonetheless, media attention of the disturbing tragedy helped to ensure that the days of unchecked lynch law in the American South were numbered.

These stories are brought to life through eyewitness accounts in contemporary newspaper reports and court records. In addition to presenting a case study of each lynching, I examine the public sentiment, media treatment, and legal proceedings (if any) surrounding these acts of racial violence. As an overarching theme, I analyze how society itself changed during the period under review, from 1884 to 1911.

While there are unique aspects to each lynching, all of these stories share common threads. Each took place in the adjacent western Kentucky Coal Field counties of Daviess, Hancock, and McLean. Each lynching victim stood accused of a crime that typically brought with it an automatic “death sentence” in the New South—sexual assault of a white woman in two cases, and attempted murder of a white man in the other instance. Each occurred about a decade and a half apart.

While lynchings of African Americans in the Bluegrass State during the period covered by this thesis were not uncommon—historian George Wright counts some 135—many of the details make these three cases distinctive. The death of Jailer Lucas in the
line of duty was a very rare occurrence. So too was the brazen communal nature of the Hawesville lynching and the legal action taken against the men of the Livermore mob. These tales also demonstrate that public attitude about extralegal “justice” was far from unanimous. While many whites undoubtedly agreed with the Owensboro *Messenger*’s assertion that lynching was “too good for” certain “black brutes,” there were unwavering voices of reason and civility present also. These latter voices grew progressively louder as the national anti-lynching campaign reached its crescendo in the 1920s and 1930s.

Many special people have been influential in helping me to complete this project. I would like to thank the Western Kentucky University History Department, in particular Patricia Minter, Carol Crowe-Carraco, and Marion Lucas, for reading my thesis and offering their valuable suggestions. Any mistakes that remain are solely my responsibility. Also, the librarians at the Daviess County Public Library, Western Kentucky University, and the University of Kentucky were immensely helpful in my search for primary sources. Above all I want to dedicate this project to my father and mother, Woody and Susan Maglinger. They have taught me to live by the Golden Rule, and I would not be the man that I am today had they not shared God’s love through their beautiful examples.
CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION—
“DIVIDED WE FALL”

In the years from 1882 to 1930, lynch mobs in the South murdered nearly 2,500 African Americans. That translates to roughly one black individual lynched every week for nearly half a century.¹ And this horrifying estimate could be indeed much lower than the actual total. (For example, the official compilation of the Tuskegee Institute counts almost 1,000 more lynchings.)² Detailed individual state compilations by historians such as George Wright have significantly revised old tallies. Most traditional Kentucky history sources place the number of lynchings in the Bluegrass State at 205, however, Wright's 1990 study registered at least 353 victims of mob violence. Consequently, he concludes that the lynching totals for the other Southern states likely “have also been greatly undercounted.”³

This abomination would plague the South and come to define the entire region and its culture. “[A]n imposing wave of mob violence against blacks built in the 1880s, crested in the 1890s, receded during World War I, resurged in the early 1920s, and finally dwindled during the 1930s,” conclude Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck.⁴


⁴Tolnay and Beck, A Festival of Violence, 4.
The Merriam-Webster Dictionary traces the etymology of the word “lynch” to the 1830s. There is some debate over the specific origins of lynching, however. Some scholars trace the practice back to seventeenth-century Ireland; however, most experts agree that mob violence in its modern manifestation sprung from Revolutionary era America. The colonists’ rebellion was at its core a rebellion against authoritarianism, and the vigilante spirit born in the age of patriots would remain an integral part of the American psyche. Historian Philip Dray, author of the recent book *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, explains:

The Revolution helped foster two durable traditions in American life—*localism*, or Americans' belief that problems besetting a community are best addressed by those who live there, and *instrumentalism*, the uniquely American confidence that there are no societal functions off-limits to individuals; in a word, that anyone can do anything, including enforce the law.\(^6\)

Charles Lynch (1736-1796) was a justice of the peace in Chestnut Hill, Virginia. Lynch was a zealous patriot, and during the Revolutionary War he conducted an informal community “court” to try suspected Tories and horse thieves in the region. Those individuals “convicted” by Judge Lynch were subject to thirty-nine lashes. This practice came to be known as “Lynch Law.” It would live on into the early 1800s, as sparsely populated areas on the American frontier administered their own homegrown “justice.” These early “lynchings” were almost always non-lethal in nature; however, as America began to change, so too did extralegal violence.\(^7\)


\(^6\)Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 20.

\(^7\)Ibid., 21.
Whatever its exact origins, “lynch law” would become a distinctly American institution—and a “southern obsession.” Indeed, an overwhelming 85 percent of lynching victims in the South and border states were African American, while only 17 percent of victims in the rest of the United States were black.\(^8\) The transformation of mob violence from primarily non-lethal to lethal would roughly parallel the perceived threat level that white Southerners felt. Published stories of lethal lynch mobs first began to appear in the 1830s, about the same time that the antislavery movement was beginning to have a strong psychological impact upon the South. Just as they would a half century later (with the threat of black equality), Southerners sought to control their surroundings; and a major part of this control came to be in the form of violent—and often deadly—repression of African Americans.\(^9\)

Thus, the first widely publicized use of lethal lynch law would correspond to the rise of the antislavery movement. “In the slave states of the South,” says W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “mob violence became intimately tied to the defense of slavery. Organized vigilance committees kept a watchful eye for suspect slave behavior, inflammatory abolitionist literature, and unorthodox attitudes.”\(^10\) White Southerners harbored a deep-seeded fear of slave uprisings. Outnumbered by their African American servants in most Southern locales, slave owners realized that a revolt would be disastrous—and quite possibly fatal. In 1835, in Madison County, Mississippi, whites learned of a supposed elaborate insurrection plan. As a result, dozens of blacks were rounded up and hanged. In retrospect it was determined that the rumors had no foundation. One Mississippi politician


\(^9\) Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 22-23.

would later concede that the whole conspiracy theory had been “one of the most extraordinary and lamentable hallucinations of our times.”

For the most part, however, blacks’ antebellum status as slaves actually discouraged lynching. Slaves were viewed as property, and were thus accordingly “extended far more legal consideration than their free descendants”. When slaves were executed for criminal activity—and this was rare—slave owners were often compensated for the loss of their personal property.

The frontier nature of young America lent itself to vigilantism. Settlers who lived many miles from larger cities and towns felt vulnerable to criminal activity and incapable of adequate official law enforcement. Therefore, for small, isolated communities, it became “popular and acceptable to enforce a swift, exacting ‘people's justice.’” Dray notes that until the Civil War, lynching “was understood to exist in lieu of established systems of justice.” Most people felt “that as a feature of frontier life it would be phased out by the advent of civilization—the coming of larger municipalities, courts, and a salaried constabulary.”

However, the South’s staunch resistance to Northern interference—first in response to abolitionist alarm, and later to Reconstruction—altered the equation. What emerged was “a new lynching hybrid”: “part rustic self-governance, part caste oppression.” Thus, by the turn of the twentieth century, lynching had become almost solely a means for white Southerners to hold their African-American neighbors in check. “After

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12 Ibid., 29.
13 Ibid., 18-19.
14 Ibid.
emancipation, lynching was the ultimate expression of racism,” note Mark Curriden and Leroy Phillips, Jr.\textsuperscript{15}

What was the underlying cause of the American legacy of racial hatred and violence? Tolnay and Beck conclude that it “had its origin in bloody encounters between resident Native Americans and the first explorers and settlers;” and it was “then refined and institutionalized through more than two centuries of chattel slavery.”\textsuperscript{16} Brundage argues that mob violence was part of a worldwide phenomenon. He sees lynching in the American South as simply “one manifestation of the strenuous and bloody campaign by whites to elaborate and impose a racial hierarchy upon people of color throughout the globe.”\textsuperscript{17}

Michael Bellesiles has examined the role that violence has played in shaping American history. He argues that “since 1861 Americans have excelled at killing one another in a fashion unparalleled in any other industrial nation.” Finding an intimate connection between racism and violence, Bellesiles notes:

The fears and false perceptions engendered by racism drove whites to levels of brutality not seen elsewhere in their society. Whites acted with outrageous barbarity in the Indian wars and the suppression of slave rebellions, real and imagined. The only mass executions in antebellum America came in the aftermath of slave rebellions. In New York City in 1712, authorities responded to a slave insurrection with a series of executions, including burning and hanging in chains. In 1741, rumors of a slave uprising in New York led to the execution of more than thirty slaves, thirteen by public burning. Gabriel's insurrection in Virginia in 1800 ended with the hanging of thirty-five suspects, about the same number as were hanged in Charleston in 1822. Whites responded to Nat Turner's rebellion with a rampage of murder that claimed at least one hundred lives. In such a con-

\textsuperscript{15}Mark Curriden and Leroy Phillips, Jr., \textit{Contempt of Court: The Turn-of-the-Century Lynching that Launched 100 Years of Federalism} (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 215.

\textsuperscript{16}Tolnay and Beck, \textit{A Festival of Violence}, 2.

\textsuperscript{17}Brundage, \textit{Lynching in the New South}, 2.
text it is not surprising that many scholars have come to see violence as the core value of American culture. . . .

“Sometime in the dark past of white racism, a gruesome consensus emerged that black criminality could not be effectively punished by law,” writes historian Christopher Waldrep in the introduction to *Roots of Disorder: Race and Criminal Justice in the American South, 1817-1880*. “Only night-riding terrorists and lynchers could truly control black bestiality.” Waldrep concedes that ingrained racism and economic factors provided the immediate motivation to fuel mob brutality. However, he argues that above all “whites’ violence grew in a hothouse of more general hostility toward law and courts.” Simply stated, Waldrep extrapolates that participants in lynch mobs simply had no confidence that their legal system could “control” black crime.

The phenomenon of mob violence was not homogeneous; it had many faces. In *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*, Brundage classifies mobs into four general categories: terrorist mobs, private mobs, posses, and mass mobs.

Terrorist mobs and private mobs involved the fewest number of individuals—both comprised of less than 50 participants—and enjoyed the least public support. Terrorist mobs were highly organized, clandestine groups (e.g. the Ku Klux Klan, Regulators, Night Riders, etc.) who made no pretense of defending the law. They targeted victims who posed a threat to the status quo of white society, be it economic, social, or moral. They were the most structured type of mob, but they were also the most publicly chastised. In an era when most lynch mobs got off scot-free, many terrorist mobs were condemned by newspapers and politicians, and some participants even faced legal prosecution. Western Kentucky’s bloody Black Patch War of the early 1900s is an example. Michael Bellesiles, ed., *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 10-11.


cution. Western Kentucky’s bloody Black Patch War of the early 1900s is an example of terrorist violence.\textsuperscript{21}

Private mobs were also secretive assemblies, but they were made up of friends, relatives, and neighbors of the victim of an alleged offense. They sought personal vengeance against alleged criminals who were most often already in legal custody. “Sometimes denounced, more often ignored,” writes Brundage, “private mobs lacked the legitimacy that broad local favor might have given them.”\textsuperscript{22} The 1884 lynching of Dick May in Owensboro was the work of a private mob, albeit a rather large one.

The other two forms of lynch mobs, posses and mass mobs, enjoyed broader public support. Posses were quasi-legal entities ranging from a handful to hundreds of men. Due to the ineffectiveness of law enforcement in many areas of the South, posses often offered “welcome assistance” to shorthanded police forces. These impromptu supplemental law enforcement bodies “combined the fellowship of the hunt with the honor of serving the alleged needs of the community.” Although their stated function was to simply apprehend fugitives from justice, posses often murdered the suspects upon capture and terrorized innocent blacks in their pursuit. The press usually praised posses as noble defenders of community justice.\textsuperscript{23}

Mass mobs were the most prevalent and by far “the most spectacular” class of mobs in the South. With anywhere from 60 to thousands of participants, mass mobs undertook the calculated punishment of African Americans charged with offenses viewed as exceptionally vile and notorious. “Communal participation in mob violence ensured that no single individual would be held responsible for the execution,” observes Brundage.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 19-28.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 28-33.

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 33-36.
“because mass lynching became the expression of communal values of law and order, family honor, and white supremacy rather than personal vengeance.” Both the 1897 Hawesville lynching and the 1911 Livermore lynching were testimonies to the brutality of mass mobs. Raymond Bushrod’s murder graphically illustrated the significance that ritual played in the action of mass mobs and the communal approval that legitimized it. Will Potter’s gruesome killing demonstrated mass mobs’ penchant for “almost unlimited sadism.” Brundage notes that the local black community—even relatives of a victim—often times publicly distanced themselves from the deceased, afraid of any appearance of support.24 This was evinced in the aftermath of Potter’s lynching, as the town coroner found no blacks willing to assist in his burial.

Within the lynch mobs themselves, there was a hierarchy. Philip Dray identifies the general categories of participants: At the center of every mob was “a cell of highly motivated perpetrators,” who carried the tools of execution, scuffled with lawmen, and ultimately captured the victim. Then came “a ring of cheerleaders,” individuals with a particular interest in seeing “justice” meted out. Sometimes a pillar of the community would also make an appearance, granting a “sense of legitimacy” to the lynching. Next was the throng of spectators, who looked on “alternately frightened and fascinated.” The final group was “the better people” of the community, who would not attend the lynching but gave tacit approval to the event; they would usually express regret about the mob’s actions, but at the same time accept that such things sometimes could not be helped. Dray argues that the “complicity” of this final group was “essential.”25

Where was the phenomenon of lynching most prevalent? The Deep South states of Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas witnessed the most lynchings, with Louisiana, Ala-

24Ibid., 36-48.

25Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown, ix-x.
bama, and Arkansas close behind. According to Tuskegee’s records, Kentucky ranked ninth in the nation. On a narrower geographical scale, mob violence was more likely to occur in agricultural lowlands than in hill country. Thus, most of Kentucky’s lynchings were concentrated in the western half of the state.26 Both western and central Kentucky also featured the highest concentrations of African American population, and the two regions—southwestern Kentucky particularly—participated in trade primarily with Nashville and other Southern markets.27 “Thinly populated white counties with a high rate of black population growth turned away from law more often than demographically stable regions,” says Waldrep. “When white communities felt besieged by outside forces they naturally drew their wagons into a tighter, and sometimes more vicious, circle.”28

Edward Ayers agrees. In *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, Ayers offers a geographic explanation for lynching. Racial violence was most likely to occur in areas of the South that were predominantly white but experienced a rapid influx of transient blacks. Surprisingly, it was not most prevalent in the regions of most dense distribution of African Americans, like the “Black Belt” of the Deep South. Ayers explains:

The counties most likely to witness lynchings had scattered farms where many black newcomers and strangers lived and worked. Those counties were also likely to have few towns, weak law enforcement, poor communication with the outside, and high levels of transiency among both races. Such a setting fostered the fear and insecurity that fed lynching at the same time it removed the few checks that helped dissuade would-be lynchers elsewhere. . . . Whites dreaded the idea that black criminals could get away with harming a white person without being punished, wor-

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26Ibid., ix.


ried that

the lack of retribution would encourage others to raise their hand against isolated whites on remote plantations, farms, or roads.29

“Lynching tended to flourish where whites were surrounded by what they called ‘strange niggers,’” comments Ayers, “blacks with no white to vouch for them, blacks with no reputation in the neighborhood, blacks without even other blacks to aid them.” Ayers finds that Kentucky’s lynching record did not follow the model of the South. Even though the Bluegrass State had a comparatively diversified economy and was not a hotbed of racial agitation, it witnessed “a remarkably high rate” of mob violence.30

Ayers notes that the black community, just like the white majority, sought to point the finger at black vagrants for criminal acts. This attitude is very understandable given the precarious position in which African Americans stood. “Local blacks had ever reason for displacing white anger,” writes Ayers, “for finding some stranger who could bear the brunt of white men determined to wreak vengeance.”31 The aftermath of the Livermore lynching illustrates this point. African Americans in McLean County were quick to distance themselves from victim Will Potter, claiming that he was a “bad Negro” and refusing any association whatsoever—even assistance in his burial.32

What alleged crimes most often fueled mob violence? “Although most lynchings were inflicted in response to alleged murder,” says Ayers, “most of the rhetoric and justification focused intently on the so-called ‘one crime’ or ‘usual crime’: the sexual assault


30Ibid., 156.

31Ibid., 157-158.

of white women by blacks.” Whites in both the North and South seemed readily to accept

this rationalization. It was understood that such “violations of white womanhood . . . unleashed the lynching beast.”

In Kentucky, murder and attempted murder was the most common cause for lynching, barely edging out rape and attempted rape 29.1 percent to 28.6 percent. However, among African Americans who were lynched, 33 percent were killed in response to rape or attempted rape, while only 24 percent were killed for murder or attempted murder. Thus, blacks accused of sexual crimes in Kentucky were more likely to be lynched than whites. “In the majority of cases,” notes Wright, “no one challenged the word of a white woman when she identified her attacker.” White Americans everywhere seemed to acquiesce to the notion that black men in the South “brought on” much mob violence themselves by their sexual conduct. Thus, Southerners would rehash this popular justification for lynching time and time again.

White Southerners also perpetuated another popular myth to legitimize lynching. They often repeated the claim that the region’s inadequate system of justice made the lynching phenomenon necessary. “Lynching served as a method of law enforcement in sparsely populated places where white people felt especially insecure,” notes Ayers. However, Tolnay and Beck find no link between the frequency of mob violence and the activities of the formal court system, noting that mobs were “impressively insensitive to

33 Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 158.

34 Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 77-83.

the vigor with which the state [legally] imposed the death penalty on blacks.”36

Scholars who study lynching face certain inherent, insurmountable obstacles. Dray explains: “By definition, lynching denies a suspect due process under law, and so the kind of information that due process generates—lawyers’ arguments, a judge’s rulings, testimony, evidence—is not available to assist the historian in understanding the instigating deed.”37

It was the late 1800s before serious scholarly research was conducted about the lynching phenomenon. The first scholars of lynching were also generally anti-lynching activists. Famous African-American anti-lynching crusader Ida Wells-Barnett was a pioneer in this endeavor. Throughout the 1890s, Wells compiled statistics on racial violence and wrote numerous editorials and publications denouncing mob violence.38 She closely examined the motivations that fueled mobs, taking particular issue with the popular justification that lynching was necessary for Southerners to protect white women from the “monster” Negro rapist. Wells presented evidence showing that rape was cited as the instigating motive in less than one-third of lynch mobs. Thus, she admonished Southerners to “tell the truth and admit that colored men and women are lynched for almost any offense, from murder to a misdemeanor . . . .” White outrage over Wells’ anti-lynching rhetoric eventually forced her to flee from Memphis to Chicago.39

Although Wells publicized numerous lynchings, amassed scores of statistics, and traveled around the world to speak out against mob violence, she was unable to persuade


the U.S. Congress to enact anti-lynching legislation. Her legacy, however, is bringing the
dark issue into the national spotlight. “Between 1892 and 1900 Wells dropped an anti-
lynching pebble into the pond of the American public sentiment,” writes Jacqueline Jones
Royster, “and for the first time placed mob violence on the American agenda and estab-
lished a pathway to change.” When she died in March 1931, Wells was hailed as a trail-
blazer of the anti-lynching crusade. Renowned African-American social scientist W.E.B.
Du Bois praised Wells for beginning “the awakening of the conscience of the nation.”

A generation later, NAACP secretary Walter White published *Rope and Faggot*, a
detailed study of lynching. White was particularly interested in exploring the psyche of
mob participants. He argued that lynchers shared mutual characteristics: they feared Af-
rican-American progress, possessed the “drab rural inhabitant's desire for excitement,”
turned to violence when they felt vulnerability, and were undeterred by threat of legal
repercussions. White believed that seeing blacks in uniform in World War I had served
only to raise the threat level for white Southerners and deepen their resentment.

The anti-lynching crusaders were extremely brave, determined individuals, reso-
lutely pursuing justice in the face of public rebuke and threats to their personal safety.
“They sustained their campaign with the ardent belief that their countrymen would, if
adequately informed of the evil of lynching, join them in addressing so terrible injustice;
and they dreamed that from such a fundamental change in consciousness other improve-
ments in racial understanding might flow,” writes Dray. “If lynching, historically, is em-
blematic of what is worst about America—racism, intolerance, cruel and sadistic forms
of violence—their fight may stand for what is best: the love of justice and fairness, and
the conviction that one individual’s sense of right can suffice to defy the gravest of

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40 Ibid., 39-41.

Early lynching scholars of the 1920s and 1930s viewed racial violence as a passing phase, the “growing pains” of the New South. Most agreed that lynchings would decline as the South matured both economically and socially. Social scientists, like John Dollard, put forth “frustration-aggression” theories, suggesting that blacks served as convenient scapegoats for white dissatisfaction and bore the brunt of their pent-up frustrations—economic, social, and political; and Southern society readily condoned such an outlet.43

Brundage notes that the scholarship on mob violence “has only recently moved beyond its infancy.”44 Traditionally the subject has been tackled primarily by sociologists, psychologists, and social scientists—not historians. Since the 1960s, many scholars have tried their hand at examining the lynching phenomenon through the prism of social science. They have searched for answers from within the complex and oft maligned psychology of Southerners.

Some scholars have traced the roots of lynching to deep-seeded sexual frustrations and contradictions within the collective psyche of white Southern males. “Whites . . . projected forbidden fantasies onto blacks and then vented their anger on the creature of their own creation, the black rapist,” writes Brundage.45 Indeed many white slave owners had had sexual relations with their black female slaves, and now after emancipation these same men were burdened with guilt and an irrational fear of black men “turn-

42Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown, xii.

43Brundage, Lynching in the New South, 9-10.

44Ibid., 8.

ing the tables” on them. Historian Joel Williamson argues that “black men were lynched for having achieved, seemingly, a sexual liberation that white men wanted but could not achieve without great feelings of guilt.” So, consequently, white men projected their dark fantasies onto black men “and symbolically killed those thoughts by lynching a hapless black man. . . . In effect, the black man lynched was the worst part of themselves.”

Furthermore, Dray argues:

Compounding the white man's certainty that black men desired white women was the gnawing possibility that white women desired black men. This made it necessary not only to despise and criminalize the black male but also to make him subhuman, a monkey man, to desexualize him and remove him altogether from the sphere of the white woman's potential sexual choices.

Recent scholars have also focused upon the venerated Southern cultural ideal itself as an explanation for racial violence. They have sought to illustrate how the long-held principles of white male dominance within Southern society and the “Religion of the Lost Cause,” as Charles Reagan Wilson terms it, actually helped to make lynching more socially acceptable. In other words, as Brundage summarizes, “Mob violence was one of the most hideous manifestations of ingrained cultural attitudes of the patriarchal, honor-bound South.” Overall, however, Brundage finds some inherent defects in the social science explanations of mob violence. “Psychohistorical interpretations of lynching have all too often been flawed by the tendency to explain away the complex and contradictory

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46 Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown, 71-72.


48 Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown, 73.
phenomena of lynching as simple reflections of individual psychology,” he argues. They cannot account for the regional and temporal variances in lynching.\footnote{Charles Reagan Wilson, \textit{Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920} (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1980); Brundage, \textit{Lynching in the New South}, 11-12.}

In his 1982 book \textit{Anatomy of A Lynching}, James McGovern probes the psychology of lynching. McGovern labels most mob participants as “solid citizen types,” not radical outcasts on the fringes of society. He argues that African Americans historically proved to be ready scapegoats for white frustrations, especially when “inhibitory influences” were too weak to act as a counterbalance. McGovern names the threat of legal ramifications and black reprisals, as well as condemnation by local white residents, the local media, and religious leaders, as “inhibitory influences.” Community approval—either explicit or implicit—was crucial to the survival of the phenomenon of lynching.\footnote{James McGovern, \textit{Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal} (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 8.}

Tolnay and Beck are social scientists who use the comparative method in \textit{A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930} to identify patterns of geographic, socio-economic, and temporal distribution of mob violence. In other words Tolnay and Beck seek to develop a model to explain why lynchings occurred \textit{where} they did and \textit{when} they did. At the heart of their study is a basic assumption: white Southerners lynched blacks “when they felt threatened”—either socially, economically, or politically; and because the two races coexisted in a “poisoned” competitive environment in the South, whites were “predisposed to react violently to even the slightest provocation—or to invent provocative acts where none existed.”\footnote{Tolnay and Beck, \textit{A Festival of Violence}, 3.} The sociologists argue that mob violence was “an immediate function” of the level of that perceived racial threat.\footnote{Ibid., 82.}
Cotton was king in much of the American South, and Tolnay and Beck—like many other scholars—identify a strong correlation between racial violence and fluctuations in the value of the region's cash crop. Yeoman whites competed fiercely with blacks to supply the labor for the cotton industry. Mob violence decreased in years when the price of cotton was high, and it intensified when it dropped. At the same time, Tolnay and Beck find no direct parallel between postwar politics and lynching; during the Redemption Era (1880s), for instance, shockingly African Americans were statistically less likely to face mob violence in the counties with larger proportions of Republicans.

Tolnay and Beck dismiss the notion that white Southerners turned to mob violence to offset a weak system of criminal justice. They argue that the practice of lynching was “a tool for maintaining dominance in a society that was forced to accept a revolutionary change”—the emancipation of its slaves. Although blacks posed a threat to whites in many ways, “economic forces were clearly the most important undercurrent that carried southern society to such outrageous extremes of brutality.” It was economic forces also, however, which would eventually herald the end of mob rule, as southern entrepreneurs were hit hard by the mass departure of the black workforce during the Great Depression era.

The out-migration of Kentucky blacks would surpass even the states of the Deep South. Kentucky's African American population had steadily declined throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, and by 1900, blacks comprised only 13.3 percent of the Commonwealth's population. That figure would stand at just 8.7 percent by the

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53Ibid., 157.
54Ibid., 199.
55Ibid., 256-257.
1920s; and it would slowly decrease even further thereafter.\textsuperscript{56}

Tolnay and Beck emphasize that economic indicators in the lynching era were a veritable barometer by which mob violence could be anticipated. They conclude:

Blacks were most vulnerable to the rope and faggot when lynching had the potential to benefit most of white society, for example, during periods of economic distress. They were least vulnerable where cleavages developed in white society, as where strong opposition political groups existed or where well-to-do whites suffered from the loss of cheap labor.\textsuperscript{57}

Historians have sought to explain the reason for the dramatic leap in mob activity nationally—especially in the South—in the mid 1880s. Ayers argues that this increase in violence was inversely proportional to interracial interaction. The lynching phenomenon’s peak “was a by-product of a new generation of southern whites and blacks who had grown to adulthood without close intimate contact with each other,” he notes. These individual’s parents had interacted closely with African American slaves, but they themselves knew little about their racial counterparts. “These men feared each other with the fear of ignorance,” says Ayers. “They saw each other dimly, at a distance.” This un familia rity bred distrust and contempt.\textsuperscript{58}

Dray, argues that several concurrent factors contributed to the rise in mob violence as the nineteenth century drew to a close:

In addition to the fears about black encroachments on Southern society and white women, certainly the region's historic emphasis on protecting


\textsuperscript{57}Tolnay and Beck, \textit{A Festival of Violence}, 257.

\textsuperscript{58}Wright, \textit{Racial Violence in Kentucky}, 7-8.
personal honor with violence played a role in the increased frequency of lynching, as did the lingering emotional connection to the Lost Cause and the warm memories of the vigilantism of the Reconstruction era. It’s also impossible to discount the region’s widespread religious fundamentalism, with its powerful emphasis on the forces of good and evil, or the economic depression of the early 1890s that sent cotton prices tumbling.  

The devoted anti-lynching crusaders had to work hard to overcome the public sentiment that was often tolerant—if not outright supportive—of lynching. Newspapers were the primary source of public information, and they could both helped and hurt the cause, depending upon which periodical one examined.

The news media in the South helped to perpetuate the stereotype of the “black brute.” Ayers concludes that Southern periodicals tangibly “increased racial tension” in the later part of the nineteenth century. “The newspapers did more than their share to publicize and exaggerate black crime and white retaliation,” he notes. They painted a portrait of a vile and dangerous individual, and they blamed the region’s violent reputation upon such African Americans. Ayers explains:

Virtually every issue of every Southern newspaper contained an account of black wrongdoing; if no episode from nearby could be found, episodes were imported from as far away as necessary; black crimes perpetrated in the North were especially attractive. Black men were thought to be inclined toward certain kinds of crimes, crimes of passion rather than crimes of cunning.  

