

Lynching

American Mob Murder in Global Perspective

ROBERT W. THURSTON



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Miami University, Ohio, USA



ASHGATE

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LYNCHING

*For Tom Kofron,
artist, craftsman, raconteur, intellectual, friend*

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List of Abbreviations

<i>AC</i>	<i>Atlanta Constitution</i>
<i>AJ</i>	<i>Atlanta Journal</i>
<i>CIC</i>	Commission on Interracial Cooperation
<i>GA</i>	Georgia Archives
<i>HAL</i>	Historical American Lynching Project, directed by Elizabeth Hines and Eliza Steelwater, http://people.uncw.edu/hinese/HAL/HAL%20Web%20Page.htm . Organized by county, then year, within each state covered (which does not include Texas or Virginia).
<i>HCB</i>	Historical Census Browser, organized by year of the census, nation, state, and county. http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html . Data are available on many demographic and economic categories, although these unfortunately changed frequently from census to census.
<i>HMD</i>	Hugh Manson Dorsey Collection, Atlanta History Center
<i>JCL</i>	<i>Jackson</i> [Mississippi] <i>Clarion-Ledger</i>
<i>LG</i>	<i>Lexington</i> [Virginia] <i>Gazette</i>
<i>NAACP</i>	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
<i>NOP</i>	<i>New Orleans Picayune</i>
<i>NYT</i>	<i>New York Times</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Valdosta</i> [Georgia] <i>Times</i>

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Introduction

On the evening of May 16, 1918, someone shot into the Georgia home of a young white farmer, Hampton Smith, killing him instantly. Smith lived in Brooks County, on the Florida state line. Mid-May is already summer in the area, and the humid air lies heavily on the land day and night. Air conditioning was several decades away, so the attacker fired through an open window. The same person, perhaps with several other men, also wounded Smith's pregnant wife, Bertha. Somehow she managed to escape and make her way several miles to the nearest neighbor.

A report quickly spread among the whites of Brooks County, part of Georgia's wiregrass and long-leaf pine region, that a group of black men had murdered Hampton Smith and repeatedly raped Bertha. The local white population exploded in fury. Poses began to search for Sidney Johnson, an African American who had worked on Hampton's farm, and his alleged fellow murderers and rapists. Within five days, white mobs killed up to 11 black people.

To define lynching is no simple matter, as Chapter 1 will show. But in essence the word means that a group, acting with a goal of service to the public, puts someone to death outside the bounds of the law. How death is delivered does not matter; mobs have used ropes, guns, clubs, fists, fire, and probably many other means of ending their victims' lives. Every lynching is grim; even the simplest hanging can be agonizingly slow, choking the victim to death over a half-hour or longer.

The South Georgia episode featured some of the most grotesque mob murders recorded in America. One involved the death on May 18 of Hayes Turner, an African American suspected of plotting to kill Hampton Smith. Turner "was taken from the jail at Quitman by Sheriff Wade and the Clerk of the County Court, Roland Knight by name, for the purpose of being carried to Moultrie for safe-keeping." A mob caught up with the officers, took Turner from them, and killed him. "He hung on the tree between Saturday and Monday and was then cut down by the county convicts."¹ But the worst single stroke of violence was still ahead.

¹ Walter White, "Memorandum for Governor Dorsey from Walter F. White, July 10, 1918," NAACP Papers, Group I C, box 3-353.

According to a report by Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), after Hayes Turner's death his wife Mary said publicly that he had nothing to do with Smith's murder. She swore that if she learned the names of mob members, "she would have warrants sworn out against them."² These words only further inflamed local whites. Eight months pregnant, Mary Turner was caught by a mob on May 19, strung upside down, and burned to death. A member of the mob cut the fetus out of her womb; it gave two cries before a man crushed its head with his boot. Hundreds of bullets were then fired into Turner's corpse, "until it was no longer possible to recognize it as the body of a human being."³ Mary Turner was lynched during World War I, at a time when American troops arrived in large numbers in Europe to battle for "civilization" against "barbarism."