Philip Dray refers to the turn-of-the-century local news reports as a type of “folk pornography.” Southern newspapers painted a portrait of “a world made precarious by

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59 Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 76.

60 Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 153-155.
Negroes” and fanned the flames of racial intolerance. Examining one particularly heinous Georgia lynching, Dray noted how the local press “whipped up expectations” for a huge public mob.\footnote{Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown}, 4-5.} The press coverage of the 1897 Hawesville lynching examined in this study graphically illustrates this point. After black vagrant Raymond Bushrod was arrested for the rape of white adolescent Maggie Roberts, the local newspaper commented: “Hawesville and vicinity are in a state of madness tonight, greater than ever known before, and the result of it will likely be the first lynching in the history of Hancock county [sic] before morning.”\footnote{“Lynching is Too Good for this Black Brute,” \textit{Owensboro (KY) Daily Messenger}, 26 September 1897: 1.}

It is also ironic that local newspaper coverage seems to contradict one of the main rationales put forth for lynching. Many historians have noted that Southerners would often justify lynching by arguing that it spared white women the humiliation of having to face and positively identify their alleged attacker and to publicly recount the terrible details (as in a trial setting); yet for some reason the local papers usually found such details vitally important to plaster on their front pages for all of the community to see.\footnote{Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown}, 11-12.} “In account after account of lynchings,” notes Wright, “the white newspapers gave the woman’s name, specific information about the attack, and how she somehow escaped to safety.”\footnote{Wright, \textit{Racial Violence in Kentucky}, 81.} This was the case in both the 1884 Owensboro and 1897 Hawesville lynchings, both of which involved the alleged sexual assault of young white girls.
The local press—mirroring prevalent white attitudes—also sought to dehumanize the “enemy.” White newspaper editors painted African-American males as sex-crazed, bloodthirsty monsters. In articles about Hawesville lynching victim Raymond Bushrod, he is referred to as a “Negro ravisher” and “black fiend.” Bushrod is likened to “a snake” and “a mad dog.” The Owensboro Daily Messenger quips that “the penalty for rape is rope.” “Right or wrong,” comments the editor, “as long as black brutes outrage white women, just that long will citizens swing the brutes to a convenient limb.”

While local Southern newspapers fanned the flames of racial violence, they were counter-balanced by the national press. “Big city” newspapers like the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune reported on Southern lynchings, but they often condemned mob action in strong editorials. Following the 1911 Livermore lynching, the editors of the New York Times blasted McLean County residents and Kentucky’s public officials alike for allowing such a heinous act to be perpetrated in their community. Even the Louisville Courier-Journal at times criticized mobs in the Bluegrass State. “The folly, the futility, the fatality of a mob were never more clearly exhibited than in Owensboro,” its editors wrote following the 1884 Owensboro lynching.

In his essay “Word and Deed: The Language of Lynching, 1820-1953,” Christo-

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pher Waldrep argues that throughout history actual mob violence and the rhetoric used to describe it occupied two distinct realms of reality. Language was manipulated both to defend and to attack the lynching phenomenon. Waldrep identifies four major shifts in the meaning of the word “lynching” between the 1830s and the 1950s. In the antebellum period, abolitionists won supporters by perpetuating the stereotype of the racist, violent Southerner; just before the Civil War, Californians persuaded the press that lynching was “necessary” in the lawless Wild West; after the war, whites in the South came to realize that Northerners would muffle their criticism of mob violence if the victim was accused of rape; and finally, in the twentieth century, civil rights groups expanded the meaning of “lynching” to keep alive “this very effective rhetorical tool.”

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, numerous American politicians—including presidents—paid lip service to the anti-lynching campaign. However, very little was ever accomplished in the legal arena. “Progress on a federal response to lynching was almost always inconsistent,” argues Dray, “the judiciary generally moving forward with very slow and deliberate caution while Congress and the executive branch flailed indecisively.”

The U.S. Congress never enacted an anti-lynching law. In the 1920s and 1930s, several anti-lynching bills were proposed, however Southern Congressmen trotted out their well-worn rhetoric in arguing against them: “unconstitutionality of an anti-lynching

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70Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown, 159.
law, states’ rights, the horrors of Reconstruction, the southern whites’ sentimental attachment to the Negro, the correlation between rape and lynching, the steady reduction in mob violence in the South, and continuing progress in southern race relations.” By 1940, the movement for a federal anti-lynching statute was effectively dead, having been stonewalled by recalcitrant Southern conservatives.\(^7\)

What course did Kentucky follow during the Lynching Era? To fully answer this question, one must examine the racial history of the Commonwealth. In American history the word *Kentucky* evokes certain distinct images. One envisions the buckskin-clad pioneer brandishing his long rifle, essentially the Daniel Boone persona. According to popular culture, early Kentuckians were rugged, brave, and adventurous—and they were most certainly Caucasian. As is often the case, however, general stock images do not paint a complete picture.

African Americans quietly entered the “Land of Tomorrow” shoulder to shoulder with the more-ballyhooed Euro-American frontiersmen. A young black “servant” accompanied one of Kentucky’s earliest explorers, Christopher Gist, on his 1751 trip down the Ohio River. African Americans also figured prominently in the now-legendary exploits of Kentucky’s favorite son, Daniel Boone. Several slaves helped Boone cut the path that became the “Wilderness Road,” and some of those same individuals joined white families in the first attempt at building a permanent trans-Appalachian settlement.

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in 1773.\textsuperscript{72}

There are numerous stories of early Kentucky blacks, like Monk Estill, who acted fearlessly in the face of attack from hostile Indians—many times risking their lives for their white companions. African Americans even sometimes worked intimately with the “enemy,” the very first Kentuckians. In 1778, when Daniel Boone was captured by Shawnee Indians, he encountered “Pompey,” a black man who served as Chief Blackfish’s interpreter. By and large however, the first blacks in Kentucky lived and worked and fought and died beside their white brethren.\textsuperscript{73}

So then, what was this relationship like? Marion Lucas, author of the first volume of \textit{A History of Blacks in Kentucky}, identifies three important points about the interracial frontier coexistence. First, there was “a strong interdependence” among the races, as both groups faced common enemies—hostile, unfamiliar Native Americans and a hostile, unfamiliar wilderness; second, slaves on the frontier had “few viable options,” given their harsh and uncertain surroundings; and third, the pioneer experience would prove to yield the most intimate association between whites and blacks of any time during slavery. It is significant to note that nearly all of the African Americans in early Kentucky were there against their will—they were slaves to the white colonists moving westward.\textsuperscript{74}

Perhaps Kentucky’s preeminent pioneer offers the most telling insight into the

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72}Marion B. Lucas, “African Americans on the Kentucky Frontier,” \textit{The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society} 95, no. 2 (1997): 121-122.
\item \textsuperscript{73}Ibid., 123-127.
\item \textsuperscript{74}Marion B. Lucas, \textit{A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Volume 1: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891} (Frankfort, KY: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), xii-xiii.
\end{itemize}}
European American-African American relationship on the frontier. During his Shawnee captivity, Daniel Boone was forced to work in the tribe’s cornfield. Boone protested: “At home I don’t do this kind of work.” He complained to Chief Blackfish that in American culture this type of backbreaking manual labor was reserved for slaves. “But here,” Boone told the Indian, “you make a Negro of me.” Obviously then, even by the frontier period, the lines of race in the New World were clearly drawn. White Europeans were “above” the inferior blacks, in effect in a totally separate class of humanity. 75

Historians believe that blacks comprised at least 10 percent of the frontier population of Kentucky from the very time that Americans from the East Coast began their mass transmontane migration—a proportion that would only increase as the demand for labor did. By the time Kentucky achieved statehood in 1792, African Americans represented more than 16 percent of the Commonwealth's citizenry. For the following four decades, this ratio would increase steadily, rising approximately two percent in each census. By 1830, virtually one in every four Kentuckians was black. 76

This trend, however, soon reversed itself. From 1830 to 1860, the Commonwealth’s black population waned, until by the outbreak of the Civil War only one of every five Kentuckians was African American. This rapid decline was due in large part to the nature of the state’s antebellum economy. Kentucky farmers engaged primarily in

75 Lucas, “African Americans on the Kentucky Frontier,” 129.

76 Lucas, Blacks in Kentucky, xv.
small-scale agriculture, requiring much less slave labor than the plantation system of the Deep South necessitated. Also the dynamics of one of the states’ most profitable pre-war financial activities—the Southern slave trade—figured largely into the equation. Scholars estimate that some 80,000 African Americans were shipped southward during this thirty-year period. At the same time, the Kentucky legislature in 1833 passed a law that prohibited the importation of African slaves for the purpose of resale.

Although slaves represented the vast majority of black Kentuckians, a small number of African-American freemen were present in the Commonwealth's first decades. Kentucky’s first census in 1790 enumerated 114 freemen, and that number would jump an incredible 550 percent just ten years later. History records that several frontier-era slaves, like Monk Estill, won their freedom by performing “heroic acts,” however this alone can not explain how 741 free blacks came to inhabit Kentucky by 1800. Thus, many free African Americans from the East undoubtedly followed in the footsteps of European Americans, trudging westward in search of opportunity and a better life.

Kentucky's free blacks, however, never experienced the full measure of “opportunity” that was accorded to white settlers. In 1799 under Kentucky's second constitution,

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 99.
79 Ibid., xv.
free blacks lost their right to vote.\textsuperscript{81} After 1807, state law prohibited free blacks from outside the Commonwealth from traveling into Kentucky; and those already living in the Bluegrass State were forced to carry “free papers” at all times to identify themselves. The antebellum criminal code was also grossly inequitable to its free black “citizens.” “Kentucky's free blacks could be arrested for allegations of numerous vague violations,” comments Wright. For whites there were four criminal acts that carried with them the possibility of the death penalty, while free blacks could be executed for eleven different offenses.\textsuperscript{82}

During the antebellum period, the state’s free black population never rose above five percent of the total African American population. Thus, the history of blacks on the Kentucky frontier is predominantly the story of its slaves. Lucas concludes:

Upon reaching Kentucky, slave labor began the process of turning a wilderness into a civilized agricultural community. Blacks went to work clearing forests, erecting cabins, cultivated gardens, planting orchards, and building fences. When it came to hard labor, blacks had plenty of experience, and their general knowledge also proved beneficial to the communities that grew up around the early forts.\textsuperscript{83}

Despite their contributions, early Kentucky blacks—both slave and free—did not reap the benefits of the wilderness paradise, and they are seldom mentioned as more than mere footnotes in the colorful history of the Bluegrass State's pioneer era.

If blacks were footnotes in the pioneer era, by the 1820s they had ascended to

\textsuperscript{81}Ibid., 133.


\textsuperscript{83}Lucas, “African Americans on the Kentucky Frontier,” 130.
headline status—as the great national debate over slavery began to boil. Most Kentucky slaves toiled either as farmhands and cattlemen on the “small, self-sufficient farms” that dotted the vast countryside, or as handymen and merchants in the Commonwealth's growing cities. Historians point to two noteworthy distinctions which made the “peculiar institution” in Kentucky unique from other Southern locales. First, individual slave-holders in the Bluegrass State owned relatively few bondsmen, an average of 5.4, compared to the fabled “planter aristocracy” of the U.S. Cotton Belt. (Only Missouri tallied a smaller ratio.) And secondly, and perhaps most significant, experts characterize treatment of Kentucky slaves as “milder” than that of slaves in the Deep South.

Whatever comparatively favorable circumstances Kentucky bondsmen enjoyed could not offset the profound tragedy of the institution of slavery itself. Thousands of African-American men, women, and children were held in bondage simply because of their race. There had been voices of antislavery present in the Commonwealth since its inception—most notably Christian ministers David Rice and David Barrow; however, by the 1830s those voices had grown louder. They were divided into three major camps: Abolitionists demanded “the immediate, uncompensated freeing of the slaves”; Emancipationists advocated a gradual termination of slavery with owners being paid for their economic losses; and proponents of colonization called for liberated blacks to be relocated from America altogether. Although in three decades of existence the Kentucky Colonization Society would transport only 658 blacks to Africa, it represented popular sentiment among the state's white citizenry. “Most white Kentuckians,” write Lowell

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84 Lucas, Blacks in Kentucky, 2-3.


86 Ibid., 173-174.
Harrison and James Klotter, “did not believe that a large number of free blacks could or should be absorbed into the general population.”

Cassius M. Clay and Reverend John G. Fee were two of Kentucky's most outspoken antislavery advocates, as the movement reached its crescendo in the 1850s. However, the eventual rift between these two men—Clay pushing for *emancipation* on economic grounds, and Fee preaching that morality demanded nothing short of *abolition*—perhaps most fittingly illustrates the ideological divide that plagued the antislavery movement. Despite this infighting, “a small but vocal white minority agitated throughout the antebellum period, calling for the end of slavery, usually employing religious, economic, moral, and humanitarian arguments.” The “slavery question” would not be settled peacefully, however. It would take a bloody conflict—a devastating war that would divide Kentuckians, and all Americans, and reverberate for decades to come.

During the American Civil War, the Commonwealth of Kentucky and its people occupied a precarious position. Sitting between the North and South, the state's strategic geography would play a crucial role in determining the ultimate outcome of the conflict. In 1861, President Abraham Lincoln commented, “I think to lose Kentucky [to secession] is nearly the same as to lose the whole game.” Residents of the Commonwealth were deeply divided in their loyalties. The institution of slavery tied Kentucky to the South; yet burgeoning industries utilized new railroad lines connecting the state to Northern hubs.

The national events of 1860 resonated throughout the state—from the Jackson

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88 Ibid., 177-178.


Purchase to the Cumberland Plateau. Despite receiving less than one percent of the popular vote in his home state of Kentucky, Republican Abraham Lincoln won the White House in a bitterly contested election. Soon thereafter the first of the southern states began to secede from the Union. Kentucky’s populace was torn, but the heavily pro-Union state legislature declared the state “neutral.” However, this official stance of neutrality would soon fade, as Federal troops came to occupy many of the Commonwealth’s cites; and pro-southern Kentuckians established their own Confederate state government in Bowling Green.\footnote{Harrison and Klotter, \textit{A New History of Kentucky}, 183-193.}

The Civil War left an indelible mark upon the Commonwealth—physical, economic, and psychological. Around 30,000 Kentuckians who fought in the conflict never returned from the battlefield. Observers have long made note of this “Lost Generation,” one of few distinguished intellectual or political achievements.\footnote{Ibid., 215.} Economic losses were also staggering, as agricultural production decreased by more than 50 percent, and 4 million acres of previously cultivated cropland lay dormant, due to the loss of labor, both slave and free. The quantity of livestock in the state decreased by roughly one-quarter during the war years,\footnote{Ibid., 207.} and property values in Kentucky dropped by $27 million.\footnote{Michael A. Flannery, “Kentucky History Revisited: The Role of the Civil War in Shaping Kentucky’s Collective Consciousness,” \textit{The Filson Club History Quarterly} 71, no. 1 (1997): 41.} Psychological damage, although the most difficult to quantify, may have been the war’s most prevalent legacy.
“The keys to understanding future developments in Kentucky would be the war, the war, and the war,” write Harrison and Klotter in *A New History of Kentucky*. By its very nature, the Civil War divided communities, neighbors, and even individual families. Living in a border state, Kentuckians were as divided as any group of Americans. Men like Union officer Samuel M. Starling of Christian County lived out the nightmare cliché of having two of his sons fight—and die—on opposing sides of the Civil War. An examination of Starling's wartime correspondence to his daughters back home offers telling insight into the mind of a Kentuckian of the 1860s. “I wish the war was over. I wish the rebels were whipped. I wish the cursed Yankees were out of the country. No good feeling has grown out of their occupancy of our state. . . . I fear the worst for our future peace and harmony,” wrote Starling.

Aside from ideological disagreement, Kentuckians experienced much tangible emotional distress during the conflict. Children grew up in an atmosphere of turmoil and tumult, often being raised by a single parent. Detached bands of guerilla troops from both sides pillaged, destroyed property, and physically intimidated citizens; and this practice continued for several years after the war, as common criminals joined forces with disgruntled veterans. The Commonwealth had become “a land of worry, distrust, and fear.” Against this backdrop of uncertainty and adversity emerged two contradictory characteristics within Kentuckians.

Kentucky attempted to be a place of continuity. After the Civil War, Kentuckians continued to venerate the “agrarian ideal,” stubbornly resisting urbanization and industri-

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96Samuel M. Starling to Daughters, March 7, 1863, *Lewis-Starling Collection*, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

alization. They were a conservative people who fought change, and they were extremely provincial in their outlook. “The world of many Kentuckians was one of limited learning, narrow geographic boundaries, and restricted mental horizons,” write Harrison and Klotter. 98 Scholars have often pointed to the South’s intimate relationship with slavery—and the attributes that accompanied it: rurality, poverty, large black population, lack of diversified immigration, narrow religious beliefs, and a propensity toward violence—as the defining influence in the region’s historical development. Writer W. J. Cash could easily have been speaking about Kentucky in particular when he noted in 1941, “The South . . . is a tree with many age rings, with its limbs and trunks bent and twisted by all the winds of the years, but with its tap root in the Old South.”99

Kentucky was also undergoing change. The Commonwealth was in many aspects vastly different in 1865 than it had been just five years earlier. In the Civil War, Kentucky supplied five Union soldiers for every two Confederate soldiers; but Unionist sentiment steadily dwindled. 100 Resentment towards the federal government grew as the war progressed. Kentuckians were angered by Union occupation of their cities, atrocities by some Union officers, the emancipation of their slaves, the use of black soldiers, and the martial law imposed upon the state after the war. The antebellum political, economic, and social structure of Kentucky had been thoroughly reshuffled.

Historian E. Merton Coulter famously noted that Kentucky “waited until after the war to secede,” and many scholars have reiterated this theme. 101 Why did the Common-

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98Ibid., 219.


100Harrison and Klotter, A New History of Kentucky, 195.

wealth “join the Confederacy” posthumously, when it had failed to officially do so during the war? In *Decades of Discord*, Hambleton Tapp and James Klotter point out that this shift was in some ways not really a shift at all: Kentuckians shared common social, cultural, and economic bonds with Southerners of the Upper South; and they were engendered with an “innate and indigenous conservatism,” and found it natural to repudiate modernization and reform—as well as any outside interference. It was this outside interference, however, that most historians pinpoint as the fulcrum in the Commonwealth’s *de facto* secession.102

The perceived harsh and undeserved treatment of the state by Washington during Reconstruction (or “Readjustment” as the period was referred to in Kentucky) triggered a vehement backlash against the Republican-controlled federal government. By and large Kentuckians deeply resented federal interference in local elections and the imposition of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments (African American freedom, citizenship, and suffrage, respectively) upon their “loyal” state. Historian Thomas Connelly suggests that Kentuckians’ inherent spirit of rugged individualism intensified their response to federal “misrule.” He also says that the emergence of powerful sectional commercial interest groups (both agricultural and industrial) undercut antebellum political divisions, leaving a “power vacuum” in state politics. This “power vacuum” changed all of the rules. Ex-Confederates took a stranglehold on state politics, as Old Whigs and Democrats joined forces to oppose the Radical Republicans at every turn. “The Kentucky mind was a complex,” writes Connelly, “of fierce love for the Union, violent opposition to any infringement of the state’s constitutional rights or interference in the state's

affairs, and a somewhat selfish regard for Kentucky's own interests."\textsuperscript{103} Another repercussion of the Civil War was the leveling of the socio-economic playing field. Emancipation stripped slave owners of their social prestige, and post-war Kentuckians “lived in a relatively less financially defined society and a more classless one.”\textsuperscript{104} Historian Michael Flannery believes that the distinct violent Kentucky nature that endured after the war emerged from “the post-bellum secessionist mentalité.”\textsuperscript{105} Tapp and Klotter concur:

Poor education, outdated philosophy, and ineffective politicians were all part of the problem; but all of these factors could be found elsewhere. . . . What made Kentucky different was that hard-to-define abstraction, “the Kentucky character,” contained elements which in the late nineteenth century combined to produce a bloody epoch in the state's history.\textsuperscript{106}

The most sweeping change wrought by the Civil War was in the area of race relations. At the start of the war, there were approximately a quarter of a million slaves in Kentucky. During the war many blacks won their freedom through military service and random declarations by “sympathetic” Union soldiers. In a relatively short span of time, blacks went from the bondage of slavery to status as official U.S. citizens, at least in name.\textsuperscript{107} In early 1864, African Americans in Kentucky began being recruited for service in the Union army. Over 20,000 ex-slaves enlisted,\textsuperscript{108} and a large percentage of them spent time at Camp Nelson in Jessamine County. The station was “the principle camp in


\textsuperscript{104}Harrison and Klotter, \textit{A New History of Kentucky}, 220-221.

\textsuperscript{105}Flannery, “Kentucky History Revisited,” 36, 51.

\textsuperscript{106}Tapp and Klotter, \textit{Decades of Discord}, 409.

\textsuperscript{107}Harrison and Klotter, \textit{A New History of Kentucky}, 234-235.

\textsuperscript{108}Tapp and Klotter, \textit{Decades of Discord}, 7.
the state for the enlistment of black troops and the principal refugee camp” for their wives and children. Reverend John G. Fee helped supervise Camp Nelson, which was plagued by both disorder and disease.\textsuperscript{109}

“Slavery died hard in Kentucky,” states Lucas.\textsuperscript{110} Even after the war when U.S. law mandated the emancipation of all African Americans, white Kentuckians stubbornly resisted. Freedmen’s Bureau officials in the state filed reports of blacks being unwillingly held by their former masters as late as 1866 and 1867.\textsuperscript{111} When blacks did physically escape the bonds of their “owners,” they found it difficult to break free from the inculcated racism that had been born in the era of slavery.

The federal government told African Americans that they were free and urged them to seek employment locally or move to areas where jobs were more abundant. At the same time, however, ex-slaveholders blatantly refused to accept emancipation and threatened individuals who hired their “slaves.” Travel was made nearly impossible for former slaves, as railroad conductors required them to obtain their “owners’” permission before transporting them. Some African Americans did use “passes” issued by General John Palmer (federal military commander of Kentucky) to move to different counties; and many left Kentucky altogether, initiating “a significant outmigration” of blacks from the state.\textsuperscript{112}

The Freedmen’s Bureau, the federal Reconstruction-era department set up primarily to assist the newly freed slaves in the South, was extended to the Bluegrass State,


\textsuperscript{110}Lucas, \textit{Blacks in Kentucky}, 206.

\textsuperscript{111}Marion B. Lucas, “Kentucky Blacks: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” \textit{The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society} 91, no. 4 (1993): 406

\textsuperscript{112}Ibid., 403-404.
much to the chagrin of most Kentuckians. “The opposition of the people to the Freedmen’s Bureau,” writes Coulter, “had been instantaneous and bitter from the first news of its extension to the state.”¹¹³ The agency’s mission was to provide food, medicine, education, and basic civil rights protections to blacks. However, Lucas concludes that in the final analysis, “. . . the Bureau arrived late, made a token contribution, and departed early.”¹¹⁴

The developments in race relations in the immediate post-war period would greatly contribute to the “decades of discord” that ensued. Most white Kentuckians “rejected black equality outright,” notes Lucas. The General Assembly, echoing the will of the majority, passed laws excluding African Americans from the political process and from equality in the courtroom. Besides obviously limiting blacks’ participation in society, the state legislators did something more: they “legitimized second-class citizenship” of blacks in the perspectives of whites. Also, state law enforcement officials by and large disregarded the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875, leaving black citizens to fend for themselves in the face of hostile neighbors. “The failure of Kentucky to extend these and other basic constitutional guarantees to its black minority,” writes Lucas, “resulted in a level of violence that made the postwar years some of the most lawless in the state’s history.”¹¹⁵

Immediately after the Civil War, all across the South, states of the former Confederacy enacted “Black Codes” (and later Jim Crow segregation laws), intended to partition the races and subjugate their African-American citizens to second-class social, eco-

¹¹³Coulter, Civil War and Readjustment, 352.


¹¹⁵Ibid., 410-411.
nomic, and political status. Some Southerners also turned to violent extralegal methods of “control,” as white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan terrorized blacks as well as white “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags.” The Radical Republicans in Congress responded by passing the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875 to extend federal citizenship protections to the newly freed slaves. The federal KKK Act and Force Act were conceived to combat this mounting wave of violence.

By the mid 1870s, however, the political and economic climate had shifted. The Republican Party had become more conservative in its agenda, and the 1873 business panic forced the nation to focus on its economic—rather than racial—problems. The U.S. Supreme Court dealt a succession of crushing blows to the civil rights of blacks: Its 1873 New Orleans Slaughterhouse Cases ruling and its 1876 Cruikshank decision essentially left blacks to fend for themselves in the face of an increasingly hostile South; and the Court struck down the 1875 Civil Rights Act as unconstitutional. President Ulysses S. Grant’s scandal-ridden second administration pulled the plug on Reconstruction, leaving the Southern states in the vengeful hands of “Redeemer” politicians.116 “[B]y the end of 1877, occupying federal troops had been withdrawn, civil rights legislation nullified, and southern statehouses ‘redeemed,’” comment Tolnay and Beck. “As a result, racial violence persisted in the South and entered a new stage in the next decade, that of the rule of the lethal lynch mob.”117 Brundage says: “The abandonment of federal intervention in southern affairs and the withering of the Republican party’s commitment to protect black rights during the 1870s go far to explain the diminishing protection that blacks received in the New South.”118


117Tolnay and Beck, A Festival of Violence, 12-14.

118Brundage, Lynching in the New South, 7.
Local law enforcement in the immediate postwar era proved generally impotent. Paramilitary groups—including the Ku Klux Klan, Regulators, Loyal Leaguers, and guerillas—roamed the countryside terrorizing victims for both political and racial motives without impunity. Elected officials often turned a deaf ear to the violence, particularly when it proved politically advantageous. Democrats were sympathetic to the KKK, while Republicans were inclined to give preferential treatment to the Loyal Leaguers.  

Adding to this atmosphere of lawlessness was a significant influx of dangerous criminals into the Commonwealth's population at war's end; Governor Thomas Bramlette issued pardons to many individuals who had been convicted of crimes, excusing their deviant behavior as the result of “war fever.”

After the war “Regulators” emerged in nearly every corner of the Commonwealth. Regulators were self-appointed law enforcers in rural communities. They took it upon themselves to administer local “justice” as they saw fit. Loyal Leaguers, who were most prevalent in the eastern Kentucky uplands, had a more political agenda. This group sought to keep Democrats out of power in the county politics. For the most part these postwar vigilante groups perpetuated immensely more havoc than they prevented. Regulators and Loyal Leaguers contributed to—rather than checked—the level of postwar violence; and they were readily joined in this venture, of course, by the Ku Klux Klan.

The name most often linked with violence in the Reconstruction-era South was the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan declared war on anyone who threatened the ante-bellum status quo—Radical Republican politicians, federal agents, and most particularly the

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119 Tapp and Klotter, Decades of Discord, 377.
120 Ibid., 9.
121 Wright, Racial Violence in Kentucky, 8-10.
newly freed slaves. The KKK’s reign of terror endured for the duration of Reconstruction. Klansmen physically threatened, flogged, and destroyed the personal property of their sworn adversaries; and they also resorted to murder.\textsuperscript{122} The KKK was a powerful force in Readjustment Kentucky. The national press routinely condemned the Commonwealth’s Democratic leaders for acquiescing to the will of the Klan, but it had little effect. “The violence perpetrated by the Klan in the Bluegrass State would equal in ferocity and frequency the attacks on Afro-Americans anywhere in the old Confederacy,” concludes Wright.\textsuperscript{123}

A spirit of vigilantism prevailed within the Bluegrass State, as rag-tag groups of men banded together to enforce community justice where professional lawmen failed. They summarily identified “offenders” and meted out whatever punishments they deemed necessary, regardless of the presence of actual evidence. Popular opinion was behind vigilante justice, but some prominent state newspaper editors, like the Louisville \textit{Courier-Journal}’s Henry Watterson, railed against the bitter cycle of lawlessness:

The desperado who, calling himself a Ku Klux puts on a mask and mounts a horse at midnight to prowl about after the weak unprotected, is merely a brutal assassin, without one solitary picturesque or dramatic quality. He is an enemy of his race, a foe to society, a cruel monster who should be shot down in his tracks like any other wild animal. . . . [H]e is the most fatal of Radical emissaries, who is mightily undermining the foundations of State authority, and piling up fuel for the partisans of Federal usurpations.\textsuperscript{124}

In the face of this dangerous new world, Kentucky blacks were primarily left to

\textsuperscript{122}Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown}, 39-47.

\textsuperscript{123}Wright, \textit{Racial Violence in Kentucky}, 25-35.

\textsuperscript{124}Tapp and Klotter, \textit{Decades of Discord}, 380-381.
fend for themselves. “Most Kentucky whites took the position that ‘the Yankees freed them, now let the Yankees take care of them,’” argues Lucas.125 Indeed one African-American Southern preacher at the time commented: “The South is a pretty good organized mob and will remain so until bursted [sic] by the Federal Government.”126 As the Commonwealth stood on the cusp of its third postwar decade, it was a “cauldron of violence” which threatened to boil over and scald its populace—particularly its African American citizens.127

In *The Promise of the New South*, Ayers closely examines everyday life in the “New South”—the term given to the period between the Civil War and World War I. Ayers reveals a region rife with distrust and violence. Homicide rates in the New South were among the highest in the entire world. Blacks and whites grew to adulthood without intimate contact, as there had been in the days of slavery. So whites increasingly turned to mob violence to “hold back” the perceived threat from African Americans. Ayers notes that while racial violence had been omnipresent—even dating back to the antebellum period—it assumed “new proportions” of “visibility and ferocity” in the 1880s.128 By 1873, the threat of organized “gangs” in Kentucky had subsided somewhat. However, the seeds of violence had been planted, and the tradition of vio-

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127 Tapp and Klotter, *Decades of Discord*, 5.

ence would be carried forward by individuals who sought “justice” through extralegal means. Fifty years later Coulter would write: “They [the lawless bands] left a heritage, which has been a curse to the state since, a weakened respect for state authority. Lynchings continued long as outcroppings of this spirit . . . [and coupled with the notorious feuds of eastern Kentucky gave] the state a fame all its own.”

The Reconstruction era would prove a bloody precursor of things to come in the Kentucky. Wright found that one-third of all lynchings in the Bluegrass State took place between 1865 and 1874. But by the mid 1880s, a tide was rising—a tide of unprecedented racial violence.

“Kentucky entered the twentieth century under a cloud which never lifted,” notes Klotter. “The state's dark image of violence severely hindered development, retarded growth, and limited the Commonwealth's every effort. Citizens seemed in a constant state of siege from without and deeply divided within.”

Kentucky’s homicide rate consistently ranked in the top ten nationwide between 1900 and 1945. “Other regions and other states did not match Kentucky’s dubious record,” argues Klotter. “In fact, a subculture of violence existed, one that produced aggressive behavior which found few restraints in a state where a folk system of justice often condoned such violence.”

Well-publicized accounts of feud violence in Appalachian Kentucky filled the national media seemingly constantly in the late 1800s. Shortly after the turn of the century,

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130 Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 3.
132 Ibid., 71-72.
though, public attention would be focused upon the western end of the Commonwealth—once again, for negative reasons. An all-out “war” erupted in the tobacco-growing counties of western Kentucky and Tennessee. Tobacco farmers met in Guthrie, Kentucky, a small Todd County town on the Tennessee border, in 1904 to form the Planter's Protective Association (P.P.A.), a cooperative which sought to have farmers “pool” their tobacco crop and hold it off the market until they were offered a fair price; they did so to combat the large tobacco “trusts,” who had a virtual monopoly on the tobacco market. However, the P.P.A. soon gave rise to a violent paramilitary “enforcement” wing—the Night Riders. The Black Patch War had begun.\(^{(133)}\)

Night Riders, groups of armed, masked horsemen, used both psychological and physical intimidation against so-called “hillbillies” who refused to join the P.P.A. They destroyed crops, burned barns, and occasionally beat or even shot nonconformists. “Yet, as with most such groups,” writes Klotter, “the original purpose often became sublimated to other, baser ones, and some forces degenerated into lawless attempts at personal vengeance or moral and racial control.” By 1908, he says, “the movement began taking its ugly turn to racism.” The Night Riders began using “Ku Klux Klan-like tactics” in order to force African American residents out of various locales. Soon, however, state government would begin to crack down on the Night Riders, and overall community support for the P.P.A. would dwindle. The movement was effectively dead; but tragically, much damage had already been done. Many western Kentucky blacks had “fled to towns

\(^{(133)}\)Ibid., 57-65.
or left the state entirely,” and the Commonwealth’s violent image was further solidified. Klotter says: “Prejudice still replaced justice, passion still overcame reason, and the lynch mob’s rope still symbolized the era for Kentucky blacks.”134

Historians have noted that while a few individual states did pass anti-lynching legislation, these measures were not particularly effective in general. “Enforcement of these laws was at best sporadic,” comments George Rable. When governors did act to protect prisoners, it was often with a dual purpose in mind: to prevent extralegal justice and to win the public relations war—both within the South and in the national press.135 Often ridiculed for its violent image and backwardness, Kentucky was actually one of the citadels of the anti-lynching crusade. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, some prominent politicians in the Bluegrass State, mostly Republicans, began to push for an end to mob rule; and thanks to their efforts coupled with a growing outcry from the black community,136 Kentucky became the first Southern state to pass anti-lynching legislation.137

“The governors of Kentucky, particularly Republican ones in whose ranks black voters resided, generally spoke out and acted with more force than did most of their fellow whites,” notes Klotter.138 The Commonwealth's first G.O.P. governor, William O.

134Ibid.

135Ibid., 207-208.

136Wright, Racial Violence in Kentucky, 155.


138Klotter, Portrait in Paradox, 68.
Bradley (1895-1899), quickly earned a reputation for taking on mob violence. In his campaign Bradley had declared war upon the violent elements of Kentucky society, including turnpike raiders and bloody lynch mobs. His distaste for mobs was particularly pronounced. “Those who congregate and conspire to take human life are legally greater criminals than those whose lives they seek to take,” railed Bradley, “for no crime is so base and repulsive as that committed under cloak of pretended vindication of law.” Once elected, he continued to denounce adamantly lynch mobs as well as local officials, who he felt allowed lynchings to continue by offering mobs little resistance and failing to bring perpetrators to justice. Governor Bradley’s most important contribution to the anti-lynching campaign was his push for an anti-mob law.  

Bradley called a special legislative session in March 1897, with the specific goal of enacting laws aimed at ending the violence in the Bluegrass State. The General Assembly overwhelming supported the legislation, and it passed in May with only minimal debate. Kentucky’s new anti-lynching law outlined legal penalties for mob participants, granted local law enforcers the power to deputize citizens for extra protection of prisoners, and gave the state executive branch broad powers to deter lynchings (including investigatory powers and the ability to offer cash rewards for the capture of members of lynch mobs). Two of the law’s provisions were more controversial: local officials would pay a significant monetary fine and be removed from office if they did not offer sufficient resistance in repelling mobs, and local sheriffs could arm prisoners with weapons for their own self-defense. “No mob would be able to stand before the prisoner fighting for

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139Wright, Racial Violence in Kentucky, 177-183.
his life and the jailer or sheriff fighting for his office,” theorized Bradley.140

Despite the noble intentions of the Commonwealth’s policy-makers, Kentucky’s 1897 anti-lynching law met the practical fate of similar acts in other states—particularly in the South. The law was “effectively nullified” when it was not properly enforced, comments Wright. Legal scholar James Cutler concluded that, sadly, racial prejudice was the main reason why officials never fully enforced the law. The General Assembly called for revisions to the Commonwealth’s anti-mob law just five years later. In March 1902, they amended the law, modifying much of the first version. Chief among these amendments was the scrapping of Section Six, which had mandated the removal of local officials who allowed lynchings to occur. This substantially weakened the anti-lynching act, greatly limiting any influence Frankfort could exert to discourage lynch mobs in the Commonwealth’s counties.141

Subsequent Republican governors picked up the anti-lynching battle. Augustus E. Willson (1907-1911) fought the Night Riders, sending the state militia to western part of the state during the Black Patch War.142 In the early 1920s, Governor Edwin Porch Morrow (1919-1923) renewed the fight against mob violence in Kentucky with vigor. He vehemently opposed mob violence and was influential in the passage of a second state anti-lynching law. The NAACP, which had failed in its efforts to have a federal anti-lynching law enacted, began a dedicated campaign in Kentucky beginning in 1917. Dr.

140Ibid.
141Ibid.
142Ibid., 11-12.
Edward Underwood, president of the Frankfort NAACP chapter, persistently lobbied Morrow and state lawmakers, insisting that a new anti-mob law was necessary—one that strengthened the watered-down 1902 version. In March 1920, the General Assembly unanimously passed a new anti-lynching bill, and it was enthusiastically signed by Governor Morrow.\textsuperscript{143}

The key provision of this act was the clause ensuring the mandatory removal of local law enforcement officers who allowed a lynching to occur on their watch. In a test case just one year later in Versailles, Governor Morrow made this point abundantly clear. “It is the duty of a jailer to resist a mob,” Morrow proclaimed in denying the local jailer’s request for reinstatement, “until he has been beaten into insensibility or killed.” The next Republican governor, Flem Sampson (1927-1931), concurred: “I do not believe that a mob can ever take a prisoner from a jailer who is really in good faith and trying to prevent the taking [of his prisoner]. . . . The trouble has been the jailers have joined in the mobs or tacitly consented to the crime.”\textsuperscript{144} On at least two occasions, Democratic governor Augustus O. Stanley (1915-1919) traveled to the site of a potential lynching and confronted the mob. Critics labeled Stanley’s actions as more political than humanitarian, but he nonetheless helped to diffuse two likely lynchings.\textsuperscript{145}

The number of lynchings in Kentucky steadily declined as the twentieth century progressed. It is debatable whether this trend occurred due to the anti-lynching laws, or

\textsuperscript{143}Ibid., 200-205.

\textsuperscript{144}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{145}Klotter, \textit{Portrait in Paradox}, 68.
whether it was simply a reflection of changing public sentiment. This chicken-before-the-egg conundrum—like ones that have plagued legal thinkers throughout history—can never be truly resolved. Nonetheless, Wright speculates: “Within Kentucky, some of the credit for the decline in lynchings must be given to the new law.” In his final assessment of the political battle against mob violence in Kentucky, Wright concludes that the Commonwealth's governors proved more effective at preventing lynchings than prosecuting guilty parties. The NAACP and other civil rights groups felt that most of the state's chief executives never fully utilized the anti-lynching laws.

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146 Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 177-183.

147 Ibid., 205.
CHAPTER 2: 
BRAVERY AND BRUTALITY—
OWENSBORO, 1884

As the mighty Ohio River reaches mile 745 on its 981-mile journey from Pittsburgh to the Mississippi, it jaunts dramatically to the south, beginning a graceful horse-shoe bend. The land to the north in Indiana is floodplain, with low-lying cornfields which become vast shallow lakes when the spring rains swell the murky stream out of its banks. At the bottom of the river bend, steep bluffs rise along the Kentucky bank forming a natural floodwall. Early river travelers called the area “Yellow Banks” because of the golden tint of the area’s clay soil.¹

By the early 1800s, Yellow Banks had grown into a thriving little river port, as pioneers were attracted by its strategic location. Located at a “deep-water bend” of the Ohio with the channel on the Kentucky side, the settlement was a natural stopping point for boatmen.² The Kentucky General Assembly created Daviess County in 1815; and two years later it accepted the plan for the county seat at Yellow Banks—renaming it Owensborough (later shortened to Owensboro). One of the town’s foremost early landowners, David Ross, helped name the streets of the planned community. The major thoroughfare, Frederica Street, ran south from the river landing. One popular story holds that Frederica was named for a well-liked local mulatto slave girl. “The citizens of the young

¹Lee A. and Aloma W. Dew, Owensboro: The City on the Yellow Banks (Bowling Green, KY: Rivendell Publications, 1990), 11.
²Ibid., 13, 27.
town,” write county historians Lee and Aloma Dew, “were amused by the thought that the slave girl was flanked by two virtuous saints [St. Ann and St. Elizabeth streets].”

Antebellum Daviess County was also home to another more famous slave. In the 1820s, Josiah Henson was sent to live with his master’s brother, Amos Riley. Henson worked as an overseer on Riley’s farm near Blackford Creek in the northeastern corner of the county. However, when he discovered that he was to be sold away from his family, he escaped across the Ohio River and eventually found freedom in Canada. Henson is widely believed to have provided the inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s highly influential novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe’s book is regarded as the most popular nineteenth-century work of fiction, as it took the great national debate over slavery into the arena of popular culture.

By the eve of the Civil War, more than one of every three Daviess County residents was a slave. Agriculture was vital to the local economy, and African-American slaves by and large provided the labor required for farming tobacco, corn, and other crops. The city of Owensboro itself also featured a high concentration of slaves, with many working as house servants, factory hands, steamboat deckhands, and other labor-

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3Ibid., 25-27.

ers.\(^5\) When it came to politics, Daviess Countians—like the vast majority of Americans—were preoccupied with one primary issue: the fiery debate over slavery.

In the 1860 presidential election, residents of Daviess County overwhelmingly supported the “compromise party”—Constitutional Union—candidate John Bell of Tennessee. The Dews suggest that the political philosophy of Owensboroans was tempered by a strong Whig tradition. “With western pragmatism they realized the economic need for a strong Union even though sentimentally and ancestrally they were linked with the South.” On Election Day both of the Kentucky candidates—representing the two extremes of the political spectrum—fared the poorest of the four contenders. Southern Democrat John Breckenridge finished third in the polls, and Republican Abraham Lincoln finished a distant fourth, garnering only 7 votes in the county. Owensboroans did not trust Lincoln, fearing that the Republicans were devoted to ending the institution of slavery at any cost and would push the nation into war.\(^6\)

When the Civil War did come, Owensboro found itself “between the Hawk and the Buzzard.” It was “caught in the schizophrenic position of being a border town in a border state,” note the Dews.\(^7\) For the balance of the conflict, the city would feel the contradictory pull of both the North and South. The only significant military action in the county came in September 1862. A rebel guerilla force of some 500-800 soldiers

\(^5\)Dews, *Owensboro*, 42.

\(^6\)Ibid., 45-47.

\(^7\)Ibid., 46.
marched into Owensboro on September 19 and looted local stores for gunpowder and other supplies, before being forced south by the Union Fifteenth Cavalry division which had been camped at the county fairgrounds. Reinforced by Indiana Home Guards from across the river, the Union troops surprised the guerillas at dawn the next morning at their makeshift camp at Sutherland’s Hill (about eight miles south of town). The cavalry, composed mostly of Indiana Legionnaires from neighboring Spencer County, drove the rebels out of Daviess County. An estimated 36 guerillas and 3 Home Guards were killed in what became known locally as the Battle of Panther Creek. Although Owensboro would not host any more heavy fighting during the war, the town witnessed its fair share of rumors and unrest.⁸

Pro-Confederate sentiment in the city during the War was prevalent. Owensboro’s physical contribution to the war itself was telling: it fielded men for three Confederate units and only one Union regiment. Federal troops passing through the city often encountered a less-than-hospitable reception. “Secession flags were waved in our faces by females,” recounted one Union soldier, “and we were insulted on all occasions . . . .”⁹ Following the Battle of Panther Creek, Indiana soldiers expressed frustration that local pro-Union men did not respond “as they should have” to help repel the enemy. Sporadic rebel incursions became commonplace, as small bands of guerillas periodically entered the town destroying property and causing a general state of alarm. In

⁸Ibid., 53-54.
⁹Ibid., 52.
January 1865, guerilla captain William Davidson’s troops burned Daviess County’s new 6-year-old, $100,000 courthouse, incensed over the quartering of African-American Union soldiers in the building.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite the uproar caused by Rebel raids, Union activity most deeply affected the emotions of the local populace during the conflict. Because of the known pro-Southern sentiment within Owensboro—evinced particularly by an intercepted note from Confederate general Simon Bolivar Buckner asking one local man to help destroy the nearby Green River locks—President Lincoln authorized Union gunboats to patrol the city’s Ohio River harbor. Civilians were required to obtain passes from the provost marshal to travel by river or even to ship supplies; and local order was often enforced by black troops—sometimes former slaves from the area. Even loyal Unionists began to feel resentment towards the federal government.\textsuperscript{11}

Atrocities by Union officials further eroded public support. In May 1862, passing Union troops placed the body of Louisiana Confederate Private A. Kyle into a box marked “Dead Rebel” and tossed it onto a wharfboat as their steamship passed Owensboro. Kyle had been wounded in the Battle of Shiloh and died as he was being transported upstream to Louisville. In July 1864, two young Confederate soldiers from Daviess County who had been separated from their regiment were captured by Union forces. General Stephen Burbridge ordered the boys executed by firing squad, as part of his

\textsuperscript{10}Aloma Williams Dew, “‘Between the Hawk and Buzzard’: Owensboro During the Civil War,” \textit{The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society} 77 (1979): 10.

\textsuperscript{11}Dews, \textit{Owensboro}, 52-53.
campaign of vengeance against Southern guerilla bands (of which the two regular soldiers had not been a party).\textsuperscript{12}

The sudden act of emancipation itself seemed to be the final straw. After the war Owensboroans—like the vast majority of their fellow Kentuckians—would become predominantly pro-Southern in their sentiments. Former Whigs in the county became “ardent sympathizers with and supporters of the former Confederates.”\textsuperscript{13} Even many die-hard Unionists would lean toward the “Lost Cause” by war’s end, feeling betrayed by the same Federal government they had initially rallied behind.

This pro-Southern sentiment would be manifested in the 1890s in the local Confederate Veterans Association’s drive to construct a Confederate monument on the courthouse lawn. A $3,500 bronze statue of a C.S.A. soldier was completed by famous Hungarian-American sculptor George Julian Zolnay. The monument was placed on the courthouse square facing towards the south, “looking perhaps toward lost dreams of a gracious way of life, a cavalier ideal” rather than facing northward to confront the “enemy” as many such statues did. Ironically, the statue’s pedestal, bearing the inscription “To Our Confederate Heroes,” sat less than 25 yards from the Daviess County Courthouse—the same landmark Confederate guerillas destroyed a generation earlier.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 60-61.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 61-64.
Not physically devastated nor economically decimated like many cities further south, Owensboro did not experience a period of true Reconstruction. The city’s scars lay below the surface—particularly bitter emotions about race and politics; and whites and blacks alike grappled with change during an era of “Readjustment.” Emancipation had abruptly and drastically changed the inveterate conventions of society. Local African Americans gingerly felt their way through the ramifications of “citizenship,” under the watchful—and often resentful—eye of their white neighbors.

By the mid 1880s, Owensboro was a booming Ohio River town. Boasting nearly 6,500 residents, the Daviess County seat had seen its population double since the end of the Civil War.\(^{15}\) Much of the city’s economy and transportation remained tied to the mighty Ohio, as steamboats regularly crowded the Owensboro riverfront. By the 1870s, however, railroad fever had hit the community, and local businessmen scrambled to hitch Owensboro to the nation’s increasingly busy rail lines. A north-south spur was completed in early 1884, linking the city to the Louisville & Nashville and the Elizabethtown and Paducah (later the Illinois Central) railroads.\(^{16}\)

Sitting in the heart of the fertile Western Kentucky Coal Field region, Daviess County had a long, rich agricultural tradition. Its alluvial floodplains and gently rolling hills (covered with rich loam topsoil from centuries of forest growth) were ideally suited

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\(^{15}\)Ibid., 46, 81.

\(^{16}\)Ibid., 65-68.
for growing tobacco and corn. These two crops would figure predominantly in the county’s late nineteenth century economy.\textsuperscript{17}

In the postwar years, Owensboro became the capital of the tobacco industry in western Kentucky, as local farmers brought their crop to its 18 factories which processed about 10 million pounds of tobacco a year. Daviess County tobacco was shipped to markets around the United States and across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe and Africa.\textsuperscript{18} Distilling was the other backbone of county industry. Local farmers supplied the corn (along with barley and rye) to county whiskey and bourbon makers. The county’s 18 distilleries produced some 1,000 barrels of spirits per day. These manufacturers helped spread the fame of Kentucky-produced liquor, and Daviess County achieved an international reputation for its “sour mash” bourbon in particular. Many satellite industries spun off from the distilleries. Loggers, planers, and coopers supplied the vast quantity of wood and barrels required by the industry; and steamboats and railroads transported the product to market. Evidently many of the town’s residents did their part to support the local economy: there were 37 saloons in Owensboro, or 1 per every 55 men.\textsuperscript{19}

With Owensboro’s industrial boom came a dramatic increase in the city’s immigrant and black population. The African-American population boom in particular ran completely contrary to the statewide trend. From 1870 to 1880, while Kentucky’s black

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 81.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 82.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 85-90.
population as a whole decreased, Daviess County’s African-American populace climbed from 3,603 to 4,854.\textsuperscript{20} The urban increase was even more dramatic; Owensboro’s black population increased by more than 130 percent, as one in three city residents in 1880 was black.\textsuperscript{21}

Along with the population explosion in the city’s black community came the need to educate their children. \textit{Claybrook v. Owensboro} was one of the earliest victories for equal (or at least semi-equal) education for blacks in Kentucky. In the 1880s, African-American parents in Owensboro were angered over the disparity in funding and facilities for their children, and they filed suit in Federal District Court demanding equity in the city’s black and white schools. A judge ruled in favor of the parents and held that state education laws supporting “colored” schools exclusively with property taxes on blacks violated the 14\textsuperscript{th} Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. As a result the General Assembly repealed those laws in March 1884; and both black and white schools were placed under the authority of the Owensboro School Board. Despite the significant strides made by Owensboro blacks in \textit{Claybrook}, the races were by no stretch of the imagination considered “equal.”\textsuperscript{22} That summer Owensboro citizens of all races commemorated the anniversary of the American Revolution in grand fashion. The first few annual Independence Day celebrations must have held especially profound meaning for African Americans;

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\textsuperscript{21}Dews, Owensboro, 92.
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\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 95-98.
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and July 4, 1884 was surely no different. More than 1,500 people congregated at Floral Park\textsuperscript{23} in downtown Owensboro\textsuperscript{24} to enjoy fellowship, refreshments, and “an exhibition of fireworks that [had] never been equaled in [western Kentucky].”\textsuperscript{25}

It was just another typical sweltering July day in the Ohio Valley for farmers who had to work in their fields.\textsuperscript{26} As city residents enjoyed the festivities of the day, white farmer Sod Kelly toiled in the hot midday sun among his endless crop rows along Yellow Creek. A small stream that empties into the Ohio River four miles above Owensboro, Yellow Creek lies about an hour’s horse ride east of town. Kelly’s modest farm was one of numerous farmsteads that lined the gently sloping river terrace.\textsuperscript{27}

Kelly, along with his wife and two daughters, had moved across the river from adjacent Spencer County, Indiana, following the flood of 1883. Both Mrs. Kelly and one of the couple’s daughters assisted Mr. Kelly in his farming duties. The other daughter, who was 17 years old, had been “almost an invalid” for at least two years. Her frail health condition required her to be bedridden a majority of the time, and she was “never able to sit up a whole day at a time.” The Kellys were also assisted by a 23-year-old African-American farmhand. Richard “Dick” May was a man of short stature and had worked for


\textsuperscript{24}Dews, \textit{Owensboro}, 101.

\textsuperscript{25}“Local and Otherwise,” Owensboro \textit{Semi-Weekly Messenger}, 1 July 1884: 4.

\textsuperscript{26}“The River And Weather,” Louisville \textit{Courier-Journal}, 5 July 1884: 3.

the Kellys for seven years. The family “trusted and respected”\textsuperscript{28} him and considered him “faithful and reliable.”\textsuperscript{29}

On this particular day, May had gone out along with Mr. Kelly, Mrs. Kelly, and their healthy daughter to work one of the farm’s tobacco beds. The group drew tobacco plants under the scorching summer sun. After a while the young black man announced that he needed to return to the family home, perhaps to receive a respite from the unfor-giving heat or maybe to retrieve some new gloves for his prickly task.\textsuperscript{30}

A few minutes later, as the Kelly family worked in the field, Mrs. Kelly heard a scream from her invalid daughter who was back at the house. Hurrying back to check on her daughter, Mrs. Kelly found the girl “on a pallet on the floor trembling and weeping, and weak from fear.” However, when quizzed on the reason for her condition, the teen-ager failed to submit any explanation. Concerned about their daughter’s actions but hav-ing no direct evidence for alarm, the Kellys finished their day’s work and retired as usual.\textsuperscript{31}

The following evening, however, the invalid daughter would recount a disturbing tale. Miss Kelly confided to her mother that when Dick May had returned to the house the previous afternoon, he had “thrown her down on the pallet and attempted to outrage

\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{29}\textit{“A Bloody, Brutal Mob: Kill Jailer Lucas And Lynch The Ravisher, Dick May,” Owensboro Semi-Weekly Messenger, 15 July 1884: 4.}

\textsuperscript{30}\textit{“An Attempt At Rape,” 4.}

\textsuperscript{31}\textit{Ibid.}
her person.” The girl claimed that she had been saved by the family’s small pet dog which was aroused by the commotion and leapt up and bit May on the cheek. She said that she was able to utter a scream as May halted his attack to subdue the dog. Startled by the girl’s scream, May instantly jumped to his feet. The young Miss Kelly claimed that the black man threatened to kill her if she told on him and then quickly bolted out of the house.32

Mrs. Kelly was horrified by her frail daughter’s story. Her “indignation was thoroughly roused,” and she sought out Dick May. May had remained on the farm following the incident, and when the angry mother found him she began to beat him with a stick. Despite her rage Mrs. Kelly sought to control her temper and thought it most prudent to retire for the evening without mentioning the tale to her husband—at least not until she could hide his gun from him. The young farmhand stayed on the property overnight, and the Kelly household went to bed as usual.33

As a bright Sunday morning dawned,34 Mrs. Kelly located her husband’s gun and other weapons and stashed them away so that he could not find them. According to the local newspaper account, she then awoke Mr. Kelly and related their daughter’s frightening tale to him. “When Mr. Kelly learned of the deed, he flew into a terrible rage, and

32Ibid.
33Ibid.
34“The River And Weather,” Louisville Courier-Journal, 7 July 1884: 3.
attacked the Negro with his fists. . . .” A terrified May fled the Kelly farm and headed westward toward Owensboro.35

Sod Kelly gathered his wits about him and set out for town. He rode up to the Owensboro police station, where he swore out a warrant for Dick May’s arrest. Officer G. F. Reynolds accompanied Kelly back to the Yellow Creek area to search for the fugitive. By this time several of Kelly’s neighbors had heard about the alleged assault and had formed an armed posse to search for May. “While Mr. Kelly and others were hunting in one locality for him, Mr. Reynolds found him in another, hiding in the bushes on the river bank,” stated the Owensboro *Semi-Weekly Messenger*. “He took him with him in his buggy, and hurried him off to jail before the others knew of the arrest.”36 The actions of Mr. Reynolds—as well as Mrs. Kelly’s initial handling of the situation—undoubtedly saved the life of the young black man.

Once May had been turned over to the authorities in Owensboro on Sunday, he was questioned concerning the allegations lodged against him. May reportedly “confessed all the girl alleged, but he declared that he had been making indecent proposals to her for two years, and while she never acquiesced, she had never repulsed him outright.” The Owensboro *Semi-Weekly Messenger* openly doubted the validity of May’s explanation in its Tuesday, July 8 edition: “[His story] is highly improbable, especially in consideration of the girl’s delicate health, and is an aggravation of his beastly offense.”