As the South Georgia killings continued, Sidney Johnson died in a shoot-out with police in Valdosta, seat of neighboring Lowndes County. City Chief of Police Dampier, Patrolman Dampier, and Hampton's father Dixon entered a house where Johnson was hiding. He shot at them from a back room, wounding the two policemen. All three whites returned fire, managing to kill Johnson. Indicative of the hysteria that followed Hampton Smith's murder, a crowd formed and began to shoot at the house while the police were still inside. "They expressed wonder that they escaped from the building with their lives," according to a local newspaper.⁴

Men from Brooks County, "irate and indignant people who had for almost one week trailed the murderer and rapist day and night," made up most of the mob around Johnson's hiding place. Now they served up more of their version of justice: "The dead body was literally riddled with bullets ... It was in truth shot to pieces." The people from Brooks took what was left of Johnson's corpse to the town of Barney, near the Smith farms, "for the purpose of showing to the people there that the brutish author of the terrible crime had paid in full the penalty."⁵ White rage remained high, and five other black men died before it was sated.⁶

Today any memory of the story has almost vanished from the scene. Only one local monument relates to the slaughter, an obelisk marking the grave of

² Ibid.

³ Walter White, *The Lynchings of May, 1918 in Brooks and Lowndes Counties Georgia: An Investigation Made & Published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (New York: NAACP, 1918), 2. A description of the body is in his "Memorandum," 4–5.

⁴ *VT*, May 25, 1918.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ White, "Memorandum," 1–2.

Hampton Smith at a rural Baptist church.⁷ Mary Turner died on the banks of Little Creek, ten miles northwest of Quitman, the seat of Brooks County. The place is usually quiet now, the water a sluggish gray-green, the lush foliage all around barely stirring. It is nearly impossible to imagine a lynch mob forming there today, even on the charges of murder and the rape of a pregnant woman. What happened in the South to create scenes like those of 1918, and then what changed to make them all but disappear?

This book will not adhere to a common interpretation of American lynching offered in recent decades: that it was the ultimate tool of whites in keeping blacks down.⁸ This view, in what is far more than a coincidence, represents more or less the opposite of older, southern apologies for lynching, which portrayed it as the unfortunate but necessary response of the superior white

⁷ I am grateful to Professor John Crowley, Valdosta State University, for help in locating sites of the May 1918 lynchings.

⁸ See, among numerous examples, Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Charlotte, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 1, 8, and passim; Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5; Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith repeat conventional wisdom on the “functions” of lynching in keep black people down in *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 15. Popular treatments like the CNN documentary *The Noose: An American Nightmare*, first aired in November 2007, take the same approach. Other works in the same vein are Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 18–19; Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002), xi; and Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), x. And see Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black–White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 189 where lynching, along with rioting, is described as “essentially a new tool for the control of blacks”; he repeats essentially the same idea in “Wounds not Scars: Lynching, the National Conscience, and the American Historian,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 4 (March 1997), 1228; readers’ reports on the article printed with it criticize it on various grounds, but not on the issue of lynching as racial control; Ann Field Alexander maintains that “lynching was, after all, an extraordinarily effective means of racial intimidation.” The practice was “arbitrary in its choice of victims”: “Like an Evil Wind: The Roanoke Riot of 1893 and the Lynching of Thomas Smith,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100 (April 1992), 199; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), ix–x, 131–3; Michael Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 139; and Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 30–32. Shapiro maintains that Frederick Douglass “demonstrated that the basic aim of lynchers was to render blacks powerless through disfranchisement,” 32.

race to brutal violence by the inferior black people. That earlier presentation was based in part on a malignant understanding of Reconstruction, 1865–1877, as rule by corrupt, ignorant, and vicious “negroes” and their venal or naive white supporters. Until the “revisionist” school of American historians attacked the standard interpretation of Reconstruction in the 1960s,⁹ it stood as proof that African Americans had to be segregated from whites and kept in a subordinate position. Blacks with political power were dangerous: they might dream of “social equality,” the southern euphemism for sexual intercourse and marriage between the races. Worse, the “negroes” might rape white women at the slightest opportunity.