35*“An Attempt At Rape,”* 4.

36Ibid.
city’s newspaper (printed twice a week) ran the following headline for its article: “An Attempt At Rape: A Negro Brute Attempts An Outrage On An Invalid Girl.” May had perpetrated “one of those most revolting offenses which of late, are of such frequent occurrence all over the country—attempted rape,” commented the paper. There was no presumption of innocence, no attempt to maintain professional unbiased neutrality.37

“What is most singular about this case,” the paper noted, “is the lack of excitement concerning it up to the present. Very few in the city knew about it [Monday], but in the evening there were rumors of a mob from the country, who would attack the jail during the night. In view of this the jailer procured a strong guard, who were on watch all night.” Here again, the *Messenger* seemed to be fanning the flames, rather than doing anything to diffuse the volatile situation.38

William J. Lucas, jailer of Daviess County, was less than a month away from his fiftieth birthday. He was born in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, where he lived until the outbreak of the Civil War. Lucas served in Gregg’s First South Carolina (Confederate) regiment, and he was present at the attack on Fort Sumter. After the war he moved to Virginia and married Mildred Summers. A decade or so later, the Lucases moved to Kentucky, where they raised their six children. William was a painter by trade, and he first ran for jailer in 1878. Unsuccessful in this first bid, he was elected jailer of Daviess

37Ibid.
38Ibid.
County on his next try in 1882. Jailer Lucas was described as a “hard-working man of an eccentric and peculiar nature.”

Jailer Lucas was a pragmatist. He recognized that in cases like the one he now faced—cases in which an African-American prisoner was accused of the so-called “usual crime” (sexual assault of white females by black males)—all bets were off. Lucas knew that such circumstances often stirred up mobs, and he prepared for such a contingency. On Monday, July 7, the jailer asked the county judge for reinforcements, and he appointed Charles Haney as a “special bailiff” and gave Haney the authority “to summon several assistants.”

Throughout the tense week following Dick May’s arrest, the streets of Owensboro were abuzz with rumors of a potential lynch mob. Monday night, the first night of the rumors, Jailer Lucas shackled May, led him next door to the Courthouse, and hid him in one of the jury rooms for his protection. On the following four evenings, Tuesday through Friday, Lucas “put him up on the roof of the jail, there being a flat place near the eaves of the house adjoining, where he could lie down on his blankets.”

Dick May was also a realist. As the young black man looked up into the muggy, starry night sky, surely he could not help but anticipate his likely fate. During his incarceration he reportedly “read his Bible and prayed continually” and told Jailer Lucas that

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40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.
he could not sleep; and as he lay there on the hard rooftop mere yards away from the county’s house of justice, he undoubtedly prayed to his God that he would live to face a fair jury trial. May realized that he may be summoned to appear before Judge Lynch’s court at any hour. He confided to the jailer that he had made “his peace with God,” and enumerated his last wishes to Lucas. In the event that he was murdered by a lynch mob, May wanted to be buried “decently in a new suit of clothes” that he had back at the Kelly farm.42

Despite the imminent threat against the jail, Jailer Lucas remained determined and committed to his elected duty. He refused to be intimidated. Evidently, his wife Mildred was every bit as resolute. “Every night while the mob was expected Mrs. Lucas and her children were invited to stay with friends,” reported the *Semi-Weekly Messenger*, “but, like the brave woman she is, she announced that she would stay with her husband until the last.”43

By the weekend the threat seemed to have subsided. Groups of men had reportedly gathered at Murray’s Woods on Tuesday night, July 8, and near the city’s toll-gate at the edge of town late Thursday, but each had disbanded without approaching the jail. On Friday the county judge conferred with other county and city officials; and “acting upon the advice of prominent citizens,” he dismissed Jailer Lucas’ reinforcements. “Friday


43: Ibid.
and Saturday nights all was quiet,” commented the Owensboro *Semi-Weekly Messenger*, “but by bed time Sunday night the city was again full of rumors.”

Throughout the entire Dick May affair, Owensboro’s newspaper had been anything but impartial in its reporting. Rather than providing “fair and balanced” accounts, the *Semi-Weekly Messenger* seemed to have already tried and convicted May, and they now offered their suggestions on how to achieve a just resolution. The most outrageous example of the *Messenger*’s prejudiced journalism would come in the newspaper’s Friday, July 11 edition. Under the headline “A Horrible Suspicion,” the paper’s editor reported:

Ever since the incarceration of the negro May in jail it has been rumored that a mob would come from Sod Kelly’s neighborhood to take him out and hang him, and every night the jail has been guarded. There was more talk than ever about the mob last night. At 1 o’clock this morning one of the MESSNGER’s indefatigable reporters was sent out to find the mob. He returned at 2 o’clock with the information that the mob was surely coming; that he had seen the men, some of them prominent people, caucusing this side of the toll-gate on the gravel road. He was sent out again with instructions to tell the mob to hurry along, if it was coming, as the MESSNGER must go to press at 3 o’clock. At that hour neither the reporter nor the mob had put in an appearance. Maybe they mobbed our man.

Just two days later, the newspaper’s prognostication—or perhaps more accurately, prodding—came to fruition. After midnight on Sunday night, April 13, a group of men once again congregated outside the city limits. At 1:30 a.m. a posse of masked men on horseback came riding down Fourth Street into town, turning onto Daviess Street and

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then heading east on Third Street towards the courthouse square. Simultaneously, two other groups of mounted vigilantes appeared: one on Main Street from the north and the other on Frederica Street to the west. The ferry bell rang and a horn was sounded as several men, assumed to be the former neighbors of Sod Kelly, crossed the Ohio River from Indiana. In all there were between thirty and fifty men, many of them shrouded in black cambric (a densely woven, smooth fabric of the day) masks. The courthouse square, which included the courthouse, the jail, and the jailer’s residence, was thus surrounded.  

The leader of the posse, carrying a pistol, dismounted his white horse and, along with seven or eight others, approached the jail. Jailer Lucas had been tipped off about the mob’s approach, and he was already waiting at the front gate outside his home. “Halt!” yelled Lucas to the nearing posse. The men shouted back at Lucas, asking who he was. “I am Lucas, the jailer, and you can’t come in here,” he announced defiantly. When his plea did not work, the jailer retreated back towards the house and ran up the back stairway. Grabbing his shotgun, he took a position to the side of the house leaning over the porch railing. The posse continued their determined march. “Don’t come in that gate. I will shoot the first man that does,” threatened Lucas.  

“Give him up!” defiantly demanded the mob leader, as several members of the supporting mob to the rear fired their guns into the air ostensibly “to intimidate the jailer.” Shocked by the burst of gunfire and unable to determine its target, Jailer Lucas


47 Ibid.
returned fire with his shotgun. “I’ll be G—d d—d if I give up the jail,” he yelled. “I’ll swear to God I’ll never give him up to you! I’ll die first!”\(^\text{48}\)

The leader of the mob continued to call out to Lucas over the din of gunfire, insisting that the prisoner be turned over. Several members of the mob rushed the front door of the jailer’s residence attempting to batter down the front door. When they shattered one of the parlor windows, Lucas’ teenage son Tommy fired six shots at them from an upstairs window. The noisy standoff continued several minutes, as neighbors were roused from their slumber by the sound of gunshots reverberating through the night air.\(^\text{49}\)

After Jailer Lucas had fired seven shots at the mob, a bullet from somewhere in the darkness sailed toward the exposed jailer and struck him in the right side of his chest. Instantly dropping his weapon to the floor, Lucas collapsed onto his back “with a terrible groan.” As the firing ceased, Mrs. Lucas and Tommy rushed to the side of their fallen husband and father. They carefully lifted him up and carried him into the house, laying him on a bed in the family room.\(^\text{50}\)

Young Tommy then sprinted towards the back door to run for a doctor. However, he was met by several members of the mob who stopped him at gunpoint. Holding their pistols to the boy, they demanded that he turn over the keys to the jail. Tommy announced that his father had hidden them and that “they would have to find them.” A tear-

\(^{48}\)“A Bloody, Brutal Mob,” 4.
\(^{49}\)Ibid.
\(^{50}\)Ibid.
ful Mrs. Lucas begged the masked men to allow her son to fetch a physician for her seriously wounded husband. Tommy then attempted to escape out the front door, but he was again stopped by other members of the armed posse. Hearing the boy’s pleas, Dr. Todd, a physician who lived nearby, volunteered to come to the aid of the wounded jailer. Dr. Todd and a local newspaper reporter were allowed to enter the house.51

Meanwhile, the mob had begun to beat the door to the adjacent jail with a sledgehammer. Dr. Todd convinced Mrs. Lucas that the incessant “noise and excitement” was hazardous to the wounded jailer’s health, so she finally surrendered the jail keys. However, by the time the mob attempted to open the jail’s front door with the key, the lock was severely battered and could not be opened. So the men continued their work, pummeling the door until it swung free. Using the key to the inner door, the mob unlocked it and entered the jail.52

The masked vigilantes first went to cell Number 6 and pointed their pistols between the bars, commanding the prisoners to approach and “show their faces.” “The trembling wretches advanced,” telling the men that the individual they sought was in cell Number 5. Immediately, the clandestine group moved on to the next cell and unlocked it. Once inside Number 5, they “dragged the poor devil they were after from under the lower berth.” Dick May begged the mob “for time to pray, but they hurried him out of the doorway, leaving the doors of the jail open.” “Come along!” they demanded of May.

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
“I’m coming,” the terrified black man responded. This would be the last audible remark that Dick May made.\textsuperscript{53}

With their prisoner in hand, the mob now sought to proceed with a “proper lynching.” The mob initially led May to a shade tree in front of the jailer’s residence, but then decided to hang May from a tree on the east side of the courthouse lawn.\textsuperscript{54} This decision was likely made because of the communal significance the location represented. The backdrop of the courthouse square lent a sense of legitimacy and tacit community approval to the act of retribution. As W. Fitzhugh Brundage as well as many other historians have noted, lynch mobs often chose their execution sites with a keen eye toward symbolism.\textsuperscript{55} Sociologist Orlando Patterson has drawn a parallel between the phenomenon of Southern lynching and ritualistic human sacrifice. “The selection of the lynch site was a decision loaded with religio-political symbolism,” he argues. In particular, “a tree near the center of the community” represented not only the geographic center of a town—but also the social and religious heart of the community. Patterson finds distinct symbolism in the tree and its profound significance in Christianity.\textsuperscript{56}

The Owensboro mob carried with them a rope, “about the size of a plow line.” They placed the noose around May’s neck, and tossed the other end over a large tree

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55}Brundage, \textit{Lynching in the New South}, 41.

\textsuperscript{56}Orlando Patterson, \textit{Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries} (New York: Basic Civitas, 1998), 205-206.
limb. The young black man’s arms were tied tightly behind him and his feet left unbound. Several men in the mob held May up and supported his weight while the rope was secured. Then “he was allowed to drop, the men jerking him down heavily.” “His heels cracked together convulsively,” reported the Messenger, “and then all was over.” 57

Their grisly act complete, members of the mob quickly mounted their horses and rode “quietly out of the city.” Spectators who had gathered—many remaining on the streets late into the night anticipating the mob’s coming—had been kept away from the scene by the mob; but when the posse departed, the townspeople “rushed into the courthouse yard and viewed, in the dim light from Fisher’s saloon, the body of the Negro hanging to a tree, with his feet within a foot of the ground.” 58

The Messenger recounted:

It was a ghastly sight. The features were contorted with pain, and the tongue hung out of the mouth. The body was, of course, still warm, but the pulse was gone. Some of the crowd claimed they could feel the heart still beating. Charlie Haney [the specially appointed bailiff] started to cut the body down, but others objected, and it was allowed to remain hanging until about 8 o’clock in the morning. 59

According to Brundage, this practice was not uncommon. “Local authorities routinely allowed bodies [of lynching victims] to remain on display for at least several hours and sometimes for days.” 60 Many white citizens undoubtedly believed that the image of

58Ibid.
59Ibid.
60Brundage, Lynching in the New South, 43.
a dangling corpse would scare other African Americans into “submission.” They hoped that the highly disturbing visual display would deter local blacks from potential criminal acts.

While Dick May’s lifeless body hung for all to see on the courthouse lawn, inside the jailer’s residence William Lucas lay dying. Dr. Todd examined the jailer and his wound. The bullet had entered the jailer’s chest “about three inches above the nipple, the ball ranging to the left”. The physician discovered massive internal bleeding. “He turned to the MESSENGER’s representative and said at once that there was no hope,” the reporter noted. Lucas requested that his minister, Father Gammon, be summoned. The priest arrived within 30 minutes and “administered the usual service.” For the next two hours Lucas remained conscious but in a tremendous amount of pain. “He bemoaned his fate, and that of his weeping wife and helpless children.” Another doctor, Dr. Hobbs, came to the scene and corroborated the medical opinion of Dr. Todd. Jailer Lucas was given opiates to help dull the pain, and he died around 6:30 a.m. the following morning.

As the early morning summer sun peeked above the Ohio Valley, residents of Owensboro awoke to news of the horrific events of the previous evening. “Comparatively few people in the city knew anything of the lynching until the sun rose,” noted the Semi-Weekly Messenger. The paper estimated that only about 30 people witnessed the actual lynching Sunday night, and that less than 100 residents viewed the gruesome scene.

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62Ibid.
before daybreak. “The excitement was high [Monday] morning, many men, women and children visiting the scene of the lynching,” proclaimed the paper. “There was great indignation at the brutal work of the mob. The murder of the brave jailer was condemned [sic] on every hand. Everybody seems to feel keenly the disgrace upon the county.”63

The Owensboro lynching made national headlines, just like hundreds of other Southern lynchings of the era. According to George Wright, although The New York Times and the Chicago Tribune did not report on all Kentucky lynchings—particularly those in rural areas—the two newspapers for the most part proved “excellent sources on lynchings between 1882 and 1918.”64 The New York Times ran the Owensboro story on the front page of its Tuesday edition, proclaiming “A Negro Lynched in Kentucky: The Jail Attacked by a Mob, the Jailer Shot, and the Negro Hanged.”65 The Chicago Tribune also printed a lengthy account on the same day, under the secondary headline “A Black Fiend Lynched.” Most of the details in the national newspapers matched the local reports. Initial write-ups in both the local and national press mentioned that as many as two members of the lynch mob had been killed by the gunfire of Jailer Lucas and his son.66

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63Ibid.
64Wright, Racial Violence in Kentucky, 4-5.
66“Mob Law: A Negro Taken from Jail at Owensboro, Ky., by Masked Men and Hanged,” Chicago Tribune, 15 July 1884: 6. No subsequent newspaper reports mention any additional casualties from the mob, so evidently there was no truth to these initial rumors.
On Thursday *The New York Times* printed a front-page obituary for Jailer Lucas, although they misidentified him as “Sheriff” Lucas. The newspaper notes that the Lucas family was “widely known throughout [Maryland].” Lauding Lucas’ Civil War service, the *Times* noted: “He was wounded several times, and bore the marks of sabres and rifle balls at the time of his death.” However, it is difficult to know how accurate the paper’s eulogizing was. For the *Times* also notes that Lucas was once elected to the Kentucky General Assembly, although neither the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives nor the Kentucky Legislative Research Commission finds any mention of his name anywhere in the legislative record.

While commending the jailer’s brave actions, the Owensboro *Semi-Weekly Messenger* questioned his judgment:

The action of Lucas in fighting the mob to the death in the discharge of his duty is considered by everybody a deed of great valor, but his indiscretion was undoubtedly the cause of his death. Being a man of highly irritable and nervous temperament, he allowed the mob every advantage of him. He stood on the gallery in full view, with a lighted lantern behind him, while the mob was concealed behind the corner of the house in darkness. Had he taken his position in Tommy’s room, . . . he could have shot, from behind the door, every man who dared come to the head of the stairs. After a few had been hurt the remainder would have been driven away. Access to the jail was made intentionally difficult when it was constructed, and one man, with plenty of arms, which Lucas had, could ordinarily have kept a large mob at bay.

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Who exactly made up this clandestine mob? The Messenger notes that “many of them appeared to be beardless youths.” Of course the participants would be officially listed as the clichéd “unknown parties.”\textsuperscript{70} Brundage has commented on this particularly perplexing custom—of convening a coroner’s jury essentially to make an official statement that announces absolutely nothing of substance. He concludes that these “token” investigations “were testimonials to the rule of law” so revered by Southerners.\textsuperscript{71}

The Messenger indicated that a couple members of the mob may have been wounded in the gunfight with the jailer and his son, although no specifics were known. One rumor held that a certain local doctor had been among the mob participants and had been wounded in the shootout. The paper said that “. . . [L]ike all good citizens, [Dr. Simon Lockhart] had no sympathy with the mob.” However the reporter added sarcastically: “His presence contradicted the latter statement.”\textsuperscript{72}

What is fairly certain is that the Owensboro lynch mob had planned more carnage than they had actually carried out. One unused rope had been left by the mob on the courthouse grounds. The Messenger speculated that the posse had intended to hang Silas Clark as well. Clark, also a black prisoner detained at the jailhouse, was serving time for

\textsuperscript{70}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{71}Brundage, \textit{Lynching in the New South}, 44.

\textsuperscript{72}“A Bloody, Brutal Mob,” 4.
“committing a similar act to the one for which May was hanged.” The newspaper contended that the mob lost their resolve: “. . . having shot the jailer, they weakened.”

The Messenger continued its biased reporting—like most local mainstream periodicals of the day—in its summation of Sunday night’s events: “Whilst all good citizens regret the outbreak of mob spirit in the community, still the feeling is general that the negro deserved the fate he met, and the only real sorrow that is felt is over the death of Jailer Lucas, who was killed in the discharge of his duty.” Thus, a significant portion of Owensboroans in 1884 believed that a white life held more intrinsic value than a black one.

The Louisville Courier-Journal ran a feature editorial piece about the lynching on Tuesday, July 15, and it was reprinted in Friday’s edition of the Messenger. The Courier used the occasion to lambaste the citizens of Owensboro—and indeed all the citizens of Kentucky. “W. J. Lucas, jailer of Daviess county . . . leaves an example of zeal and devotion which should inspire us to renewed efforts to restore law and order to Kentucky; to redeem the State from blood-guiltiness; to restrain the passions of the multitude and punish the instigators of the mob,” it said.

While the Courier-Journal and its outspoken publisher Henry Watterson often served as a voice of reason, denouncing extralegal violence in the Commonwealth, the

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
newspaper also concluded that Kentucky’s legal system bore the brunt of the blame for such outbreaks of violence.\(^{76}\) In its Owensboro feature, the *Courier* lamented that Lucas had fallen as “another victim to the laxity of law.” Communities had come to realize that “swift and severe” justice from the courts was “almost impossible,” argued the editors. “By their delays and judgements, by their toleration of inconsistent pleas, by their indifference to public safety they have almost abolished capital punishment, and have made the most noted criminals the most distinguished and most privileged citizens of the state.” Consequently, citizens chose to revert to vigilante tactics whenever a serious crime was committed.\(^{77}\)

The editors of the *Courier* did not fully pardon mob action, however. They contended that, while citizens defended lynching as “self-protection,” extralegal violence was never justified. “[Lynch mobs] are not to be excused; they are not to be tolerated; the mob and society are irreconcilable, implacable opponents.” If lynch law is allowed to go unchecked, the end is inevitable: “society will disintegrate and anarchy prevail,” the editors argued.\(^{78}\)

They claimed that Jailer Lucas’ blood was on the hands of all Kentuckians:

The folly, the futility, the fatality of a mob were never more clearly exhibited than at Owensboro. In order to hang a brutal negro a faithful officer was slain. . . . The spirit which [Lucas] manifested is the spirit which must control the whole people before we can expect peace, quiet and repose.


\(^{77}\)“Died At His Post,” 4.

\(^{78}\)Ibid.
The law must be upheld even at the cost of life itself. His blood is on our hands; he is the victim of our failure to do our duty as good citizens. We place our fellow-citizens in positions of trust and difficulty; we impose on them certain and important and dangerous duties; and then we desert them and leave them alone to struggle with organized lawlessness.

Lucas died combating not alone the mob of Daviess county; he fell not simply in defense of one poor negro. He faced the people of Kentucky recreant to their duty, and he defended every citizen and every home in the State against our own assaults. He stood alone, sacrificed to his sense of duty and to our neglect. If it awakens our people to a better appreciation of the responsibilities of citizenship; if it arouses as it should the people everywhere to demand better laws, firmer judges and juries determined to punish crime and to restrain the lawless elements, Lucas, the jailer of Daviess county, will not have died in vain.79

Newspapers all around the nation sounded off on the events in Owensboro. The New York Herald implored local officials to take action:

If the people of Daviess county, Ky., do not capture and punish every man of that mob upon whom the crime can be proved, they will have recorded a stigma against their character as a law-abiding and reputable community of American citizens which years will not blot out.80

The Chicago News went even farther, chastising the commonwealth’s entire populace:

The same old gang of first citizens got out in Kentucky the other night and riddled a jailer with bullets because he would not surrender the keys and let them have a colored prisoner whom they wished to hang. It is about time to build a stone wall around Kentucky, and appoint wardens and overseers for the multitude inside.81

79Ibid.


In death, the ex-Confederate Lucas was hailed as a hero—as a model of civic duty and responsibility. The entrances to the county courthouse were “heavily draped in mourning” in honor of the jailer. A grand funeral ceremony for Lucas was planned at Owensboro’s largest Roman Catholic church, St. Stephen’s Cathedral. However, his family evidently decided to have the service at the jailer’s residence. The funeral on Tuesday morning “was attended by an immense throng of people,” and there was “a long procession of carriages” that followed the hearse to Elmwood Cemetery on the southeast edge of town for Lucas’ interment. The Messenger encouraged citizens to donate one dollar apiece, hoping that at least $1,000 could be raised for Lucas’ widow and his children.

Early Tuesday morning, July 15, before the funeral, Owensboro and Daviess County officials met at the courthouse to discuss the events of Sunday night. Local officials adopted resolutions about the fallen jailer “couched in strong and highly complimentary language.” There were also discussions about the best way to handle the aftermath of the lynch mob.

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85 Ibid.
In the days that followed, all was not quiet and peaceful in Owensboro. “It was evident [Monday] that the negroes in the city were very much excited,” proclaimed the Messenger. The paper reported that blacks “stood in groups conversing all day” and held “crowded meetings” in at least two locales. African-American citizens had reportedly purchased “an extraordinary quantity of ammunition” from local hardware stores. Rumors swirled about an impending riot or some form of vengeance from Owensboro’s black community.87

It was feared that Sod Kelly and his family may face retaliation because “they think [Mr. Kelly] incited the mob”; as a result, Kelly sent his family away as a precaution and guarded his homestead with the help of about 25 friends. County Judge Atchison was also a possible target for retribution, since he was the official responsible for withdrawing the extra security from the jail after Thursday night. Like Kelly, Atchison sent his family away, but the judge himself remained in town undaunted by the threats. “The MESSENGER was reliably informed at midnight [Monday] . . . that two notorious negro characters had been dogging [Atchison’s] footsteps,” said the paper.88

At least one local African American felt compelled to visit the Messenger’s office in person to clear his name and distance himself from the rumors. On Friday, the newspaper noted that Marshal McLean, “colored,” had come to their office “twice this week to

88Ibid.
deny that he had any intention of leading a colored mob or attacking Judge Atchison.”

“We give him the benefit of this statement,” crowed the *Messenger*’s editors proudly.89

Judge Atchison tried to telegraph Governor J. Proctor Knott on Monday night to request mobilization of the National Guard. The operator was unable to send the dispatch, however. Local members of the state militia did assemble at the Owensboro’s armory to protect it from any potential assault. “[Militia commander Captain Ford] promised a warm reception to [local black instigators] if they came,” noted the newspaper. Several militiamen, bolstered by fifteen special policemen wielding shotguns, were also strategically stationed on every downtown block. The *Messenger* concluded: “Of the rumors that are afloat it is highly probable that many are groundless, but it is undoubtedly true that there were many ugly signs about.”90 The editors would later note that the riot rumors were undoubtedly fueled at least in part “by the long tongues of some sensational liars.” Nonetheless, for at least three nights after the lynching, the city of Owensboro was on edge, wondering if more violence was forthcoming.91

One central Kentucky newspaper, the *Lexington Press*, commented upon the potential impending insurrection by Owensboro’s blacks. The article was reprinted in the *Messenger* one week after the lynching. “The negroes [in Owensboro] cut a good many capers because the scoundrel [May] was given his just des[s]erts [sic], and threatened to

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90.“A Bloody, Brutal Mob,” 4.

91.“Reminiscences of the Mob,” 4.
destroy various things and murder the outraged girl’s father,” it said. “They did nothing, however, and things are quiet.”

In his research on Kentucky lynchings, George Wright observed that local newspaper reports of lynchings often provided a valuable source of county history: they made passing mention of previous lynchings in the particular area. The local write-up of Dick May’s lynching illustrates Wright’s observation, as it yields such details. The Messenger notes that May’s lynching was not the first act of mob violence in Daviess County. “This is the third man hanged by a mob in the court-house [sic] yard in the history of the county,” explained the paper. “Another man was once hanged in another part of the county.” May’s lynching would not be the last time the courthouse tree was utilized for such a dark purpose. Just five years later, a local black barber, Dock Jones, was whisked from his jail cell and hanged from the same tree as May was. Alfred Holt, another Owensboro black, was hanged on courthouse square in 1896. Two white men, Felix Poole (1893) and Josh Anderson (1902) also met their demise at the hands of Owensboro lynch mobs.

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93. Wright, Racial Violence in Kentucky, 5-6.


95. Wright, Racial Violence in Kentucky, 97.

96. Ibid., 74-75.

97. Ibid., 316.
Whatever his motivations, Jailer Lucas’ act of bravery was truly unique in the lynching era. Southern history is littered with accounts of local law enforcers turning their back on their prisoners or even acting in complicity with mobs. For a white officer to die in the protection of a black prisoner was unheard of. However, George Wright notes that Lucas’ actions were an isolated incident of courage, not the spark for a trend. “Instead of giving other sheriffs and deputies the courage to stand up to the mob,” says Wright, “Lucas’ decision to protect his prisoner might have convinced them even more that their lives were not worth risking for Afro-Americans accused of murdering and, especially, of raping white women.”

Judge Lucius P. Little convened the July criminal term of the Daviess Circuit Court one week after the 1884 Owensboro lynch mob. The court swore in sixteen grand jurors for the session; and from day one, Little made it clear that seeking out and punishing the murderers of Dick May and Jailer Lucas was a top priority. He expected the members of the lynch mob to be brought to justice.

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98Ibid., 320.

99Ibid., 156. Interestingly, Lucas’ brave actions were not without precedent in the county’s history. Jo Slaughter, the former jailer, had repelled an armed siege upon the jail just nine years earlier. In 1875, a posse came to lynch a prisoner—this time a white man accused of murdering a local couple with an axe. Apparently Jailer Slaughter had used trickery to outwit the mob. When the posse arrived, Slaughter flung open an upstairs window and shouted “Fire on them, boys!” as he discharged his own weapon into the night. Believing that they were facing superior firepower, the men in the mob quickly dispersed in fear (“A Bloody, Brutal Mob,” 4.)

As the courtroom audience listened “with breathless attention,” Judge Little implored the jurors “in the most forcible manner.” He sternly charged them:

. . . I will allude to a recent occurrence which has disgraced our city and county and dishonored the State. . . . Whether [Dick May] was guilty as charged remained to be tried. But, if guilty, his offense was not capital—was not a felony, and punishable only by fine and imprisonment. Whether the punishment be adequate to the offense was not a question. So the law stands and so it always stood.

. . . The law guaranteed to [May], as to every other citizen, the right to be tried and convicted before being punished; to be confronted by the witnesses against him; to be heard through counsel; to be tried by a jury and punished only according to its verdict. All these things were denied him. He was not even allowed time for a dying prayer. . . . I say to you that each and every person that joined in that bloody work, who came to this town with the mob, understanding its purpose, aiding and encouraging it by their presence or otherwise, are guilty of murder, and this grand jury should indict them for that offense. I wish to say to you now, if there be a man on this grand jury who sympathizes with that mob, or endorses any of its acts, he should say so, and I will discharge him. None of you speak. I felt I did not misjudge in believing you incapable of entertaining sentiments so at war with Christian civilization.101

Judge Little then continued, proceeding to explore what he called “the darker side of this dark picture”—the slaying of Jailer Lucas. Little proclaimed that the jailer’s murder was “almost without parallel among that crimes that have occurred in the State.” He called the members of the mob “cowards” and praised the late jailer for holding “a loftier conception of official duty than I fear many of us would have had under like trial.” The judge noted that he would not appeal to the governor to offer reward money “because I believe it is in the power of this grand jury to detect the guilt.”102


102 Ibid.
Little concluded:

Need I say that this was murder unredeemed by a palliati ng circumstance. Not only murder in the one firing the fatal shot, but in all engaged in that unlawful conspiracy. For murder they should all be convicted. If they are not all punished, it will be no fault of the law, but of those charged with administering it.\footnote{Ibid.}

Despite Judge Little’s razor-sharp invective to the grand jury, the case sadly concluded just as a vast majority of such cases of the day ended. The South’s unwritten code of community silence prevailed. “We are privately informed that several persons who were in the mob can be indicted if the grand jury chooses to do it,” commented the editor of the \textit{Messenger}.\footnote{“The Last Week: The Regular Term of Criminal Court Drawing to a Close--A Few Convictions--the Bruner Trial,” Owensboro \textit{Semi-Weekly Messenger}, 12 August 1884: 4.} However, no one was ever indicted for the murder of Jailer Lucas and the lynching of Dick May on that hot July night in 1884.

As an interesting aside to the entire incident, the death of Jailer Lucas resulted in an interesting political outcome. Lucas’ wife Mildred became the acting Daviess County Jailer upon her husband’s death. In doing so she became the first female to hold political office in Owensboro.\footnote{Dews, \textit{Owensboro}, 195.} On August 4, 1874, a special election to fill William Lucas’ unexpired term was held, and Mrs. Lucas won, defeating nine other candidates by a plurality of 313 votes.\footnote{“Official Returns: Give Atchison a Majority of 484, and Mrs. Lucas a Plurality of 313--The County Judge Refuses Mrs. Lucas a Certificate,” Owensboro \textit{Semi-Weekly Messenger}, 8 August 1884: 4.} “The insatiate desire for office springs so eternal in the average Ken-
tuckian’s breast that it makes him forget both is gallantry and courtesy,” commented the editors of one central Kentucky newspaper, chastising Mrs. Lucas’ opponents. 107

From the very beginning, however, Mrs. Lucas’ tenure was disputed. Judge Atchison refused to sign her certificate of election, and the whole affair soon turned ugly. 108 The citizens of Owensboro became polarized—with some insisting that Mrs. Lucas be allowed to serve out of respect for her husband’s bravery and some demanding that a woman could not hold elective office under any circumstance. The debate played out in various local courts. During one heated exchange, Mrs. Lucas’ attorney drew a knife and threatened Judge Atchison, who had come down from his bench to physically challenge him. 109 Just 16 months into her term, however, Mrs. Lucas was forced to step down. The Kentucky Court of Appeals ruled that she could not legally serve as an elected official since–being a woman–she could not vote in the Commonwealth. 110

The 1884 lynching of Dick May was a twofold tragedy. Yet another African-American male was violently murdered without due process; and a dedicated law officer was killed in the process. Judge Little brought out a significant point in his grand jury instructions. He declared that “each and every person that joined in that bloody work,” even if it was simply by “understanding its purpose” or “aiding and encouraging it by


110Dews, Owensboro, 195.
their presence,” were “guilty of murder.” Little proved to be ahead of his time in understanding that it was broad-based community approval or acquiescence that allowed the phenomenon of lynching to continue.

This particular lynching was very different from most. A white county official died attempting to save a black life—and moreover to preserve the rule of law. So one would think that local citizens would be much more likely to punish mob participants in this case. Indeed there was much verbal outrage expressed about Jailer Lucas’ murder. However, in the end it did not translate into action. Area residents chose to blame the stereotypical “hands of persons unknown” for the killings, rather than to open their eyes to the heinous deeds of their neighbors.

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111“Will the Mob Be Punished,” 4.
CHAPTER 3:
“IN THE BROAD, OPEN GLARE OF A SUNDAY SUN”–
HAWESVILLE, 1897

Hancock County, the eastern neighbor of Daviess County, was formed in 1829 and named in honor of early American statesman and famous Declaration of Independence signatory John Hancock. Containing less than 189 square miles, it has the smallest land area of any county in western Kentucky.¹ Despite its small size, the county has a rich history. Abraham Lincoln left his footprints throughout Hancock County—both figuratively and literally. It is believed that Lincoln’s family crossed the Ohio River at Thompson’s Ferry (at the present site of Emmick Landing Road) in 1816, on their way to southern Indiana. In 1827, Lincoln also won his first law case in Hancock County, successfully defending himself against charges of operating a ferry without a license.²

The gently rolling alluvial farmlands of the western section of the county give way to high, rocky bluffs along the Ohio River in the northeast. Steep limestone cliffs overlook the city of Hawesville and offer a magnificent vista into the bottomland of southern Indiana. Hawesville, the county seat of Hancock County, lies thirty miles upriver from Owensboro. The Perry County, Indiana twin cities of Cannelton and Tell City lie opposite the Ohio River from Hawesville.³

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¹Kleber, ed., The Kentucky Encyclopedia, 401.


³Kleber, ed., The Kentucky Encyclopedia, 402.
An old river town, Hawesville has not changed much in its 175 years. The city was named for Richard Hawes, who donated the land for the town in 1829. Hawes’ son served as the second of two governors of Confederate Kentucky during the Civil War. A significant coal seam was discovered in the cliffs outside of town in the 1850s, and local entrepreneurs capitalized on the find, shipping their mined treasure westward. The Civil War would severely disrupt Hawesville’s commerce, as Union gunboats blockaded the city on several occasions. Hawesville was called a “citadel of Confederate sympathy,” and Rebel guerillas exploited this popular sentiment. They used explosives to damage several local coal mines which supplied fuel to Union steamboats. As a result, Federal gunboats and cannons located across the river frequently opened fire upon the town.

Even before the war, Hawesville had earned notoriety as “a wide open river town,” known for its violence. In the 1850s, a man named “Davidson” carried a home-made bomb concealed in a basket into a downtown store, intending to kill several men. His “infernal machine” exploded prematurely, killing only himself. A “political” dispute also turned deadly, as one man was shot and killed in the streets and another was murdered by a mob in his jail cell. “From that day on,” wrote the Owensboro Daily Inquirer, “Hawesville lost much of its bloody character, and killings have been as few as in any Kentucky town of its size.”

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4Ibid., 418-419.


After the end of the Civil War, Hawesville would experience an economic boom. Like thousands of other villages in the New South, it grew rapidly in the 1880s as a regional trading center. The county courthouse located downtown near the Ohio—destroyed by Confederate guerillas—was rebuilt in 1867. The town’s valuable coal mines were reopened with the cessation of hostilities; and in 1888, the Louisville, Henderson, & St. Louis Railroad was built, bringing cross-country rail access directly through Hawesville. It would become the busiest terminus on the rail line between Louisville and Owensboro. Steamboat transport also remained a profitable business, with goods arriving and departing frequently from the city’s river port.

In 1860, there were over 6,000 people living in Hancock County. This figure included approximately 600 slaves, meaning that the county’s ratio of African Americans to whites was less than one-third of Daviess County’s. By 1890, Hancock County’s population had reached its historical peak at 9,214 residents. African Americans comprised only eight percent of the county populace in 1890; and that figure would dwindle to just seven percent by the turn of the century.

The summer of 1897 was an especially hot, dry summer in the Ohio Valley. There had been “no rain of any consequence,” and as a result, farmers reaped poorer than

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7 Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 55-56.

8 Kleber, ed., *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 419.

9 Ibid., 402.

average harvests. Fall would arrive early, however, in western Kentucky. Hancock County was blanketed by its first frost of the season in mid-September, and there was a feeling of change in the air as county residents prepared for the coming new season.

The little railroad stop of Petrie Station lies about three miles west of Hawesville. Like dozens of others across the state of Kentucky, it is a small station. Petrie sits about one and a half miles from the Ohio River, very near the main east-west highway between Owensboro and Louisville.

Ben Roberts, a local farmer, lived with his family along the Texas Railroad near Petrie. On Saturday afternoon, September 25, 1897, Roberts sent his 14-year-old daughter Maggie to buy some groceries at nearby Petrie’s Store. After finishing her shopping around 5:00 p.m., Maggie started back home, following the railroad tracks. She had not been gone long when three local residents heard terrified screams.

Fred Petrie, John Beauchamp, and Ed Muffit raced in the direction of the screams, and by the time they arrived, they found the adolescent in a state of shock. Maggie Roberts was lying on the ground badly beaten and visibly shaken. She told the men an ap-

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12Owensboro Daily Inquirer, 30 September 1897: 2.

13“Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute;” Owensboro Daily Messenger, 26 September 1897: 1.

14Ibid.
palling tale. Roberts said that a black man had struck her on the back of her head with an iron railroad car coupling pin and brutally raped her.\textsuperscript{15}

The three men scoured the nearby countryside for the suspect but discovered no sign of him. Thus, after carrying the injured girl home, they went into Petrie and recounted the diabolical story to the local citizens. “The news of the awful deed spread very rapidly, and every man and boy able to carry a gun joined in the hunt,” stated a local newspaper. “The report soon reached [Hawesville] and [the city] was thrown in a perfect frenzy of excitement, and there was a general rush of maddened men, well armed, and with a desperate determination to avenge the horrible outrage. . . .”\textsuperscript{16}

Hancock County Sheriff Fuqua and Hawesville City Marshal Thomas quickly mobilized posses to hunt for the suspect. “Over half of the county is organized to assist the officers in their search for the scoundrel,” claimed the \textit{Owensboro Daily Inquirer}. While this assertion was undoubtedly inflated, evidently somewhere around 150 armed men–dozens of them on horseback–were scouring northern Hancock County by nightfall Saturday. The \textit{Inquirer} saw fit to note that: “Mr. B. H. Hemphill, principal of the [Hawesville] high school is leading a posse.”\textsuperscript{17} This reference substantiates Philip Dray’s argument that the presence of prominent citizens during extralegal community gatherings lent credibility to the action and was an essential component of lynching culture.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18}Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown}, ix-x.
\end{flushright}
From the description given by Maggie Roberts, the suspect was a young “heavy set and very black” African-American man. He wore jean pants, a light-colored shirt, and either a straw or black slouch hat. Raymond Bushrod (early press accounts mis-identified him as Ben or Lewis Bushrod) seemed to fit this description. He was “a tall, smooth-faced mulatto” who weighed “about 150 pounds.” Just two weeks earlier, Bushrod had been released from the county jail at Hawesville after serving a 130-day sentence for stealing a watch. He had been “ordered out of town” by local law enforcement officials on Friday afternoon. Bushrod was also the prime suspect in a rape in the southern Indiana town of Rockport.

Both local newspapers mentioned that Bushrod was alien to the area—a “strange nigger” as white Southerners termed such individuals, according to Edward Ayers’ The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction. “The negro is unknown. . . ,” said the Inquirer. The Messenger noted, “The negro is a stranger in that locality [Hancock

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19. “Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute,” 1.


24. “Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute,” 1.

25. Ayers, The Promise of the New South, 156.

Ayers argues that particularly when it came to heinous crimes that aroused community passions, both African Americans and whites were likely to point the finger at vagabonds and transients. Whites could more readily dehumanize and demonize unknown black men, fitting them neatly into the role of the mythological insatiable, ravenous predator; and “[l]ocal blacks had every reason for displacing white anger,” writes Ayers, “for finding some stranger who could bear the brunt of white men determined to wreak vengeance.”

The local papers also made sure to note that vengeance upon the perpetrator was forthcoming. What today would be looked upon as criminal instigation was evidently a century ago regarded as community support. Under the headline “Lynching is Too Good for this Black Brute,” the Owensboro Daily Messenger exclaimed: “Hawesville and vicinity are in a state of madness tonight, greater than ever known before, and the result of it will likely be the first lynching in the history of Hancock county [sic] before morning.”

The Owensboro Daily Inquirer prognosticated, “If [the suspect] is caught his life will be but of short duration.”

Just as with the Dick May incident thirteen years earlier, the local press was once again practicing the “folk pornography” about which Dray writes. The coverage of Owensboro newspapers would definitely place them among the ranks of periodicals that

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27 “Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute,” 1.
28 Ayers, The Promise of the New South, 157-158.
29 “Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute,” 1.
30 “A Fiendish Crime,” 1.
Dray argues perpetuated racial intolerance.\textsuperscript{31} Ayers concurs that local papers in the South regularly spotlighted African-American crime and glorified white retribution.\textsuperscript{32} While it is undoubtedly true that the local press echoed the sentiments of the majority, it is undeniable that at the same time biased newspaper accounts influenced public opinion.

Indeed, two of the Commonwealth’s most prominent newspapers also anticipated the outbreak of violence, offering no condemnation whatsoever. On Sunday, the Louisville \textit{Courier-Journal} reported that an African-American suspect had been apprehended and that “death by violence may be his fate.”\textsuperscript{33} Similarly, the Lexington \textit{Daily Leader} announced that “an unknown Negro” was in custody. “A lynching is sure to follow,” it commented.\textsuperscript{34}

The search for Bushrod continued late into Saturday evening. Unbeknownst to the bands of roving vigilantes, the suspect had been captured around 8:00 p.m., just three hours after the alleged crime. A group of four “country boys” discovered Bushrod at Falcon, a small railroad station some six miles west of Hawesville.\textsuperscript{35} The fugitive was hiding under the depot platform, and the \textit{Messenger} speculated that he had intended to “escape on the first west-bound freight.”\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31}Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown}, 4-5.
\item \textsuperscript{32}Ayers, \textit{The Promise of the New South}, 153-155.
\item \textsuperscript{33}“A Mob of Farmers Searching For a Negro Fiend in Hancock County,” Louisville \textit{Courier-Journal}, 26 September 1897: 2.
\item \textsuperscript{34}“Lynching Likely,” \textit{The (Lexington) Daily Leader}, 26 September 1897: 1.
\item \textsuperscript{35}“Lynched The Brute,” 1; “In Daylight,” 1.
\item \textsuperscript{36}“Lynched The Brute,” 1.
\end{itemize}
The small posse restrained Bushrod and loaded him into a wagon. They transported their prisoner to Petrie to present him to young Miss Roberts. Roberts had been seriously injured by her attacker. “Her body was terribly lacerated, and she is now in critical condition,” reported the *Owensboro Daily Inquirer*. “The girl is almost certain to die, and she is suffering untold agonies,” added the *Messenger*. Despite her fragile condition, it was important that the accused be brought before his alleged victim, so that she could officially identify her attacker.

Dray, among other historians, has made note of this “curious tradition” of the rape victim confronting her attacker face-to-face. This practice impugns one of the main arguments that Southern whites used to justify lynchings—the claim that mob killings spared a traumatized white girl the public humiliation a trial would produce. The emotional stress of facing one’s assailant inside of a court room does not seem to be intrinsically higher than in another less formal locale.

When Maggie Roberts saw Raymond Bushrod on Saturday night, she identified the African-American man as the culprit. However, for some reason, her identification must have been less than totally convincing. “[Bushrod’s] captors left with him and started for Hawesville, but after getting a mile or two from the Petrie, decided to return to

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37Ibid.
38“A Fiendish Crime,” 1.
39“Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute,” 1.
40Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 11-12.
Mr. Roberts’ and put the girl to one more test,” reported the Messenger. “She again identified him. . . .”

It is entirely possible that the journalist could have invented this detail to satisfy preemptively readers who may have potentially questioned Bushrod’s guilt. The question still remains: Why would these “country boys” start towards Hawesville, making it at least halfway, and then turn around and bring Bushrod back to the Roberts’ home—especially given Maggie’s extremely frail state of health? There is nothing in the historical record to hint that anybody other than Raymond Bushrod was the individual who sexually assaulted Maggie Roberts; however, this unexplained detail at least bears consideration.

The Inquirer called it “almost a miracle” that Bushrod “escaped lynching Saturday night.” After departing from Petrie for the second time, the group of men headed for the county jail in Hawesville with their prisoner. During their Saturday evening journey, they passed several bands of armed men along the road. At one point the caravan encountered a group of over fifty vigilantes carrying weapons and searching for Bushrod. The Messenger reported that the black man’s life was saved thanks to his captors’ guile and the cover of night. “. . . [T]he negro was lying down in the wagon, and in the darkness, was not discovered, the mob supposing the men in the wagon to be farmers returning from Owensboro.”

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41 “Lynched The Brute,” 1.

42 “In Daylight,” 1.

43 “Lynched The Brute,” 1.
Once in Hawesville, Bushrod was further protected by local law enforcement officials. “Fearing that he would be lynched when the mob learned that he was in jail,” wrote the *Messenger* reporter, “the officers took Bushrod to a cemetery near town, where they kept him until just before daylight and returned him to jail.” The officers had also considered spiriting away their prisoner to Owensboro on the 9:05 p.m. west-bound train. However, they evidently decided against this plan, since the angry townspeople who had already begun to assemble “had every avenue of escape from the town well guarded.”

The *Owensboro Daily Messenger* would later note:

> The hanging would have occurred Saturday night but for the fact that there were hundreds of people who were out scouring the country searching for the negro and knew nothing of his arrest, and it was decided to postpone the lynching till [sic] Sunday night, in order that the mob might be made up of citizens from all parts of the county, thereby indicating a general uprising on the part of the people in a demand for immediate vengeance on the head of the lustful brute.⁴⁴⁻⁵

This statement clearly illustrates the importance that broad community-wide approval played in the phenomenon of lynching. Quite simply stated, mass mobs could not exist without popular support. W. Fitzhugh Brundage notes: “Some [lynching] spectators may have been shocked and disgusted by the violence they witnessed, but it was their visible, explicit, public act of participation and not their ambiguous, private sentiment that bound the lynchers both socially and morally.”⁴⁶

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⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

Meanwhile, with the suspect in custody, the authorities questioned Bushrod about the crime at Petrie. The young African American allegedly confessed that he was the individual who had sexually assaulted Maggie Roberts earlier that day. In addition, Bushrod evidently confided to police that he had perpetrated previous rapes. The *Messenger* reported, “Bushrod says that the first rape he ever committed was at Ferdinand, Ind[iana], several years ago, and the second one was at Rockport about two years ago.”47 The details of this latter crime were particularly disturbing; Bushrod had served several years in an Indiana prison for raping his 65-year-old aunt.48

The *Inquirer* noted that “it was not generally known until dawn” on Sunday, September 26, that Raymond Bushrod had been captured. Thus, dozens of search parties, large and small, combed the woods and bottomland fields along the Ohio River in northern Hancock County late into Saturday night.49 As dawn broke over the sleepy little river town on Sunday, local residents awoke to an unseasonably chilly morning and talk of community retribution.50 More and more citizens began to assemble at the jail in downtown Hawesville as the morning wore on. “By 10 o’clock the town seemed full of people, and the excitement was intense and mob talk open.”51

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47.“Lynched The Brute,” 1.
48.“In Daylight,” 1.
49.Ibid.
51.“In Daylight,” 1.
“The crowd grew larger and the excitement was more intense every hour,” reported the *Inquirer*. As the prospect for mob violence grew incrementally throughout the day, local officials debated the course of action to take. After lunch Hancock County Judge-Executive John Adair telephoned Circuit Judge Owen in Owensboro to get his assessment of the situation. Owen suggested that Adair slip Bushrod out of town on the 5:00 p.m. east-bound train; and if that plan failed, he conceded that all Adair could do was reinforce the county jail. Adair soon realized that with both the jail and town completely surrounded, it would be impossible to transport Bushrod to the train depot. Adair also recognized that as the size and fury of the mob around the jail continued to swell, a lynching became more and more inevitable.52

“The people of Cannelton and Tell City, across the river from Hawesville, are in a fever of excitement and are only awaiting a signal from this side to come over and assist in the lynching,” reported the *Messenger*. The editors of the *Messenger* seemed quite concerned that a lynching could potentially be averted and attempted to prod local citizens to action in their Sunday morning edition. They complained aloud: “The crowd around the jail seem unable to formulate any plans. Each minute’s delay is giving the officers better opportunity to formulate plans for removing the prisoners, which it is reported they are preparing to do.”53

By late Sunday afternoon, the situation in Hawesville had become desperate. The crowd had learned of Judge Adair’s plan to sneak Bushrod away on the 5:00 train. At the

52 Ibid.

53 “Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute,” 1.
same time, gossip began to circulate that Company H of the Kentucky state guards (stationed in Owensboro) was en route to Hawesville to help fortify the defense of the jail. In light of these rumors, the arrival of the regularly scheduled “Texas” train at 4:55 p.m. touched a nerve within the mob gathered downtown.54 The word on the street all day had been that a lynching would take place as soon as night fell; however, the mob was now fueled by a fervent sense of urgency.55

The crowd was now estimated to be between 500-600 strong, and they were more on edge than ever. As is the case in most stories of mob action, the exact details of the initiation of violence are not clear. Evidently, though, as the 4:55 train pulled into town, the rumor was started that the prisoner had escaped out of the back of the jail. The Messenger reported, “The officers got up a ruse to deceive the mob by having a negro to run down the main street just as the 4:55 p.m. east-bound train pulled into Hawesville, with the intention of making the mob believe that Bushrod had escaped from jail.” The newspaper said that only about half of mob fell for the ploy and gave chase; so the officers had no legitimate chance to evacuate Bushrod.56 This version begs one important question that undermines its validity: What poor individual in his right mind would volunteer—for any amount of money—to play the role of decoy, with an angry, armed mob hot on his heels?

54“In Daylight,” 1.
55“In Lynched The Brute,” 1.
56Ibid.
According to the *Inquirer*, there was no decoy scheme, and the rumor of Bushrod’s escape began after the mob had already overpowered the jailer and taken his keys. “Before the keys were taken from the jailer the doors had been broken open. At this moment someone cried that the negro had escaped from the back of the jail.” The furious mob—even those who had just battered down the jail entrance—then “yelled and waved their pistols in the air and rushed as if impelled by some superhuman force in the direction the negro was supposed to have taken.” They searched several homes and even broke into the Presbyterian church to hunt for Bushrod.57

Deputy Sheriff Miles Fuqua seized the moment. He grabbed Raymond Bushrod and quickly led him out of the jail. The officers then tried to lead their prisoner toward a waiting horse tied up nearby. However, Bushrod was understandably suspicious of the men’s motives, and he resisted, forcing the officers to drag him along. Unfortunately, this hesitation may have cost the young black man his life. With all roads from town crawling with “spies,” it is doubtful that the sheriff and his men would have made it very far. With this momentary hesitation, however, Bushrod’s fate was sealed.58

The mob, realizing that they had been deceived, returned to the jail and wrestled Bushrod away from authorities. (By all accounts the local law enforcement officers did everything in their power to save Bushrod—hiding him Saturday night, trying to slip him out of town on Sunday, and possibly even attempting an eleventh-hour ploy to trick the mob.) What ensued was bedlam. The *Inquirer* reported: “The negro was in the centre of

57*“In Daylight,”* 1.

58Ibid.
a crowd of 500 men all trying to get to him. It seemed there was no concert of action in
the mob. Everybody wanted to do it differently. It was impossible to tell from even a
short distance who had possession of the negro.”

The mob led Bushrod across the street to the Courthouse square. It was at this
time, however, that someone noticed that one key item was missing—a rope. Therefore,
while a small group of men went to retrieve rope, Raymond Bushrod was “given time to
confess and pray.” The Louisville Courier-Journal noted that Ben Roberts, the father
of the girl Bushrod allegedly assaulted, demanded of the mob: “Give the man time to
pray.”
The Messenger recounted that Bushrod “mumbled something incoherent” in his
eleventh-hour prayer.

The Inquirer described a pathetic scene:

[Bushrod] admitted that he had raped Maggie Roberts and that he de-
served death. The negro, as he dropped on his knees and crossed his
hands and turned his face toward heaven and prayed, was the most pitiful
sight imaginable. His body shook and he trembled as from palsy.

The Messenger reported that “in clear, distinct voice,” Bushrod had addressed the
crowd: “I am guilty,” he confessed. “I am sorry. I hope I will die easy.” But, how le-

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59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.


62 “Lynched The Brute,” 1.

63 “In Daylight,” 1.

64 “Lynched The Brute,” 1.
gitimate is a confession extracted under such incredible circumstances? As the U.S. Supreme Court decreed in *Brown v. Mississippi* in 1936, “The rack and torture chamber may not be substituted for the witness stand.”65 The Court’s implication was clear: an individual will certainly speak differently if he is sitting in a court room as opposed to standing in the middle of a hostile mob with a noose around his neck. “That the confessions were made under extreme duress mattered little because mobs executed their victims whether or not they confessed,” notes Brundage. “Confessions, however prompted, served to legitimize further the executions in the eyes of the mob.”66

The mob then proceeded with its grisly work, at the foot of “a great, shady popular” tree.67 After a noose was fashioned around Bushrod’s neck, the other end of the rope “was thrown over a limb, about fifteen feet from the ground, and about forty hands then gathered the rope and drew the negro up.” “He was then drawn up and let down several times, though not enough to allow his feet to touch,” the Messenger reported. “Finally the end of the rope was tied to the fence and the negro was allowed to swing.” Bushrod offered no resistance as he was strung up. There was “a slight contraction” of his legs, and then it was all over. Witnesses remarked that Bushrod’s face showed no signs of contortion or struggle.68


68“Lynched The Brute,” 1.
The lynch mob participants wore no masks nor made any attempt whatsoever to disguise their identities. Also, the Messenger noted: “Lovers Leap and other hills in the town were covered with women, who looked approvingly on. The mob was composed of men and women, both white and colored. . . .”

“Scores of farmers say that their wives insisted on their coming to town [for the lynching],” commented the Inquirer, “and it is a fact that the women were as much worked up and as vehement in their cries for vengeance as the men.” This aspect offers further proof that the Hawesville lynching was what Brundage classifies as a mass mob. Brundage notes that in such mobs females “often figured prominently” and spurred on the lynchers with their cheers of encouragement.

The Messenger’s reporter described the scene as “extraordinarily quiet,” though, given the size of the gathering. One witness to the day’s events remarked that there must have been “five hundred pistols and guns displayed.” However, not one single shot was fired during the entire incident. Within an hour after the lynching was over, the mob participants “had deserted the streets.”

However, many people broke off pieces of the poplar tree from which Bushrod had been hanged; and by Monday afternoon souvenir seekers had “almost torn away the

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69.“In Daylight,” 1.

70.“Lynched The Brute,” 1.

71.“In Daylight,” 1.


73.“Lynched The Brute,” 1.
Indeed, the taking of relics from a lynching site was another trademark of mass mob action. Dray recounts at least two lynchings where entire trees “disappeared” at the hands of souvenir hunters. Even more barbaric, it was not uncommon in the aftermath of many mobs for the remains of lynching victims themselves to become keepsakes. Orlando Patterson concludes that the fact that mob participants kept relics reinforces the argument that mass lynchings were a form of ritual human sacrifice.

The body of Raymond Bushrod hung in the Courthouse square until nightfall. At that time Hancock County Coroner A. G. Mitchell had the body cut down so that an inquest could be held. Seven local white men served on the jury. The jury interviewed “only three or four witnesses” before rendering their verdict. To no one’s surprise, the jury pronounced: “We of the jury find that the deceased, Raymond Bushrod, came to his death at the hands of a mob by being strangled, the members of which are unknown.”