Serious historians now reject the old view of Reconstruction. Instead, the period is rightly described as filled with white violence against blacks. Ultimately, this bloodshed became the world’s most successful terrorist operation; by the early 1870s, African Americans were driven out of major roles in southern government and political life in most areas, although legal segregation and disfranchisement of the black population took several more decades to complete.

When historians finally cleaned up the image of African Americans in Reconstruction and depicted them largely as the period’s victims, not aggressors, it was probably natural to fill in the rest of the story by portraying white rule after 1877 as a system of complete dominance. Lynching then reversed polarity to become not a white response to black atrocity but a white mechanism to keep blacks down. The mob and the noose also became tied in the new interpretations to whites’ sexual anxiety, rooted in the suspicion that black people were richer in emotions, culture, and genitalia. First suggested by African American commentators in the 1890s, the emphasis on white sexual fear as essential background to mob violence in the US has remained a central theme in lynching studies.

Reversing the interpretation of major events, done often enough for other settings,¹⁰ does not serve to deepen understanding. One set of stereotypes and vast generalizations is replaced by their opposite, equally broad assertions. More than 40 years after the scenes of genuine African American heroes and white villains during the crucial years of the Civil Rights movement, the time is right

⁹ The first major effort to reinterpret Reconstruction was by the African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois: *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (Philadelphia: A. Saifer, 1935). But his book did not greatly affect mainstream, that is, white interpretations of Reconstruction until the 1960s.

¹⁰ See, for example, the way that Russian writers of fiction turned the official, positive images of Stalin produced while he was alive into completely negative pictures: Margaret C. Ziolkowski, *Literary Exorcisms of Stalinism: Russian Writers and the Soviet Past* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998).

to probe more deeply into the worst years of discrimination, 1880–1920. The cardboard whites of full-blown injustice narratives were not the only ones on the stage – and even the worst of the race-baiters had other sides to their personalities and took actions to stop lynching that call for careful review.

American imagination about the South, centered most vividly on lynching, has been dominated in recent decades by a “sense of moral outrage.”¹¹ Whites’ mistreatment of blacks, which did occur on a vast scale, is often presented as the only kind of interaction between the races. Lynching, illustrated by the worst cases of prolonged torture, becomes an unchanging phenomenon in which whites are painted as demons: “A rapid execution did not satisfy the emotional hunger of whites who insisted on prolonging and intensifying the taking of a life, not only to inflict a harsher penalty but also to send a more forceful message to the black community” about white supremacy. The few good whites in these narratives of horrors are those who realize their own race is evil. As one observer of a lynching put it, “I am a white man, but today is one day that I am certainly sorry that I am one. I am disgusted with my country.”¹²

This approach to southern collective murder is a “fire-and-damnation message” which continues to fight the battle of the 1960s revisionists. But that group succeeded in overthrowing the old view of Reconstruction long ago. Still, much scholarly work and virtually all popular images of lynching continue their monochromatic treatment of the South,¹³ which calls only for “whites to repent their evil deeds and break utterly with the past.”¹⁴

Yet other, less strident accounts of southern life and race relations have long been available. Decades ago, a prominent historian remarked that the region encompassed a “bewildering variety of human relations.” African

¹¹ Mark R. Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 9.

¹² Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: distributed by Random House, 1998), 299, 292.

¹³ For example, Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008). Another unrelentingly negative picture of southern race relations is Neal R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 25 and 207, among other pages. William Chafe argues that “sex and race have always interacted [in the US] in a vicious chemistry of power, privilege, and control.” He claims incorrectly that “most lynchings of black men in the 19th and early 20th century were justified by accusing black men of lusting after white women – even though there was little evidence that such attacks ever took place,” “Sex and Race: Guest Column,” *Duke Chronicle*, posted March 31, 2006; at <http://222.dukechronicle.com/home/index.cfm?event+displayArticl>, consulted November 29, 2007.

¹⁴ Schultz, *Rural Face*, 9.