However, very uncharacteristically, the verdict was not unanimous. One of the jurors, George W. Newman, refused to sign the official verdict. Newman believed that the jury had not made “sufficient effort” to determine the identities of individuals who led the lynch mob. He evidently felt that the evidence strongly implicated a “Schaeffer”

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74“A Rope and Willing Hands and Judge Lynch’s Court Was Over,” 1.
75Brundage, Lynching in the New South, 43.
76Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown, 14, 168.
77Ibid., 82, 181, 218, 233, 358.
78Patterson, Rituals of Blood, 193-197.
79“Lynched The Brute,” 1.
80“In Daylight,” 1.
character from Indiana. Following the inquest, the Louisville Medical Society telegraphed Hawesville and requested the remains of the lynching victim. Bushrod’s body was shipped by train to Louisville on Monday, September 27.81

There were several vague references to one particular individual who may have been at the forefront of the mob. Supposedly at the outset of the lynching, a strange white man stepped forward and told Sheriff Fuqua: “My name is Schaeffer, and we must have that negro now.”82 It seems doubtful that anyone, particularly a stranger to the community, would voluntarily offer his name to local law enforcement officials just before leading a deadly lynch mob. The Messenger described “Schaeffer” as “a large six-footer” who had likely come across the river from Indiana.83 The Inquirer stated that he resided in Cannelton, where he worked as a machinist.84

Both local newspapers mention a “well-dressed woman” who assumed a prominent role in the lynching. According to the Messenger, this mysterious female carried a “vicious looking revolver” and declared to the crowd that she wished that she could “shoot the life out of the scoundrel.”85 The Inquirer reported that this “country woman with her riding whip in her hand urged the mob on and screamed with delight when the
deed was done.”

This detail—a female playing such a salient part—certainly made the Hawesville lynching distinctive. According to newspaper accounts, Ben Roberts was present at the lynching, but not directly involved in the hanging of Bushrod.

The Messenger claimed that even local residents who observed the entire lynching could not recognize with certainty any of the participants:

A former Hawesville citizen who saw the mob, and who thought he knew every man in the county, said he would never think it strange again that onlookers could not swear to the identity of the participants. He said although it was broad daylight, and he had a post of advantage, he could not identify a single man whom he could swear took part.

“Everybody seems to be in sympathy with the action of the mob,” noted the Inquirer, “and it would be very difficult, if not impossible to convict any one [sic] for taking part in it.” The paper interviewed County Attorney E. C. Vance after the lynching, and he concurred. Vance stated that he would not lobby Judge Owen to convene a grand jury to investigate, given the improbability of a conviction. “Your correspondent has been unable to find a single person who does not endorse the action of the mob,” remarked the Inquirer reporter.

In fact the Hawesville lynch mob—and its brazen community supported action performed in broad daylight—caught the attention of Kentucky Governor William O. Bradley. In early January 1898, more than three months after the lynching, Governor Bradley

87. “Lynched The Brute,” 1; “A Rope and Willing Hands and Judge Lynch’s Court Was Over,” 1.
mentioned the incident in his State of the Commonwealth address, chastising both the lynchers and the lynchee:

In Hancock county [sic], in open day and without masks, or even pretense of secrecy, a Negro was forcibly taken from the jail and hung on the public streets of Hawesville. Rewards were promptly offered, but the Coroner’s jury, doubtless composed of blind men before whom life, or by death, in the discretion of the jury, as the extent of the injury may demand. The fiend who makes an assault on a defenseless woman with such hellish purpose in view, is equally guilty with him who accomplishes his purpose. But for the sake of law and order and the fair name of the Commonwealth, courts, rather than mobs, should punish him.90

The press speculated that the crowd in Hawesville would have been even larger had the hanging have taken place later in the evening. “The employees of the through freight, which passes Pe[t]rie [sic] at 5:53 say that the men were going into Hawesville in groups of twenties and thirties, and had the lynching occurred as late as the hour arranged, 8 p.m., there would have been over 1,500 men in it,” claimed the Messenger.91

The Louisville Courier-Journal reported that there had been twenty five people at the Cloverport (in neighboring Breckinridge County) railroad depot awaiting the arrival of the 7:39 p.m. west-bound train for Hawesville, when they were “disappointed” with the news that Bushrod had already been lynched.92


91:“Lynched The Brute,” 1.

The night of September 26, 1897, could have proven even more deadly than it actually did. The *Messenger* reported that “hundreds of the mob” proposed that they travel to Owensboro to lynch Henry Richardson, another African American accused of rape. Richardson had allegedly raped a 10-year-old girl on Sunday afternoon. Except, this time the victim was also African-American. It is impossible to assert why the mob was dissuaded from going to Daviess County to continue its bloody work, but the significance of the race of the alleged victim must be considered.93 “Whites took into account not only the nature of the offense itself,” argues Brundage, “but also who did what to whom.” Blacks who harmed blacks were much less likely to face retribution than blacks who harmed whites.94

In its write-up the day after the lynching, the *Messenger* unabashedly noted:

> The brutal outrage upon the person of little Maggie Roberts has been avenged, and another black fiend, confessed guilty, has learned that the penalty for rape is rope. There is no use to moralize over it—no use to call down maledictions upon the state or the officers. Right or wrong, as long as black brutes outrage white women, just that long will citizens swing the brutes to a convenient limb.95

Simply put, Raymond Bushrod had been lynched for allegedly committing the so-called “usual crime”—the rape of a white female by a black male—and accordingly, the local newspapers repeated the standard line of the day. Most turn-of-the-century white Americans undoubtedly echoed the sentiments of President Theodore Roosevelt when he stated that “the greatest existing cause of lynching is the perpetration, especially by black

93.“Lynched The Brute,” 1.


95“Lynched The Brute,” 1.
men of the heinous crime of rape. . . .” As George Wright has demonstrated, though, only one-third of Kentucky’s African-American lynching victims stood accused of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault; and that figure did not approach fifty percent in any Southern state.\textsuperscript{96}

The Louisville \textit{Courier-Journal} featured the Hawesville story on its front page on Monday morning. “. . . Judge Lynch held a large court here to-day [sic], but there was only one case on the docket,” began the article wryly; “Raymond Bushrod, negro, aged twenty, third time ravisher, is in eternity, sent there by the hands of an outraged community as a reward for his crime.”\textsuperscript{97}

The article’s writer next presented evidence to show the extent of the community’s unity of spirit. He mentioned that six young girls fought their way to the front of the mob to witness the hanging up close. He also recounted that a decrepit old man approached the swaying body afterward and declared: “This is in defense of our wives and daughters; may God bless the braves.” The writer added, “All the negroes in the town were ready and willing to take part, had it been necessary, many negro women watching the execution with seeming pleasure.” An innate–perhaps subconscious–tendency to protect the identities of the white citizenry of Hawesville is evident, as the reporter referred to the old man as “a stranger in the city” and pointed out that the girls hailed “from neighboring Indiana towns.”\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{96}Wright, \textit{Racial Violence in Kentucky}, 77.

\textsuperscript{97}“A Rope and Willing Hands and Judge Lynch’s Court Was Over,” 1.

\textsuperscript{98}Ibid.
The *Courier-Journal* painted a stoic, almost gallantly noble, portrait of the little river town:

It is safe to say that this Hawesville mob breaks all records. It did its work by daylight and on Sunday. Not a drunken man was to be seen anywhere, not an oath was heard, not a mask on any face. Nothing—nothing but quiet, plain people of the hills and valleys who had assembled with the solemn vow to protect their homes.99

The national newspapers also carried the story of the events in Hawesville. On Sunday, the *Chicago Tribune* ran the headline “To Be Burned At the Stake: Infuriated Mob of Whites in Kentucky Threatens a Negro with an Awful Fate” and concluded that: “It seems certain that [the suspect] will be burned at the stake.”100 The following day, the newspaper’s prognostication proved prophetic, although, of course, the method of execution would not involve flames.

Monday’s *Tribune* article emphasized the community-wide approval of the act. It declared, “During the entire time of the lynching not less than 200 women were on the hill overlooking the public square, and when the negro’s dangling form went up their cheers rent the air.”101 The *New York Times* also ran a feature story on the Hawesville lynching on Monday and recited the same refrain nearly verbatim.102 Clearly the visibil-
ity and viscosity of the females in Hancock County proved noteworthy on the national stage.

“In the broad, open glare of a Sunday sun, in the midst of a protracted revival . . . Raymond Bushrod . . . was made to pay the penalty of his assault on 14-year-old Maggie Roberts,” begins the Monday Tribune article. It is noteworthy that the Tribune makes reference to “a protracted revival.”103 Aside from the Tribune, no other primary source mentions such a concurrent religious revival.

One contemporary African-American newspaper from the region, the Indianapolis Freeman, reported on the Hawesville lynching in its October 2, 1897 edition. “The usual fate for the usual crime has been meted out to Raymond Bushrod, of Hawesville, Ky. The details of this man’s alleged doings are too revolting to reproduce, but sufficient to say, it was the usual offense,” began the article.104

However, The Freeman continued:

We have insisted all along that such crimes are not to be condoned nor do we think of saying one word in the wretch’s favor; rather be it said that the death was richly deserved. But the law makers of the land have prescribed a course to follow that includes all crimes. Raping does not fall beyond the pale of this classification, no matter how horrible the details.105

103“Negro Lynched In Kentucky,” 5; This version is popularized in Wright’s Racial Violence in Kentucky, p. 89.

104“Raymond Bushrod Lynched,” The (Indianapolis) Freeman, 2 October 1897: 4.

105Ibid.
The article chastised lynching as “a relic of barbarism” and suggested a directly proportional relationship between a community’s illiteracy rate and its predisposition for mob violence. If rural areas did not have an African-American rapist to lynch, reasoned the newspaper, they would find other outlets for their violent tendencies. “The savage fury must be spent, that is all.” *The Freeman* classified Hawesville among the “communities of little learning, but exalted ideas of chivalry.” “The states of higher intellectual status,” it argues, “have no such tales of woe. . . .”106 While the Bluegrass State has traditionally borne ridicule for its educational standards, Hancock County itself was ranked somewhat higher. At the turn of the century, Hancock’s illiteracy rate was measured at 18.2 percent. While seemingly high, this estimate actually placed the county slightly below the state average of 18.8 percent.107

Therefore, while *The Freeman*’s theory could plausibly explain why the lynching occurred in Kentucky, standing alone it could not explain why it occurred in a county like Hancock, as opposed to the counties with higher historical rates of illiteracy, namely the Appalachian region. As Tolnay and Beck have demonstrated, there were numerous interrelated factors at work in determining where lynchings took place, and it is impossible to quantify the passions that certain crimes—such as Maggie Roberts’ assault—aroused within a community. In an article from the previous week’s issue, *The Freeman* cautioned the citizens of southern Indiana—who had lynched five white men at Versailles—that their actions threatened to place Indiana on equally “barbarous” footing with its “sister states”

106Ibid.

The message was clear. More and more, mob violence was being attached as a negative stigma.

Even the *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, which initially seemed to offer outright endorsement of the lynching on September 28, somewhat softened its stance a day later. The *Messenger* published an editorial entitled “Dangers of Mob Law.” “Mob law is bad,” began the article; but the next three sentences would paint a disturbing metaphor—one that would be repeated over and over again throughout the American South in defense of mob law. “It can be safely set down that whenever a black brute in the South ravishes a white girl he will be hanged as soon as caught,” it asserted. “It is done on the same principle that a snake or a mad dog is killed. The safety of the public demands it.”

The writer of the editorial argued: “It would be much better to leave even the case of rapists to the courts. . . .” However, it also presented two other typical justifications for lynch mobs: The editorial pointed out the terrible emotional burden and embarrassment that a public trial places upon a young female defendant, and it noted that court trials were seldom “speedy” affairs. “If speedy and sure justice could be administered under the law, there would be no appeal to mobs,” it concluded. “If the lynching of black brutes were the only work of mobs, no great harm would be done,” callously suggested the editorial. “But a mob is an unlawful body and frequently composed of a low and vi-

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cious class. If they can commit on depredation without punishment it is often taken as a warrant for further depredations.”

The 1897 Hawesville lynching was the only one ever recorded in Hancock County’s history. It was like many other lynchings in Kentucky, and indeed throughout the South. However, what distinguished the Hawesville affair was its setting: the sheer size of and demographics of the crowd. The fact that scores of women, children, and senior citizens all willingly witnessed the spectacle—performed without even the slightest pretense of secrecy—attests to the community-wide support the mob enjoyed.

The brazen, defiant act of extralegal violence perpetrated in broad daylight illustrated the popularity that mob justice still enjoyed in the South on the eve of the twentieth century.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{110}}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{111}}\text{History records the bizarre lynching of a white man across the river in Perry County, Indiana exactly one decade earlier. In 1887, John Davidson was hanged by a “drunken, angry mob.” The mob had come in search of John’s brother, who had eloped with a young local Catholic girl. The girl’s father, enraged that his daughter had run off with a Protestant boy, was determined to find him. When young John informed the men that he had no idea where his brother was, they refused to accept his answer. A fight ensued, and the mob beat Davidson and hanged him from a beech tree near Kitterman Corner. (Don Stur-geon, “The Lynching of John Davidson: They Hanged The Wrong Man,” 1980 <www.perrycountyindiana.org/history/davidson2.html#They Hanged The Wrong Man> (22 September 2003).}\]
A little over thirty miles southwest of Hawesville lies the town of Livermore, the largest city in McLean County. McLean County forms much of the southern boundary of Daviess County, and it is just slightly larger in land area and population than Hancock County. The Green River, a major tributary of the Ohio River, flows through the middle of McLean County. Although not nearly as large as the Ohio, the Green is nonetheless a noteworthy stream. It is navigable for more than half of its 360-mile course,\(^1\) and it has reportedly been measured at more than 200 feet in depth in places.\(^2\)

Livermore in 1911 was a small yet significant Green River port. Located in eastern McLean County (in the heart of the fertile Western Kentucky Coal Field), Livermore prospered by exploiting the region’s abundant natural resources. Coal was shipped by way of the town’s Louisville & Nashville Railroad spur, and local farmers sent their produce and livestock 75 miles downstream to Evansville, Indiana. Livermore was the hub of the region’s lumber manufacturing industry—utilizing the rich timberlands of the Green and Rough river valleys.\(^3\) It was another New South boomtown—like Hawesville—

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\(^3\)Ibid., 51-54.
that burgeoned in the 1880s and then again in the first decade of the twentieth century, as the railroad brought population and prosperity.\textsuperscript{4}

The town of Livermore was in its heyday in 1911, boasting some 1,220 residents. Most worked as either farmers, merchants, or laborers; and most were white. There were only 188 African-Americans living in Livermore in 1911 (15.5 percent of the total population). Before the Civil War, McLean County’s slave population never comprised more than 17 percent of the total. In the 1910 United States Census, most Livermore blacks listed their occupation as “servant,” “laborer,” or “none,” although there were a handful of African-American clergymen and barbers.\textsuperscript{5}

Thursday, April 20, 1911 was a mild spring day in Livermore.\textsuperscript{6} The mighty beech, sycamore, and cypress trees that overhang the banks of the Green River displayed their rich emerald foliage. Cattails and wildflowers sprouted from the “Point” downtown—the sliver of land where the narrow Rough River meets the wide, lazy Green River. It was late afternoon, and the distant whistle of the recently departed L & N train could be heard, as it steamed southward towards Central City.\textsuperscript{7} The riverfront was bustling, as roustabouts hurriedly off-loaded merchandise from a steamboat headed to Bowling Green, hoping to finish by the 5:00 whistle.

\textsuperscript{4}Ayers, \textit{The Promise of the New South}, 55-56.

\textsuperscript{5}Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, \textit{1910 McLean County, Kentucky Census} (Washington, D.C., 1910), 44-56.


Clarence Mitchell, a local white man in his mid twenties, made his way downtown. He was the son of the prominent town liveryman, William Mitchell, who had moved his family to Livermore just a year earlier. Clarence Mitchell had just gotten off from work at one of the town’s mills. Newspapers praised him as “an upright young man,” although subsequent accounts call this assessment into question.  

Mitchell, accompanied by his friend Clifton Schroeter, headed down Main Street to the pool room owned by J. D. Whitaker (a white resident). Whitaker’s pool room was “conducted for negroes,” and his manager was a young 22-year-old black man named William Potter, a native of Smithville, Tennessee, who had only lived in Livermore a few months. In that time, however, Potter had managed to earn a reputation for drunkenness and was referred to even by other blacks as “a bad negro.” Mitchell and Potter were not strangers to one another. “It is said that Mitchell and the negro had had previous trouble in the pool room, and that a bad feeling existed. It is also said that Mitchell is a negro hater and had a special dislike for Potter.”

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10Glenn Hodges, “Livermore Lynching: Is the infamous tale of the killing of William Potter fact or fiction?,” *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer*, 5 October 2003: 3E.


12“Mob Lynches Negro Over At Livermore,” 1.
Shortly before 5:00 p.m., Mitchell and Schroeter entered the black billiards hall.

(This plainly illustrates the double standard at work in the early twentieth-century segregated South. While African Americans were severely restricted, whites enjoyed unlimited access to virtually any edifice or institution.) From that point, the versions of what occurred differ. The *Owensboro Daily Inquirer* provides a plausible account:

Mitchell and Schroeter played a game [of pool] . . . and refused to pay. Potter told them that there was a pool room for white people in the town, and that they should patronize it, as a negro pool room was not the place for white men. . . . Mitchell and Schroeter became abusive in their language, and Potter ordered them to leave the house. Mitchell caught Potter by the collar, and a scuffle ensued, at the end of which Mitchell and Schroeter left the room. When outside Mitchell cursed the negro and dared him to come out. Potter walked to the door with a pistol in his hands and fired two shots at Mitchell, both taking effect.13

The first bullet had only grazed Mitchell’s clothing. An eye witness heard Mitchell taunt the black man: “You are not game; try that again!” This time Potter did not miss. The second shot tore through Mitchell’s right arm and lodged in his chest. Clarence Mitchell collapsed to the dusty street, bleeding from his side.14

Undoubtedly in a state of shock and fearing retribution, Potter rushed to find his boss, Mr. Whitaker. He ran to the white pool room, which Whitaker operated in the rear of the opera house—a sturdy two-story brick structure at the corner of Main and 1st streets, overlooking the Green River. The town marshal, Virgil P. Stateler, had been only a short distance from the commotion, and he immediately entered Whitaker’s theater and

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
placed Potter under arrest. The marshal then enlisted the help of a half dozen local men, including Mayor V. B. Morton, to assist him in guarding the prisoner.\textsuperscript{15}

It was nearly 5:45 now. By now most of the townspeople had finished their workday, and the streets of Livermore were abuzz with the news of what had transpired at the pool hall. The seriously wounded Mitchell had been carried to his family’s home and was being attended to by Dr. H. J. Beard. Rumors circulated that the young Mitchell was mortally injured and that he would not live through the night.\textsuperscript{16}

A large group of men had begun to assemble on 1st Street outside of Whitaker’s theater. Angry voices called for “vengeance,” and the word “lynch” was freely thrown about. By 6:30, when the Number Four train rumbled through town on its last run of the day, Marshal Stateler and his men were clearly concerned. Mayor Morton had placed an urgent telephone call to Sheriff C. E. Beeler in Calhoun, requesting that he come immediately with a “posse” to transport Potter to the county jail.\textsuperscript{17}

It is not entirely clear why Stateler and his deputies kept Potter under guard in the opera house instead of taking him to the Livermore jail. The town lock-up was less than a block away. City officials contended that the jail house was “a flimsy structure”\textsuperscript{18} and

\textsuperscript{15}“Negro Mobbed By Three Hundred Livermore Men,” 1.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}“Lynched Before The Footlights,” \textit{The Courier-Journal}, 21 April 1911: 1.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
that “before the sheriff arrived it was not thought safe to attempt to take the negro to the
lock-up.” Other observers, however, would later charge more sinister motives.

By nightfall, a mob of some 50 men had surrounded the entrance to the theater. Marshal Stateler had barred the door and hidden the frightened Will Potter in a dressing room to the rear of the stage. Lawrence Mitchell, the brother of the wounded man, and his earlier companion Clifton Schroeter, now led the fiery mob. They angrily demanded that the marshal turn over his prisoner, and when Stateler did not, they threatened to enter the building with force. Sometime around 7:30, the mob made good on their earlier threats. “. . . [T]he mob surged against the doors in an effort to break them down. The doors stood the first onslaught, but gave way under the second attack.” Stateler and his men had kept the interior of the opera house in darkness for Potter’s protection; but now moonlight from the street flooded into the pitch black theater, as the doors were flung open.

There are two conflicting accounts of what took place next. The first—somewhat less gruesome—account holds that Will Potter was discovered by the lynch mob by lantern light. When he had been located, there was one shotgun blast and a report from a pistol. Potter was killed instantly, shot through the heart and the back of the head. “Two or three more random shots were fired, and after being assured the negro was dead, the


mob dispersed.” This account was held fast to by McLean Countians, and the Livermore mayor reiterated it in his official statement about the incident.21

A second version of the lynching—later perpetuated by the NAACP—paints an even more disturbing picture. It charges that the four dozen members of the lynch mob burst into Whitaker’s theater and quickly located Will Potter’s offstage hiding place. The sinister group dragged the young black man “shivering with terror” onto the stage. They then set about their unholy task.22

According to the NAACP account, the throng of angry white men, armed with their personal firearms, arranged themselves among the seats of the crude opera house:

The shooting of the negro was done in a weird scene. Against the wall props, long unused, were bare windows, and startled from their night’s rest rats scurried across the floor. Against such a background the negro was bound hand and foot and placed in the center of the stage. Many of the lights when the current was turned on refused to burn, and in the semi-darkness, the mob silhouetted against the theatre walls, awaited the signal of their leader. When it was given fifty guns fired in unison, one piercing scream was heard, and their work was over. The lights were then extinguished, the curtain lowered, and the mob then filed out.23

Some authorities suggest that the lynching was contrived to accomplish a dual purpose—to kill Potter and to raise money for the Mitchell family. They contend that “an admission fee was charged to witness the lynching, the prices ranging from those usually charged for orchestra and gallery seats.” “Those who bought orchestra seats had the
privilege of emptying their six shooters at the swaying form above them, but the gallery occupants were limited to one shot. . . .” All proceeds from the morbid melodrama were said to go to Clarence Mitchell.24 “And so it happened,” writes Richard Kluger in Simple Justice. “Sadism was riding bareback and unimpeded through the South.”25

It is interesting to note that this latter version has been the one most often recited when the incident was mentioned over the past century. The opera house atrocity entered popular culture 65 years after it happened. The Livermore lynching is believed to be the basis of “The Swing,” the 1976 drama by English playwright Edward Bond. The play perpetuates the more sensational version of the lynching.26

Which version was indeed factual? In a 2003 feature, Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer reporter Glenn Hodges concedes that, at the very least, the Livermore lynching was likely “one of the most poorly reported stories in the local paper’s history.” He notes that conflicting and “confusing” details plague the Messenger’s coverage.27 No matter the specific sordid details of the spectacle, one fact remained undisputable: By the time Sheriff Beeler arrived from Calhoun Thursday night, William Potter lay dead in a bloody pool on the stage of Whitaker’s Opera House. The young black man had been taken from

24“Minutes of the Executive Committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” NAACP Papers, 2 May 1911, microfilm, 56.


26Hodges, “Livermore Lynching: . . . fact or fiction?,” 3E. This version is also put forth in a February 2000 article by Regis College history professor Dr. Susan Zeiger in the history magazine Clio’s Eye.

27Ibid.
police custody and brutally murdered by a mob of some 50 local white men. Whatever the actual number of shots fired, however exactly the gruesome act had been perpetrated, and whoever had masterminded the act, a black man had been killed in cold blood because he had allegedly wounded a white man.

By the turn of the twentieth century, lynchings had ceased to be a proper common occurrence in the South. “The Livermore lynching so thoroughly epitomized the unenlightened backwardness associated with the rural South, it was almost laughable,” comments Philip Dray in his recent book At the Hands of Persons Unknown. “It was certainly the kind of grotesque occurrence from which most Americans could feel comfortable distancing themselves.”

In other words, the days of unbridled public support for such spectacles—even if they were performed in retaliation for supposed serious crimes against whites—had passed. Thus, the April 21, 1911 headlines of Kentucky newspapers devoted prominent coverage to the sensational happenings in Livermore. In Owensboro, in neighboring Daviess County, residents awoke to exaggerated accounts—“Negro Mobbed by Three Hundred Men”!

Louisville’s Courier-Journal proclaimed, “Lynched Before The Footlights: Bloody Drama is Staged in Livermore, Ky.”

The tragic story also made the major national newspapers. (This was not uncommon, as the New York and Chicago press often reported on Southern lynchings between

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28Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown, 178.

29“Negro Mobbed By Three Hundred Livermore Men,” 1.

1882 and 1918.) Moreover, *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* gave full, front-page treatment to the Livermore lynching. They both, however, erroneously reported that Clarence Mitchell had died of his wounds.

Meanwhile in Livermore, Mayor Morton hurriedly prepared an official statement about the incident to release to the press. He corrected earlier reports, stating that, “Mitchell, while badly wounded, has chances to recover.” Morton characterized the lynching as an unfortunate incident, saying that it occurred although “[e]verything was done that the mayor, marshal, and other cool-headed citizens could do to keep down the mob.”

The mayor concluded:

> To sum it all up, an undesirable negro citizen violated the law and was unlawfully put to death, through no neglect or carelessness of the city authorities, and which is not condoned by any of the law abiding [sic] citizens of this place.

Thus, while denouncing the mob action, Mayor Morton uses the opportunity to take a backhanded swipe at the character of the lynchee. Morton could have very easily omitted the derogatory adjective he uses to classify Potter. Calling him an “undesirable negro” is not only unnecessary, it is disrespectful, and it shows that even in 1911, some

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33 “Livermore Mayor Makes Statement,” 2.

34 Ibid.
Southern officials still attempted to justify racial violence. Morton seems to be saying that what happened to Potter was unfortunate, however, it was made less tragic due to the race and supposed character of the victim.

Two days after the Livermore lynching, *The New York Times* printed a scathing half-column editorial denouncing the actions of the McLean County mob. The editors of the prominent newspaper sarcastically noted that, “Whatever else may be said about the inhabitants of Livermore, Ky., it cannot be denied that in them the dramatic sense is strongly developed.” Regarding the offense with which Will Potter had been charged, they commented, “In such places [as Livermore], if anywhere, the social conventions and proprieties must be rigidly observed and every violation of them sternly rebuked.” Potter, *The Times* claimed, had broken one of the South’s sacred rules—“getting the better of a white antagonist in a barroom brawl.”

The editorial cynically predicted the eventual outcome of the detestable act:

According to the inevitable report, efforts are making in Livermore to discover who it was that devised and took part in this original and ingenious flouting of the law. Later, no doubt, we shall hear that the efforts, though energetic and persistent, were without result.

The Indianapolis *Freeman* ran a full-length article on the lynching about a week after the incident. Under the headline “Realism With A Vengeance At Livermore, Ky.,” the article perpetuated the latter—and more sensational—version of the event. “As for spectacular tragedy perhaps nothing in the annals of the horrible has outdone the Liver-

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36: Ibid.
more incident,” asserted the writer. He labels the extralegal execution of Potter “the most melodramatic scene of vengeance ever enacted.”

Indeed the macabre theatrical aspect to this mob grabbed the attention of the national press, setting this lynching apart from hundreds of others that had been covered in the previous three decades. A lynching in a small Southern town was not big news in 1911, however a lynching where the victim’s last moments were played out on stage before a paying audience was. Noting that in this particular case fact proved more disturbing than fiction, the *Freeman* article opined about the dangers of unchecked lynch law:

The tragedy is most deplorable in view of the record hoped to be established to the extent that each year would witness less and less of the evil until the [lynching phenomenon] passed and in a manner becomes a dream. The white people no less than the Negro should be anxious for the cessation of such happenings. The State of Kentucky will have something to do to overcome the awful backset. The country at large, we think, will not view the happening with a complacent spirit, since it means a riotous disposition and which may not be careful where it will break out.

Back in Kentucky reaction to the April 20 lynching was surprisingly negative. “Perhaps more than any previous incident of racial violence, the Livermore lynching led many white Kentuckians to acknowledge,” wrote George Wright in his *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, “that such incidents, regardless of the offense attributed to the victim, undermined respect for the law and were therefore unacceptable.” It was becoming

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37“Realism With A Vengeance At Livermore, Ky.,” *The (Indianapolis) Freeman*, 29 April 1911: 3.

38Ibid.

clear that residents of the Bluegrass State would not simply turn their backs and dismiss this affair as just another case of hometown “extralegal justice.”

One week after the lynching, an article in The Hartford (KY) Republican was telling. The Ohio County (just east of McLean) newspaper glowingly recounted how the Associated Press had complimented county citizens for deferring “punishment to the courts” in the case of an alleged child molester. The paper praised Ohio Countians for refraining from mob action. “The misdeeds of Kentuckians have been heralded from coast to coast,” it noted, “and it has become customary to compare any terrible tragedy in any other state as the way they do things in Kentucky.”

In Livermore the weekend of April 22 and 23 was eerily quiet. Friday, the day after the fateful proceedings, the townspeople had returned to work. They discussed in hushed tones what had transpired at the opera house. “Since the lynching of the negro the feeling [of vengeance] has subsided, and very little talk is being indulged in, as it is feared the county authorities will hold an investigation,” reported the Owensboro Daily Messenger. “The city officials are gaining all of the information possible, and, it is claimed, the names of several participating in the lynching of the negro are generally known.”

Preliminary newspaper accounts had characterized the members of the lynch


mob as “young hot-headed fellows,” rather than “the older and very best citizens of the town.”

The word now was that Clarence Mitchell’s wounds were not as serious as initially believed. Mitchell’s physician reported that the young man’s fever was subsiding. By the weekend he was resting comfortably, and it was believed that he would “more than likely recover.”

Across town, undertaker John Hughart attended to a more morbid detail.

Following the lynching, Hughart had taken the body of the slain Will Potter to his mortuary. The next day the town coroner had impaneled a jury; as a result of the inquest, the jurors—to no one’s surprise—concluded that “Potter came to his death from gunshot wounds at the hands of parties unknown. . . .” The official death certificate listed the cause of death as: “gunshot wound through left scapula fired by some member of a mob and was killed instantly.”

Now Hughart had the unenviable task of making burial arrangements for Potter.

The town undertaker reportedly offered one local African American five dollars to help him bury Potter, but he was turned down. Livermore blacks also refused to have the body buried in the black cemetery. According to the press, local African-Americans

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42 “Mob Lynches Negro Over At Livermore,” 1.
43 “Blacks Refuse To Touch Body,” 1.
44 “Mob Lynches Negro Over At Livermore,” 1.
45 Hodges, “Livermore Lynching: . . . fact or fiction?,” 3E.
viewed Potter as “a bad negro” who “had gotten himself into trouble.” The specter of what had happened to Potter undoubtedly did much to encourage disassociation. It is not clear exactly who helped Hughart with the body; but the dignity that Potter was robbed of in life was not restored in death.\textsuperscript{46} His death certificate indicates only that he was buried in “Potters Field” in Livermore on Monday, April 24, 1911.\textsuperscript{47}

If McLean Countians wanted the ugly affair to fade into the dark recesses of history, the NAACP was doing all it could to bring it to light. “It came as a kind of strange gift to the NAACP propagandists,” wrote Philip Dray, “that one of the first lynchings they publicized was also one of the more bizarre incidents of civic violence in American history.”\textsuperscript{48} Less than two weeks after the lynching, on May 2, 1911, the NAACP took up the matter at its executive committee board meeting in New York City. The African-American activist group charged that the Livermore atrocity “of spectacular, revolting, barbarous brutality, defies alike the laws of God and the laws of the Nation, disgraces our country and impeaches our civilization.”\textsuperscript{49}

A seven-member committee was formed to draft letters to elected officials and the national press corps. The committee called for President William Howard Taft and Kentucky governor Augustus Willson to work to prevent future lynchings. The NAACP fur-
ther urged the president to send Congress a resolution condemning “lynch law” and im-
ploring them “to take such actions as will save this nation from this foul blot and curse on
its civilization.” Liles Wald of Kentucky investigated the matter on behalf of the
NAACP. Wald reported that the lynching was “without the least justification” and that it
was “condemned by the whole neighborhood.”

President Taft evidently did not formally respond to the NAACP’s letter, however
Governor Willson did. Willson’s comments were reprinted in the June 1911 volume of
The Crisis, the NAACP’s monthly publication. He began by informing the organization
that he had made an immediate inquiry into the actions of the lynch mob. Willson re-
futed the sensational version of the event. He concluded that “while [the lynching] was
bad enough, I am glad to say that it was not as bad as reported in the sensational dis-
patches; that it was not conducted as a public exhibition, that the theatre was not opened
nor lighted, much less were people there by admission either paid or unpaid, but a small
mob did murder this man [Potter] in that building in the dark. . . .” Willson further noted
his pleasure that a local grand jury had indicted eighteen alleged mob participants.

Willson defended his actions—or lack thereof—in the case, stating that he did not
receive word of the western Kentucky lynching until the morning after it occurred. “I do
not permit any lynching if I know of it before hand,” he stated. The Livermore lynching,

50Ibid.

51“Minutes of the Executive Committee of the NAACP,” NAACP Papers, microfilm, 6 June 1911, 72.

however, he remarked, was a “sudden mob.” Willson refused to pass judgment regarding the precipitating incident, the argument between Potter and Mitchell. . . . [T]his was a sudden mob gathered on the Negro shooting a white man, the merits of which I know nothing. . . .”

Defending his record Willson added:

I have taken a great deal of care to prevent injustice through race prejudice being done to our colored people. I have pardoned them when it was plain they were wrongfully convicted or too severely punished, and I have in every case where there was a reason to fear a mob taken great care to prevent such a disgrace.

Denunciation of the Livermore lynching even came from halfway around the world. Paris, France’s Le Petit Journal devoted its May 7, 1911 cover to the story. In a detailed full-color illustration, the Parisian newspaper depicted the gruesome scene of April 20—a terrified Will Potter bound on stage as dozens of white “gentlemen” discharge their weapons at him. On the first page of text, explaining the picture (in French), the editors noted that “scenes of lynching Negroes are always very frequent in the United States.” They facetiously added that the Livermore event was “performed with unique taste.”

Some of the details of the Le Petit Journal illustration were necessarily embellished. The opera house appears more like Carnegie Hall than the country theater it truly

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{“A Negro Shot on a Theater Stage,” Le Petit Journal, 7 May 1911, front cover and 146.}
was. Also, several of the lynch mob participants are dressed more like Wall Street bankers than small-town Kentucky farmers and merchants. Despite these inaccuracies the artwork plainly makes its point. The ghastly look of horror on the doomed Potter’s face and the bullet wounds to his forehead and chest speak volumes.  

By the second week of May, public pressure on McLean County officials (both from within Kentucky and without) was intense. In the county seat of Calhoun, eight miles downstream from Livermore, a grand jury was convened to consider the case. Local residents undoubtedly felt that this action was merely a formality; but, as they would soon learn, the circuit court was not simply going through the motions. On May 12, 1911, Circuit Judge T. F. Birkhead offered what was deemed “the most vigorous instructions ever given to a grand jury in Western Kentucky.” Judge Birkhead reportedly proclaimed to the grand jury:

. . . that if indictments were not returned against the members of the mob[,] that these same men, when the occasion again arose, would attempt to take the law into their own hands and bring shame and disgrace upon the commonwealth of Kentucky.  

The grand jury was comprised of twelve white McLean County farmers. For one week they had listened to testimony by some 50 eyewitnesses to Will Potter’s lynching. Commonwealth’s Attorney Ben D. Ringo and County Attorney Richard Alexander

56Ibid.


examined the witnesses, who testified as to the identity of supposed members of the April 20 mob.\textsuperscript{59}

On Friday morning, May 12, the grand jury indicted 18 alleged Livermore lynchers. The three purported leaders of the mob, Lawrence Mitchell (brother of Clarence Mitchell), Clifton Schroeter (Clarence’s companion on April 20), and Jesse Schroeter (Clifton’s brother), were indicted separately and charged with murder. The remaining 15 men—Bob Hays, John Fielden, William Coghill, Leslie Wright, Sam Colburn, John Taylor, Ira Coghill, Ellis Thronsberry, Ellis Burten, Cecil Jarvis, and Tom Dabner—were charged under a blanket indictment with being accessories to murder.\textsuperscript{60} The \textit{Courier-Journal} reported, “Practically all of the men indicted were well known in Livermore and McLean [C]ounty, and the news of the action of the grand jury came like a thunderbolt from the clear sky.”\textsuperscript{61}

The \textit{Messenger} praised the initiation of judicial proceedings in a May 13, 1911 editorial entitled “Good Omen.” The editors proclaimed:

> At last a Kentucky grand jury has succeeded in indicting the alleged members of a mob. Four times in the past 25 years, mobs have taken prisoners from the Owensboro jail and hanged them [obviously one being the 1884 lynching of Dick May], but no grand jury investigation ever resulted in the indictment of any member of any of these mobs. It is a most notable victory for justice and restoration of complete order in Kentucky that these indictments (in McLean County) have been so speedily returned. It is a

\textsuperscript{59}“Return Indictments for Eighteen. . . .”, 1.

\textsuperscript{60}\textit{McLean County, KY Circuit Court Order Book V}, 1911, 42.

\textsuperscript{61}“Murder Is The Charge Made,” \textit{The Courier-Journal}, 13 May 1911: 1.
good omen. The innocent will not be allowed to suffer; the guilty should be speedily punished.62

The town of Livermore was in a state of shock. By Friday evening Sheriff Beeler had arrested 13 of the accused men (including the 3 principals). “The scenes in Livermore this afternoon were pitiful in the extreme,” commented the Courier-Journal. “The weeping wives and sisters over the arrest of their loved ones was heartrending, and to-day [sic] will be one long remembered by the residents of the little river city.”63

Judge Birkhead set bond for Mitchell and the Schroeters at $1,000 each, and bail was fixed at $500 apiece for those charged with aiding and abetting.64 The five remaining defendants who had not yet been arrested sought to elude police. Receiving word of the imminent indictments, some of them were said to have left town “on timber rafts, going down Green [R]iver.”65 Two of the fugitives reportedly armed themselves and held authorities at bay in a cabin some three miles from Livermore.66

It was not long, however, before all of the accused participants in the lynch mob were captured. Most of the men executed bond quickly and were released. Lawrence Mitchell and Clifton and Jesse Schroeter, though, “were held in the county jail some time” before friends and relatives raised the $1,000 necessary to liberate them. By the

62Hodges, “Livermore Lynching: . . . fact or fiction?,” 3E.
63“Murder Is The Charge Made,” 1.
64McLean County, KY Circuit Court Order Book V, 1911, 42.
66“Murder Is The Charge Made,” 1.
middle of June 1911, all of the accused Livermore men were free on bail. With the court backlog created by such a great number of defendants, it was rumored that Judge Birkhead would soon call a special summer session to hear the cases.

As June turned into July, the intense summer sun beat down upon dusty Livermore. Only the shade of the mighty trees and the occasional breeze blowing off the river offered relief. Frogs and turtles could be heard plopping into the murky water of the Green, as the afternoon sun became unbearable. Even the river itself seemed to become lazy in the summer heat, slowing down and becoming shallower. Travelers coming downstream would comment upon the sweltering weather, but talk inevitably turned toward the trial of the accused lynchers.

The Owensboro Daily Inquirer reported that Clarence Mitchell had “fully recovered” from his gunshot wounds, and it was happily noted that Mitchell had “since married Miss Ruth English, a well known [sic] young lady of Livermore.” His brother Lawrence and the others facing trial nervously awaited their fates. It had been decided that the McLean County Circuit Court would convene a special term in late August.

On Monday, August 21, 1911 at 8:30 a.m., Judge T. F. Birkhead opened the special summer session in Calhoun. The handsome new classical-style McLean County Courthouse sat on the corner of 2nd and Main streets in Calhoun. Up the south stairway, some 300 spectators packed the second-floor Circuit Court room (an estimated one-third

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of them from Livermore). They gathered to watch a handful of white men stand trial for
the lynching of a black man—truly a rare occurrence in the early twentieth-century
American South.\textsuperscript{69}

Commonwealth’s Attorney Ben Ringo and County Attorney Richard Alexander
headed the prosecution team. Joseph Miller of Calhoun and Lawrence Tanner of Owens-
boro represented the accused men.\textsuperscript{70} Clifton Schroeter, Clarence Mitchell’s pool hall
companion on the fateful April evening, was the only one of the defendants to be excused
from the proceedings. It seems that Schroeter had gotten himself into subsequent trouble
and was in jail in Daviess County, awaiting “indictment in the federal court for making
counterfeit money.”\textsuperscript{71}

Shortly after Judge Birkhead convened the court, attorneys Miller and Tanner re-
quested continuance of the cases to the regular October term, but this request was quickly
overruled. The defense then filed a motion for demurrer (to have their clients’ suits dis-
missed). Again Judge Birkhead refused. With these unlikely avenues exhausted, Miller
and Tanner now turned their attention toward a more promising prospect—obtaining
separate trials for the defendants. On this point the judge acquiesced.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{70}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{72}McLean County, KY Circuit Court Order Book V, 1911, 58.
The prosecution chose to try Lawrence Mitchell first. Jury selection began after lunch in the sultry courtroom. The *Owensboro Daily Inquirer* had predicted that it would be difficult to find twelve impartial jurors for the case, “as nearly every citizen in McLean County, either knows the facts concerning the killing or has formed or expressed an opinion.”

This forecast proved accurate, as only six jurors had been empanelled by the time the regular pool of petit jurors was exhausted. Consequently, the sheriff had to call more than 50 spectators to add to the pool. By 2:30 p.m. twelve jurors had finally been selected. All of them were white males; the majority were farmers, and there was one timber merchant, a schoolteacher, and a grocer.

Late Monday afternoon the trial of *Commonwealth of Kentucky v. Lawrence Mitchell* began. The crowd murmured softly as Lawrence Mitchell was brought into the packed Circuit Court room. The defendant stood before Judge Birkhead and announced that he was waiving his right to a formal arraignment. Mitchell then entered a plea of “not guilty” to the charges against him.

The prosecution called several witnesses to testify about Mitchell’s involvement in the lynch mob. The local press indicated:

> The most important witness for the commonwealth was the town marshal of Livermore, V. P. Stateler, who swore that he was protecting the Negro from the mob in the Livermore theater, when the doors were battered down by the members of the mob, and the prisoner was taken from his

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75*McLean County, KY Circuit Court Order Book V*, 1911, 58.
custody. Marshal Stateler also stated that Mitchell was armed with a shotgun, and immediately after he turned his back toward Mitchell a shot was fired. He said that he could not swear that Mitchell fired the shot, but at the coroner’s inquest it developed that Potter’s death was caused by a gunshot wound.

Other eyewitnesses, including the theater owner J. D. Whitaker, corroborated Stateler’s testimony.76

Judge Birkhead adjourned the first day’s proceedings, sequestered the jury, and announced that court would reconvene at 8:00 a.m. the following day. On Tuesday morning it was the defense’s turn to call witnesses. Lawrence Mitchell took the stand on his own behalf, testifying that he “was at the home of his mother all the time the mob was in Livermore” and had not known about the lynching. His story was corroborated by his mother, sister, and brother-in-law. The defense’s calling of the local telephone company manager, however, backfired. The manager testified that Mitchell had come to his office just five minutes after Potter was killed to telephone relatives about his brother’s condition—placing Lawrence Mitchell in town at the time of the lynching.77

Late Tuesday afternoon both the prosecution and defense made their closing arguments, and the jury retired around 4:00 to consider a verdict. The Owensboro Daily Inquirer went to press with its evening edition, announcing that a guilty verdict was anticipated. “It is the general opinion of those who heard the evidence, that Mitchell failed

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77 Ibid.
in his defense of establishing an alibi,” it reported, “and that the jury will have no trouble in returning a verdict of guilty.”

After an hour of deliberation, the jury asked to be dismissed for dinner. As darkness descended upon Calhoun, the cicadas began their nightly song. Returning to the courthouse at 8:00 p.m., the jurors reconvened in the jury room. Thirty minutes later, they entered the courtroom, amid whispers from the still-large crowd which had remained. Foreman John Dillehay, a local teacher, approached Judge Birkhead with the verdict. “We, the jury,” read Dillehay, “find the defendant Lawrence Mitchell not guilty as charged in the indictment.” Four of the jurors had initially been in favor of the conviction, he commented; but all had finally agreed upon acquittal.

One local newspaper stated, “. . . [T]here was no demonstration when the verdict was read, and the jurymen filed out of the court room without having been congratulated for their action upon any hand.” Another noted that the guilty verdict was “a great surprise” to the prosecution; but, “The people [of McLean County] generally were in sympathy with Mitchell, and the verdict was just as many predicted it would be.”

Lawrence Tanner, one of Mitchell’s attorneys, commented:

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78Ibid.


80*McLean County, KY Circuit Court Order Book V*, 1911, 60.

81“Jury’s Verdict Is ‘Not Guilty,’” 1.

82Ibid.

The verdict of the jury was the logical result of evidence. The commonwealth was absolutely overwhelmed by the testimony of a large number of the best citizens of McLean County, to the effect that Mitchell was not present when Potter was killed, and had nothing to do with the killing. The verdict was a great vindication of the law, which guarantees the right of a fair trial to every man.  

It was a short night for lawyers on both sides, as Judge Birkhead called Wednesday’s session to order a little after 9:00 a.m. As a result of Lawrence Mitchell’s acquittal, the commonwealth had decided not to try Jesse Schroeter, the other principal. It was believed that the evidence against Schroeter was “not as strong” as that introduced against Mitchell. So Ringo and Alexander turned their attention to John W. Taylor, one of the men indicted for “being an accessory before the fact of the killing of Potter.”

A jury had been selected by 2:30 Wednesday afternoon. It was this time composed exclusively of white McLean County farmers—“the best men in the county,” one paper commented. To no one’s surprise, Taylor followed Mitchell’s strategy. He demurred to the indictment, but Judge Birkhead once again overruled this motion. Taylor’s lawyers then announced “not ready for trial,” asking for a continuance. Birkhead once more denied the defense’s request. Being again thwarted in their efforts to save their clients from trial, the defense urged Taylor to enter a plea of “not guilty.”

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84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 “Another On Trial,” 1.

87 McLean County, KY Circuit Court Order Book V, 1911, 61.
The commonwealth began laying out its case late Wednesday, but they had not proceeded long when Judge Birkhead adjourned the session. The deputy sheriff was charged with sequestering the jurors until the following morning. At 8:00 a.m. on Thursday, August 24, the Circuit Court room in Calhoun again buzzed with activity. Attorneys Ringo and Alexander called many of the same witnesses to the stand as they had in the previous trial. Livermore mayor V. G. Morton and others testified that they had seen Taylor in the mob. They claimed he stood guard outside the opera house with a shotgun, vowing that “the Negro would never leave the building alive.” “They can do no more than hang me,” Taylor reportedly told officials at the time, as they tried to persuade him to disperse, “and I don’t give a damn for that.”

When the defense’s turn came, they placed Taylor himself on the stand. He did not dispute the fact that he was “mingling in the crowd” outside of Whitaker’s theater on April 20. Taylor, however, contended that he played no part whatsoever in the mob which lynched Will Potter. As they had done in Mitchell’s trial, Miller and Tanner called several of the defendant’s acquaintances to corroborate Taylor’s testimony. Closing arguments were presented, but the case was given to the jury too late Thursday evening for a verdict to be reached.

The air was heavy as McLean Countians awoke on Friday morning. Clouds had moved into the region, and rain was expected by midday. In the gray morning haze, anx-

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89. Ibid.
ious onlookers filed into the brick courthouse at 2nd and Main streets in Calhoun. Judge Birkhead entered the courtroom at 8:30 a.m., and the jury—which had reassembled to deliberate an hour earlier—strode into the crowded room with its verdict. J. W. Hipsley, the foreman, stood and addressed the judge. “We the jury find the defendant John W. Taylor not proven guilty as charged in the indictment.”

Taylor was quietly congratulated by his attorneys. The other accused Livermore lynchers also breathed a sigh of relief, as Judge Birkhead announced that the remaining cases would be continued until the regular October term. It now appeared increasingly likely that not one single member of the mob that killed Will Potter would be brought to justice.

Following Taylor’s acquittal, the Owensboro Daily Inquirer stated:

It is not thought that the attorneys for the prosecution will press a further trial [in October] of the remaining cases. The evidence is about the same in all of the other cases, and with no chance of securing a conviction, the cases will probably go off the docket.

It is likely that the commonwealth’s attorney will file a statement setting out the result of the trials [of Mitchell and Taylor] . . . and not desiring to put the state to further expense . . . Judge Birkhead will then order the prosecutions filed away.

That is precisely what happened. As Judge Birkhead rapped his gavel to officially end the special August term of the McLean Circuit Court Friday morning, a light rain had begun to fall outside. Many of the spectators opened their umbrellas as they filed out

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90 McLean County, KY Circuit Court Order Book V, 1911, 64.


92 Ibid.
onto Main Street. The majority of them undoubtedly felt a measure of vindication for the Livermore men. Will Potter had, after all, tried to kill Clarence Mitchell, an “upstanding” young white man.

Judge Birkhead, Ben Ringo, and Lawrence Tanner all boarded the morning train headed for Owensboro. As the L & N chugged through the misty Green River valley Friday morning and past Livermore, what were these men’s thoughts? Was Commonwealth’s Attorney Ringo frustrated that such convincing evidence on the prosecution’s side had seemingly been disregarded by the jury? Did Tanner feel any guilt for helping two men who were closely implicated in a lynch mob walk free? Did Judge Birkhead, silent through most of the trial, question whether justice had truly been done in his courtroom?

The answers to these questions may never be known, but one fact is evident—the abominable act which occurred at the Livermore, Kentucky opera house one April night in 1911 was not soon forgotten. Historian George Wright suggests that at least 258 African-Americans were lynched in Kentucky between 1866 and 1934. But it was the particularly gruesome—and theatrical—spectacles, like the one in Livermore, which perhaps did the most to fuel the anti-lynching movement. Using such incidents, the NAACP, government officials, and the national press corps all aided in the fight to end mob violence as an acceptable practice in the American South.

93 Wright, Racial Violence in Kentucky, 307-323.
Referring to the acquittal of Lawrence Mitchell, defense attorney Tanner commented that the law “guarantees the right of a fair trial to every man.”

There is much irony in Tanner’s statement. Where was William Potter’s day in court? Potter may have been guilty of a crime; but was his “right of a fair trial” waived simply because he was black? Sadly, the answer was “yes” more often than not in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South.

The indictment of the Livermore lynchers was an anomaly in the New South. It was a positive sign that the tide of racial injustice under law was starting to turn, however, it would be another half century before the American legal system would make significant strides in viewing a truly color blind society. This case is a vivid example of the schizophrenic universe that law in the New South occupied in the early twentieth century. It paid lip service to the issue of racial violence, but did little actually to deter or punish it.

\(^{94}\)“Another On Trial,” 1.
CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSION–
“UNITED WE STAND”

The Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution officially ended slavery in 1865. However, for the better part of the next century African Americans would not experience true freedom. From Reconstruction through the Depression Era, white Southerners used intimidation, terror, and murder to keep blacks “in their place”; and the region’s legal system turned a blind eye to this holocaust. And as we have seen, western Kentucky was no different than much of the American South.

Close study of these three Ohio Valley lynchings reveal both similarities and differences. Between 1884 and 1911, American society would change in subtle ways—and so too would its reaction to incidents of mob violence. During the two and a half decade period which this study covers, public opinion among whites about lynching evolved—for the better.

In the aftermath of the 1884 Owensboro lynching, Kentuckians mostly expressed regret just that Jailer Lucas had been killed, not that Dick May had been unlawfully murdered. The majority of white residents of the Commonwealth undoubtedly agreed with the Lexington Press’ assertion that “the scoundrel [Dick May] was given his just des[s]erts [sic].”1 Owensboro citizens’ primary motive for denouncing the mob seemed to be to seek vindication for the community’s good name—not that citizens truly regretted that May was lynched.

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1“Echoes from the Mob,” 1.
The community-wide participation in the 1897 Hawesville lynching demonstrates that attitudes had changed little in the decade since the Dick May affair. “Everybody seems to be in sympathy with the action of the mob. . . .” noted the Inquirer. It would be hard to refute the local paper’s assertion, given the presence of men, women, and children of all ages at Raymond Bushrod’s hanging. In 1897, the typical justifications for lynching were still being asserted. The Owensboro Daily Messenger stated in their post-lynching commentary that when a black man raped a white woman, he brought an automatic death sentence upon himself—and justly so; and its editors argued that lynching was a desirable alternative to a court trial, which emotionally burdened the rape victim and was rarely expedient.

By 1911, public sentiment among whites had by no means shifted completely. However, there were at least signs of progress. In the City’s official statement, the mayor of Livermore made sure to mention that the lynching of Will Potter was “not condoned by any of the law abiding [sic] citizens of this place.” The Hartford Republican made much ado about the Associated Press’ praise of Ohio Countians for abstaining from lynching a local African-American criminal in a contemporary article. The Messenger also noted, though, that “public sentiment was with the accused [members of the Liver-

\[\text{\footnotesize 2}^{\text{“In Daylight,” 1.}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 3}^{\text{“Dangers of Mob Law,” 4.}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 4}^{\text{“Livermore Mayor Makes Statement,” 2.}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 5}^{\text{“Action Of Ohio County People Complimented,” 1.}}\]
more lynch mob]."\textsuperscript{6} Kentuckians may not have become social crusaders en masse—particularly when their neighbors were the ones being indicted—however, they were no longer such ready apologists for perpetrators of mob violence.

Based upon these case studies, public sentiment among African Americans in the South seemed to be more static. This outlook is completely understandable, however, given blacks’ precarious position in society during this era—a position necessitated by self-preservation. In 1884, the fear among Owensboro’s black citizenry following Dick May’s lynching was evident through the actions of Marshal McLean. McLean, a local African-American man, went to a city newspaper’s office twice to officially distance himself from rumors that he was plotting retribution.\textsuperscript{7} Thirteen years later in Hawesville, local press accounts recalled that the mob that killed Raymond Bushrod “was composed of men and women, both white and colored.”\textsuperscript{8} Even fourteen years after that, trepidation among Livermore’s African-American community was still apparent in the aftermath of Will Potter’s lynching, to the extent that the town coroner could not enlist one single volunteer to help bury the murdered man, nor would local blacks allow Potter to be laid to rest in the black cemetery.\textsuperscript{9} This was truly a dangerous time to be a black American, and it showed time and time again. Blacks realized that active resistance—or anything per-

\textsuperscript{6}“Jury’s Verdict Is ‘Not Guilty,’” 1.

\textsuperscript{7}“Local and Otherwise,” 4.

\textsuperscript{8}“Lynched the Brute,” 1.

\textsuperscript{9}“Blacks Refuse to Touch Body,” 1.
ceived as such—might bring a similar fate upon themselves. Ida Wells demonstrated this first-hand, as she was forced to flee Memphis for her safety.

Local media treatment also changed in subtle—and not-so-subtle—ways between 1884 and 1911. In the lead-up to the 1884 Owensboro lynching, the *Messenger* never once questioned May’s presumed guilt, and the editors seemed to eagerly anticipate the impending eventuality of a mob. Following the lynching, the newspaper commented: “Whilst all good citizens regret the outbreak of mob spirit in the community, still the feeling is that the negro deserved the fate he met, and the only real sorrow that is felt is over the death of Jailer Lucas...”

Reporting standards had evidently changed little by 1897. To see that the local press once again refused to embrace the American judicial principle of “innocent until proven guilty,” and that they blatantly incited mob action in Hawesville, one need look no further than the two Owensboro papers’ headlines from the day the Raymond Bushrod story broke. The *Inquirer* announced: “A Fiendish Crime: A Big Negro Brute Commits a Rape on Maggie Roberts”\(^\text{12}\); and the *Messenger* declared: “Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute.”\(^\text{13}\) The *Messenger* concluded that “mob law is bad,” but it nonetheless dusted off the same old tired justifications that had been used for decades of white South-

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\(^{10}\)“An Attempt At Rape,” 4.

\(^{11}\)“A Bloody, Brutal Mob,” 4.

\(^{12}\)“A Fiendish Crime,” 1.

\(^{13}\)“Lynching Is Too Good For This Black Brute,” 1.
erners to condone lynchings. The paper likened Bushrod’s murder to the preemptive killing of a dangerous wild animal.\textsuperscript{14}

By 1911, however, local press coverage had become somewhat more racially sensitive—or at least more committed to advocating the rule of law. In the write-up of the Livermore lynching, the \textit{Inquirer} was much less inflammatory than it had been in previous decades. The newspaper did not endorse the work of the lynchers, nor did it offer any rationalizations for mob violence.\textsuperscript{15} “The better element of citizens of McLean county [sic] deeply deplored the action of the mob and were strong in their calls for the indictment of the members of the lawless band,” pointed out the \textit{Messenger}.\textsuperscript{16} When the alleged mob participants were acquitted, the newspaper called it “a complete surprise,” commenting that the prosecution had built a “strong case.”\textsuperscript{17}

The national–and to a somewhat lesser extent, statewide–press proved to be much more socially progressive on the issue of racial violence than the local newspapers throughout this period. After the 1884 Owensboro lynching, the \textit{New York Herald} urged Daviess County authorities to “capture and punish every man of that mob.”\textsuperscript{18} The \textit{Chicago News}, only half jokingly recommended: “It is about time to build a stone wall
around Kentucky, and appoint wardens and overseers for the multitude inside.”19 The Louisville Courier-Journal harshly criticized Owensboroans for the lynching, arguing that there was no excuse for mobs. However, somewhat inconsistently, the Courier went on to blame the Commonwealth’s slow and ineffective legal system for precipitating such incidents.20

In the wake of the Hawesville lynching in 1897, the national and statewide press offered very little editorial comment. For the most part, they simply reported the facts. Both the New York Times21 and The Chicago Tribune writers seemed amazed by the community-wide support that had accompanied the lynching.22 The Louisville and Lexington papers provided balanced, even-handed accounts for the most part, however, the Courier-Journal referred to Bushrod as a “negro ravisher.”23 So, while the state press may not have offered outright support for lynching, their lexicon helped to perpetuate a culture in which racial violence could flourish.

In 1911, The New York Times made no apologies for harshly condemning the citizenry and leadership of Livermore, in light of the brutal murder of Will Potter. Its editors sarcastically speculated:

According to the inevitable report, efforts are making in Livermore to discover who it was that devised and took part in this original

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22. “Negro Lynched In Kentucky,” 5.
23. “A Rope And Willing Hands and Judge Lynch’s Court Was Over,” 1.
and ingenious flouting of the law. Later, no doubt, we shall hear that the efforts, though energetic and persistent, were without result. 24

Legal action—or lack thereof—was another important barometer of progress in the anti-lynching struggle. Progress can be seen in the coroner’s inquest process through the years. In the 1884 Owensboro lynching, the coroner’s jury ruled unanimously that Dick May had died “at the hands of persons unknown.” 25 The 1897 Hawesville jury reached the same verdict, however, one member of the panel dissented, protesting that a “sufficient effort” had not been made to identify the mob’s leadership. 26 Finally, in the 1911 Livermore lynching, the case actually went to a full court trial. Even though the lynching suspects were acquitted, four jurors reportedly originally favored voting for conviction. Although ultimately meaningless, these indictments were a significant step in the right direction. 27

While examining these local lynchings, one might ask an obvious—and valid—question: Why rehash dark tales of days long since past? In their recent book *Rivers of Kentucky*, David and Lalie Dick use the Commonwealth’s streams as backdrops in recounting folk tales of the inhabitants who made their lives along their banks. The Dicks drift down the Green River to early twentieth-century Livermore in one chapter. They tell the story of the brutal Livermore lynching, but their search for living testimony turns

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up empty-handed. “No one is in sight at the houses occupying the spot where the hellish thing happened [in 1911],” write the Dicks. “The decision is not to knock on doors. Maybe we’re cowardly. Maybe we wonder what will be accomplished by asking old questions. We move on.”

Yet much can be accomplished by asking old questions. These three lynchings were tragic chapters in the annals of western Kentucky, of the entire Commonwealth, and of the United States, but they must not be forgotten. They offer valuable lessons for today’s society. “Centuries of judicial prejudice and mob violence are not erased quickly,” writes George Wright. “Within our society the dangers still remain, dormant perhaps, but present nevertheless. If we understand the past evils, and are reminded of them, perhaps such evils will stay as they should be, behind in the past.”

Philip Dray calls lynching “the last great skeleton in our nation’s closet.” He rhetorically asks: “Is it possible for white America to really understand blacks’ distrust of the legal system, their fears of racial profiling and the police, without understanding how cheap a black life was for so long a time in our nation’s history?” “Lynching was an undeniable part of daily life, as distinctly American as baseball games and church suppers,” he notes. He argues that “lynching was not some twisted aberration in Southern

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29 Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 305.

30 Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, cover flap.

31 Ibid., 11.

32 Ibid., 17.
life, but a symptom of a much larger malady.” It “was simply the most sensational manifestation of an animosity for black people . . . ingrained in all of white society, its objective nothing less than the continued subordination of blacks at any cost.”

In explaining his interest in broaching the lynching topic, Orlando Patterson says:

I explore it not only because it is one of those collective traumas that, like the Nazi Holocaust, our humanity demands we never forget but because nothing better demonstrates just how far this nation has come in its unfinished journey toward becoming the first genuinely multiethnic society among the great powers of the world.

Christopher Waldrep also cautions observers against viewing southern history as “a sideshow to the main events in American history.” He suggests that the South may be more representative than is recognized after first glimpse. Southerners’ “history of doubt about law reflected a skepticism common to all America, perhaps central to the national character.”

Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck sum up the curious phenomenon of lynching in this way:

This was an extraordinary period of American history, during which ordinary folks did unspeakable things. They were not monsters who temporarily assumed the persona of southern whites. They were the town barber, the local blacksmith, and even the county sheriff. Clearly, they must have been swept along by very strong social forces to feel justified in committing more than two thousand atrocities against their black neighbors.

33Ibid., 15.
34Patterson, Rituals of Blood, 172-173.
35Waldrep, Roots of Disorder, 5.
36Tolnay and Beck, A Festival of Violence, 257.
In his recent book, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America*, historian James H. Madison examines a 1930 lynching in Marion, Indiana, about four and a half hours northeast of Owensboro. Madison notes that the main point of his work is to attempt to understand racism—what he calls our country’s “greatest tragedy and mystery.”\(^{37}\) He emphasizes that his study is at heart about the choices that ordinary people make—“about humans doing terrible and cowardly things to others and humans doing generous and courageous things, about violence and justice denied, and about memories suppressed and memories revived.”\(^{38}\)

All of the aforementioned elements are at work in these three western Kentucky lynchings. For the most part the law enforcement officers bravely sought to protect the accused black men and avert lynch mobs. There are not the passive or readily complicit lawmen that are described in many tales of Southern lynchings, offering only token resistance to approaching mobs.

In Owensboro, police officer G. F. Reynolds tracked down Dick May and “hurried him off to jail before others knew of the arrest.”\(^{39}\) Jailer William Lucas hid May inside the courthouse and on the roof of the jail to protect him, and ultimately sacrificed his very life protecting his prisoner when the armed mob arrived.\(^{40}\) Hawesville police offi-
cers hid Raymond Bushrod in a local cemetery overnight for his safety. They also acted bravely when the mob began to storm the jail. According to one account, they attempted to trick the mob into thinking that Bushrod had escaped. Deputy Hancock County Sheriff Miles Fuqua tried to spirit Bushrod out of town in the midst of the confusion. The actions of the Livermore lawmen are the most ambiguous. Marshal Virgil Stateler and his deputies detained Will Potter inside the town opera house, because they claimed the jail was “a flimsy structure.” While his justification would later be questioned, Stateler did at the very least make some safeguards to protect Potter. He barred the door of the building, kept the theater in darkness, and hid his prisoner in a rear dressing room.

Most of the local elected officials also performed admirably under duress. Daviess County Judge-Executive Atchison appointed a “special bailiff” and deputized several local residents to assist Jailer Lucas in guarding May during the week after the farmhand’s arrest, but withdrew the reinforcements three days before the lynching. One glaring inconsistency remains, however: On the evening after May’s lynching fearing an uprising within the African American community, Judge Atchison attempted to telegraph the governor to request National Guard troops; however, he had made no such petition in the days leading up to the mob that murdered May. Hancock County Judge-Executive

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41 “Lynched the Brute,” 1.
42 “In Daylight,” 1.
44 “Mob Lynches Negro Over At Livermore,” 1.
John Adair consulted with Circuit Judge Owen in Daviess County to discuss the tense situation in Hawesville, and Adair planned to sneak Bushrod out of town by train. Liv-ermore Mayor V. B. Morton personally aided Marshal Stateler in guarding Will Potter at the opera house. However, Morton did not seem to have much sympathy for Potter after his violent demise. Stopping short of offering endorsement of the lynchers’ work, the mayor nonetheless seemed to be handing them a backhanded justification, making sure to refer to Potter as “an undesirable negro citizen.” To Morton’s credit, though, he did testify for the prosecution in the trials of the accused Livermore lynchers.

Local jurists—like their brethren at the federal level—proved to be some of the most consistent defenders of the rule of law in these cases. Daviess Circuit Court Judge Lucius Little implored grand jurors to indict participants in the Owensboro mob that killed May. Little announced: “. . . The law guaranteed to [May], as to every other citizen, the right to be tried and convicted before being punished. . . .” Hancock County Attorney E. C. Vance did not seek a grand jury investigation into the Hawesville mob, stating that it would be useless given the unlikelihood of any convictions. In the aftermath of the Livermore lynching, McLean Circuit Court Judge T. F. Birkhead presented what was called “the most vigorous instructions ever given to a grand jury in Western Kentucky,”

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46.*In Daylight,* 1.

47.*Negro Mobbed By Three Hundred Livermore Men,* 1.

48.*Livermore Mayor Makes Statement,* 2.

49.*Taylor Had A Shot Gun,* 1.

50.*Will the Mob Be Punished,* 4.

51.*In Daylight,* 1.
beseeching jurors to indict the men responsible for the atrocity.\textsuperscript{52} When a dozen and a half alleged mob participants were indicted, Commonwealth’s Attorney Ben Ringo and McLean County Attorney Richard Alexander constructed solid cases against the accused, to the extent that the \textit{Owensboro Daily Inquirer} remarked that the jury verdicts of innocence came as “a great surprise.”\textsuperscript{53}

As Dray has argued, perhaps ordinary citizens were the key players in the lynching equation. Dray asserts that the tacit approval of “the better people” of a community was essential for mob violence to persist. He portrays these individuals as awaking in the morning to hear the news of a lynching the previous night and muttering to themselves, “Well, such things must be, mustn’t they? Perhaps now we’ll have some peace and quiet.” To Dray, and many other lynching scholars, it was this societal element—and not the actual perpetrators—that enabled the practice of lynching to continue for so long.\textsuperscript{54}

In these stories white citizens—mostly men—band together to take the lives of three individual black men. A masked private mob in Owensboro fatally shot Jailer Lucas, then hanged May from a tree on the courthouse lawn.\textsuperscript{55} The mass mob at Hawesville also hanged Bushrod on the courthouse square, but they did their work in the light of day and made no attempt to conceal their identities. Among its ranks was “a country woman”

\textsuperscript{52}“Return Indictments for Eighteen Alleged Members of Livermore Mob,” 1.
\textsuperscript{53}“Another On Trial,” 1.
\textsuperscript{54}Dray, \textit{At the Hands of Persons Unknown}, ix-x.
\textsuperscript{55}A Bloody, Brutal Mob,” 4.
who assumed a prominent role. In Livermore, an unmasked mass mob stormed the opera house to execute Potter. According to some sources, the mob conducted the event like a sordid theater performance.

Friends and relatives of the victims of the alleged African-American criminals were also present at each of the lynchings. Sod Kelly’s neighbors were widely believed to have been among the individuals who rode into Owensboro and murdered Lucas and May. Maggie Roberts’ father was at the hanging of Bushrod in Hawesville, but he reportedly did not participate. Clarence Mitchell’s brother Lawrence was one of the supposed ringleaders of the Livermore mob, along with Clarence’s pool hall companion Clifton Schroeter and his brother Jesse.

In Daviess County, Sod Kelly’s wife hid his firearms from him before informing him of May’s alleged assault on their invalid daughter, so as to prevent him using them in anger. Jailer Lucas’ family also acted courageously to aid him in trying to save the life of May. Lucas’ teenage son Tommy backed up his father during the standoff with the mob, firing a half dozen shots from an upstairs window. Tommy and Mrs. Lucas also refused to give into the mob’s demands for the keys to the jail after Jailer Lucas had been

56.“In Daylight,” 1.

57.“Mob Lynches Negro Over At Livermore,” 1.

58.“Lynched On Stage; Shots Came From Pit,” 1.

59.“A Bloody, Brutal Mob,” 4.

60.“A Rope And Willing Hands and Judge Lynch’s Court Was Over,” 1.

61.“Return Indictments for Eighteen Alleged Members of Livermore Mob,” 1.

62.“An Attempt At Rape,” 4.
wounded. They would only do so when Dr. Todd convinced them that the ruckus the mob was making with the sledgehammer on the jail door was dangerous to the jailer’s fragile health.63

Ordinary citizens played a much larger role in the Hawesville lynching. Four “country boys” located Bushrod after his alleged assault and temporarily preserved his life by concealing him in their wagon on their journey to the county jail. The crowd of more than 500 that later gathered at the jailhouse did not all participate in the actual lynching of Bushrod, however, they actively cheered on the mob. Men, women, and children of all races and ages shouted their encouragement and approval.64 Unlike many of his fellow citizens, Hawesville resident George Newman refused to condone the work of the mob. Newman did not sign the coroner’s verdict, believing that the jury could have done better than rubber stamp the proceedings with a “hands of persons unknown” ruling.65

After the Livermore lynching, residents behaved in contradictory ways. Many local citizens seemed to condemn the work of the mob, until indictments against their neighbors were handed down. Then they seemed to go silent.66 Various townspeople, however, did serve as witnesses for the prosecution in the court trial that ensued. The testimonies of some of the ordinary residents proved damming to the alleged lynchers,


64 “Lynched The Brute,” 1; “A Rope and Willing Hands and Judge Lynch’s Court Was Over,” 1.

65 “In Daylight,” 1.

66 “Murder Is The Charge Made,” 1.
however, evidently the jurors were either not convinced—or not willing to open their eyes to the fact that their neighbors could be the “monsters” Tolnay and Beck describe.\footnote{“The Alibi Was Weak,” 1.}

Lynching scholars have frequently asserted that religion (fundamental Christianity in particular) was one of the social forces which fueled the phenomenon of racial violence. German-American theologian and social commentator Reinhold Niebuhr noted in the early twentieth century, “If there were a drunken orgy somewhere, I would bet ten to one a church member was not in it. . . . But if there were a lynching I would bet ten to one a church member was in it.”\footnote{Robert Moats Miller, “The Protestant Churches and Lynching, 1919-1939,” \textit{Journal of Negro History} 42 (1957): 118.} Indeed there have historically been clear links drawn between organized religion and racial violence.

In 1929, Walter White, who would go on to become the influential executive secretary of the NAACP, published his groundbreaking examination of lynching \textit{Rope and Faggot}. In \textit{Rope and Faggot}, White presented data suggesting that lynchings were more prevalent in areas with higher percentages of fundamentalist Christians in the community.\footnote{White, \textit{Rope and Faggot}, 247-248.} However, Orlando Patterson points out that “these data do not stand up to modern statistical analysis.” Patterson, though, does find a strong link between fundamentalist pastors and Ku Klux Klan involvement.\footnote{Patterson, \textit{Rituals of Blood}, 305.} Author Wyn C. Wade estimated that there were approximately 40,000 fundamentalist clergymen involved in the Klan in the 1920s.\footnote{Ibid., 202.}
Charles Reagan Wilson has done an in-depth study into the unholy marriage between Southern secular society and evangelical Christianity following the Civil War. In *Baptized in Blood*, Wilson calls this marriage “the religion of the Lost Cause.” This “religion” became even more significant following the Confederacy’s surrender at Appomattox. “The nation was never resurrected,” writes Wilson, “but it survived as a sacred presence, a holy ghost haunting the spirits and actions of post-Civil War Southerners.” Wilson argues that after Southerners’ dream of a separate political identity died, they hitched their wagon to a cultural-religious identity in which they viewed themselves as a morally superior “chosen people.”

In his essay “Feast of Blood,” noted Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson examines a genre of mass lynchings that he labels as pseudo-religious sacrificial rituals. Patterson argues that the intersection of pervasive Christian symbolism and a deeply ingrained cultural fear and hatred of African-Americans within Southern society made the region ripe for this barbarity. He demonstrates how the language, symbolism, and even the practice itself was not so terribly different from primitive civilizations who partook in human sacrifice. The South’s “culture of honor and violence” was a trait it shared with these earlier societies.

Civil rights leader Leslie Dunbar once lamented: “The greatest of all sinning was not that white men killed and raped and cheated Negroes. . . . The mortal sin was that white men united to defend this right, as a way of life, and did so in the name of their

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Indeed, it is tragic that many individuals who supposedly held Christian beliefs, blatantly disregarded the “Golden Rule” of their religion–to love their neighbors as they loved themselves.

The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10 is instructive. In this parable the supposedly “religious” neighbor–a Jewish priest–passes by his wounded countryman on the road. However, the good neighbor proves to be a man who is considered a born adversary of the wounded man–a hated Samaritan. In much the same way, many of the “religious” zealots of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South treated their neighbors–African Americans–likewise. So-called “religious” white Southerners (many of them ordained ministers) “passed by on the other side” of the road when they saw the plight of their persecuted neighbors. Truly spiritual Christians who lived out their beliefs, rather than simply paying them lip service, did make a difference.

The two Kentucky governors who led the Commonwealth while antilynching laws were enacted by the General Assembly, William O. Bradley and Edwin Morrow, were also–and I do not think, coincidentally–guided by their spiritual convictions. In an address before the Anti-Mob and Lynch Law Association in 1898, Governor Bradley noted: “The commission of crime to punish crime can find no apologist in Christian civilization.” Governor Edwin Morrow, Bradley’s nephew, earned a reputation for fighting mob violence with his handling of the Will Lockett affair in Lexington in 1920, where he mobilized state troopers in what has been called “the first suppression of a lynch mob by


local and state officials in the South.”\textsuperscript{76} Morrow was an outspoken member of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. He designated an “Interracial Sunday” annual day of observance in Kentucky, urging white Christians to reflect upon the plight of their African-American neighbors.\textsuperscript{77} In 1928, the Federal Council of Churches (composed of major Protestant denominations) followed Kentucky’s lead, establishing “Race Relations Sunday” on February 12, to remind Christians to pray to end racial violence.\textsuperscript{78}

Kentucky governors would call out the National Guard on numerous occasions in the 1920s to protect prisoners from lynch mobs.\textsuperscript{79} Occurrences like the Will Lockett episode were beacons of hope in an otherwise dark landscape. They were bold and positive steps on the road to “justice for all,” but the overall picture was nonetheless bleak. Klotter comments:

\begin{quote}
Yet, when the counting was done, the actions of the governors, the anti-lynching laws, the occasional protection from mobs, and the cases where justice did prevail, all paled in comparison to the toll extracted from blacks by lynchings, legal lynchings, beatings, forced removals, and the like. With the state ranking high in violence directed toward blacks, it is little wonder that the state’s black population fell so drastically in the early years of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

Why did lynchings steadily decrease as the twentieth century wore on? Tolnay and Beck argue that there was a fundamental change in Southern society by the middle of

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{76} Klotter, \textit{Portrait in Paradox}, 69.
\item\textsuperscript{77} Wright, \textit{Racial Violence in Kentucky}, 12.
\item\textsuperscript{78} Miller, “The Protestant Churches and Lynching,” 124.
\item\textsuperscript{79} Wright, “Lexington’s Suppression,” 266-279.
\item\textsuperscript{80} Klotter, \textit{Portrait in Paradox}, 70.
\end{itemize}
the century. Scholars have often credited stronger law enforcement and the “enlightenment” of the press in the South with the demise of lynching. However, Tolnay and Beck view these developments as mere “mechanisms through which more fundamental social forces operated.” They see the Great Migration (of African Americans from the South in the 1910s and 1920s) as the crucible in the history of racial violence. This mass exodus of “cheap and pliant labor” threatened to undermine the economy of the entire region. As time progressed, Southerners also realized that their harsh treatment of blacks ran 180 degrees counter to their hopes for “economic investment and integration into external markets.” Simply stated, lynching had become an unsightly black eye to southern whites. “It had become an anachronism from an earlier era,” write Tolnay and Beck, “confined to fringe elements of southern white society who were themselves anachronistic.”

By 1937, Gallup polls revealed that most Southerners were in favor of classifying lynching as a federal crime. “This shift in public opinion,” states George C. Rable, “may well have had a significant impact on lynching in the South. . . .” Writing about the state of Georgia, W. Fitzhugh Brundage noted that as the twentieth century progressed, “the defenders of mob violence moved toward the periphery of southern society, no longer able to claim the unquestioned allegiance of the white masses.”

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ollowed the same path. The Commonwealth would see only nine lynchings after 1920, with the last official lynching recorded in January 1934.\textsuperscript{84}

British religion scholar Frances Young has commented that “a good deal of evil is the result of human failure to create community.”\textsuperscript{85} Another Englishman, Sir Edmund Burke (1729-1797) noted, “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”\textsuperscript{86} As these western Kentucky lynchings have illustrated, it took more than just a handful of vengeful thugs to carry out racial murder on such a grand scale. Ordinary citizens who supported the violence–either outright or by their silence–helped the practice of lynching to endure well into the twentieth century.

Since 1792, the official Kentucky state seal has borne the image of two men shaking hands, encircled by the motto “United We Stand, Divided We Fall.”\textsuperscript{87} Perhaps citizens of the Bluegrass State should have taken this motto to heart. For nearly a century, from the 1860s through the middle of the twentieth century, the specter of racial violence hung like a dark cloud over the Commonwealth, and indeed over the entire Southern United States. A Kentucky divided would never realize its full social, economic, or political potential. The legacy of lynching and violence stymied much of Kentucky’s potential progress and deeply divided its population. For decades Kentuckians refused to see

\textsuperscript{84}Wright, \textit{Racial Violence in Kentucky}, 322-323.

\textsuperscript{85}Patterson, \textit{Rituals of Blood}, 231.


\textsuperscript{87}“Kentucky Symbols,” \textit{Kentucky.gov} \textless http://gov.state.ky.us/symbols.htm \textgreater (24 March 2003).
that coexistence and cooperation among neighbors—both black and white—was a major harbinger of their own success.
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Map created by Woody Maglinger.
The Daviess County Courthouse in Owensboro was the site of the 1884 Dick May lynching and concurrent killing of Jailer William Lucas. The county jail and jailer’s residence, which by the time of this turn-of-the-century photograph had been relocated, sat to the far right of this picture. *Photo courtesy Owensboro: The City on the Yellow Banks* by Lee and Aloma Dew.
This diagram of the Daviess County Courthouse Square appeared in the Owensboro *Semi-Weekly Messenger* on July 15, 1884. The newspaper sought to provide its readers with a detailed layout of the site of Dick May’s lynching and Jailer William Lucas’ murder. *Diagram courtesy of the Owensboro Semi-Weekly Messenger.*
The Hancock County Jail, where Raymond Bushrod was held, stood across Main Cross Street from the Courthouse in Hawesville. It was reportedly built with slave labor in 1854, "made from hand hewn stone," and it featured just two cells—both on the lower level. It was demolished in 1977. "Old Hancock County Jail," original painting by Gary Akers.
Thinking that Raymond Bushrod had escaped from the jail, “a score of [Hawesville] men broke into the Presbyterian church looking for him,” according to the Owensboro Daily Inquirer. Sitting two blocks west of the jail, the structure was built in the 1860s. “Old Presbyterian Church,” original painting by Rex Robinson.
The lawn of the Hancock County Courthouse in Hawesville was the site of the 1897 lynching of Raymond Bushrod. Visible in this picture are several trees that could have been utilized for the hanging, as well as the fence to which the mob tied the rope. “Hancock County Courthouse,” original painting by Robert A. Powell.
This two-story building on the corner of 1st and Main streets in Livermore housed Whitaker’s opera house, site of the 1911 Will Potter lynching. During its history, it served as a grocery, mill, movie theater, and even skating rink. It was torn down in 1940. *Photo courtesy Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer.*
This photograph of Livermore Police Chief V.P. Stateler (left) and Officer W.O. Peak (right) appeared on the front page of the April 25, 1911 *Owensboro Daily Messenger*. After Stateler had arrested Will Potter, he decided to hold his prisoner in a dressing room within Whitaker’s theater. The marshal claimed that he did so because the town jail was “a flimsy structure,” although others would later charge more sinister motives. *Photo courtesy Owensboro Daily Messenger.*
This illustration of the 1911 Will Potter lynching in Livermore appeared on the cover of Paris, France’s *Le Petit Journal* on May 7, 1911. It was in full-color, and while the setting looks more reminiscent of Carnegie Hall than the country theater it actually was, the graphic drawing nonetheless powerfully conveys the brutality of the lynching. *Illustration courtesy of the Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.*
Come the Grand Jury, and the foreman of the Grand Jury, in the presence of all the Grand Jury and in open Court, returned to the Court the following indictment viz:-

The Commonwealth of Kentucky, Plaintiff

vs. No.1771 Murder)

Lawrence Mitchell, Clifton Schroeter, Defendants
and Jasse Schroeter,

Indictment is ordered filed, and a bench warrant for each defendant is ordered thereon. Whereupon, came the Sheriff of McLean County, and delivered in open Court the aforesaid defendants, and the bond of each was fixed by the Court at $1000.00, and defendants failing to give bail, are committed to the custody of the jailor.

The Commonwealth of Kentucky, Plaintiff

No. 1772. Accessory to Murder
Bob Hayes, John Fielden, Wm. H. Coghill, 
Leslie Wright, Sam Colburn, John W. Taylor 
Edd Haney, George Gephart, W. N. Davis, 
Clarence Robards, Ira Coghill, Ellis Thornsberry 
Ellis Burton, Cecil Jarvis, and Tom Dabner, Defendants

The indictment is ordered filed, and bench warrant for each defendant is ordered. Whereupon, the Sheriff delivered in open Court the following named defendants, viz:- W. N. Davis, Ira Coghill, Ellis Thornsberry, Cecil Jarvis, Sam Colburn, John Fielden, Tom Dabner, George Gephart, Wm. H. Coghill, and the Court fixed the bond of each defendant herein at $500.00 whereupon W. N. Davis and Cecil Jarvis executed in open Court bonds for their appearance at the October term of this Court, which bond was approved by the Court, the other named defendants in custody, were committed to jail in default of bail.

The official indictment of the 18 alleged Livermore lynchers—a truly historic occasion in the New South. From McLean County, KY Circuit Court Order Book V, page 42 (May 12, 1911).
The classical-style McLean County Courthouse, built in 1908, sits at the corner of 2nd and Main streets in downtown Calhoun. The criminal trials of the accused Livermore lynchers were held on the second-floor Circuit Court room in August 1911. *Photo courtesy Green River Area Development District.*
The operators of the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph Company, located at Second and Hill streets in downtown Livermore, work the switchboard in a photograph from the early 1900s. Despite being called to testify for the defense in the trial of the alleged 1911 Livermore lynchers, Cumberland manager J.R. Mosley (seated far left), “made a good witness for the prosecution” according to the Owensboro Daily Inquirer, as he stated that Lawrence Mitchell visited his office a mere five minutes after the lynching. *Photo courtesy of McLean County Pictoral History (Taylor Publishing Company, 1992).*