



# Lynchings of Women in the United States

The Recorded Cases,  
1851–1946

Kerry  
Segrave

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# Preface

This book is about the lynching of women in America over the almost 100 years from 1851 to 1946. That period was dictated because of a lack of material outside of those dates. There have been no documented cases of women being lynched in America since 1946. No incidents appear to have been documented in the period 1800 to 1850.

For the purpose of this book, lynching is defined as the extrajudicial murder of someone by a mob (defined herein as three or more people) for any of a variety of reasons. Victims were sometimes taken out of jail cells or removed from the custody of law enforcement officials with justice denied or suborned. Often the lynching was to reinforce something vague and undefined — such as social norms. Often the lynching was to maintain the status quo as when whites lynched blacks to maintain and reinforce their position of power and dominance and what they saw as the inferiority of the black race. And most lynchings fell in that category. Almost all lynchings were white; about 78 percent of all victims were black.

In order for a case to be included in this book, it had to appear in one of several sources, the most important being the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's list or the lynching calendar available on the autopsy website. Other sources used were the various online newspaper databases such as the Proquest series of historical newspapers, which included the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, and the *Chicago Defender*, among others.

Also searched were the various state historical newspaper databases available online such as the Missouri State historical newspaper website and similar websites for Utah, Colorado, and others. Also used were individual newspapers online historically such as the *Brooklyn Eagle*. As well,

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the website newspaperarchives.com was searched. Search terms used included “woman lynched,” and “lynching of a woman.” Those terms were also reversed, and the words “female” and “girl” in the place of “woman” or “women” were searched. Also used were the terms “murder,” “mob violence,” “mob attacks” and “mobs” in conjunction with woman, women, girl, and female. The first two terms were the ones that produced the greatest number of hits, and turned out to be the best indicator of an actual case of lynching. For the remaining terms and words, most hits were simply noise.

The hits that were accurate did not produce a complete record of the cases, but led to specific information. Once a name, place and a date were found, those were used to fill out the case or get a little more information.

All incidents described as a lynching in the press accounts have been included in this book. That is, all the lynching incidents included herein have been defined as a lynching by someone other than I. While I have endeavored to include all lynchings of women that took place during the period 1851 through 1946, undoubtedly I have missed some.

All definitions produce certain problems and a few cases have been included that perhaps stretched the definitions somewhat. For example, there is no irrefutable proof that Beatrice and Laura Sims were lynched but the evidence points strongly to that conclusion. Peb Falls was found lynched days after the event. No witness was ever found and she may have been murdered by a single individual rather than a mob. However, the symbolism of her body dangling from a rope attached to a tree limb argued otherwise. Several incidents that appeared in the NAACP listing or in the lynching calendar could not be confirmed by me in any other source and so they are included herein as a simple, unexplained listing.



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To condemn and punish by lynch law was a practice that came to the USA in the late 1770s. In those early years the infliction of punishment was usually limited to such things as whipping, tarring and feathering, or the like. Fairly soon, though, to lynch someone meant to inflict only one type of punishment on the victim — capital punishment.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, volume 9, pp. 137–138) defined lynch law as the practice of inflicting summary punishment upon an offender, by a self-constituted court armed with no legal authority; but limited now to summary execution. According to the entry, the origin of the term had not been determined. It was often stated that the expression arose from the activities of Charles Lynch, a justice of the peace in Virginia who, in 1782, was indemnified by an act of the Virginia Assembly for having illegally fined and imprisoned certain Tories in 1780. However, a Mr. Albert Matthews was said to have shown there was no evidence to show Charles Lynch was ever concerned in acts such as those which from 1817 onward were designated as “Lynch’s law.” It was possible that the perpetrators of those acts may have claimed that in the infliction of punishment not sanctioned by the laws of the nation, they were following the example of Lynch; or there may have been some other man of that name who was an organizer of such activities. Some speculated the term was derived from the name of Lynch’s Creek in South Carolina, which was known to have been in 1768 a meeting place of the “Regulators,” a band of men whose objective was to supply what they perceived as lacking in the Carolinas, regular administration of criminal justice, and who committed many acts of violence on those suspected of “Toryism.”

As far as the OED was concerned, particulars supplied by A. Ellicott,

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along with other evidence, clearly established the fact that the originator of Lynch law was Captain William Lynch (1742–1820) of Pittsylvania in Virginia. According to Ellicott, that self-created judicial tribunal was first organized in the state of Virginia about the year 1776, with another piece of evidence giving the date definitely as 1780. According to the OED the first published appearances of the term “lynch law” came in 1811, then 1817 and then 1819, referring mostly to things that happened in the late 1700s. “The Lynch-men associated for the purpose of punishing crimes in a summary way without the tedious and technical forms of our courts of justice,” went the 1811 reference. Related terms such as “lynch,” “lyncher,” “lynch mob,” and “Judge Lynch” (as a general description of the practice) all made their first appearance in print in the mid to late 1830s. In the online historical newspaper database [newspaperarchive.com](http://newspaperarchive.com), which has at least some material going back to the end of the 1700s, the first appearances of such terms were in 1835 and 1836.

In the late 18th century, Pittsylvania County, Virginia, was plagued by criminals who could not be dealt with by the courts, which were too remote. That led to an agreement to punish such criminals without due process of law. Both the practice and the punishment came to be called “lynch law” after Captain William Lynch, who reportedly drew up a compact on September 22, 1780, with a group of his neighbors. Stating that Pittsylvania had “sustained great and intolerable losses by a set of lawless men that have hitherto escaped the civil power with impunity,” those who signed the compact agreed to respond to reports of criminality in their area by confronting the person or persons suspected of a crime, “and if they will not desist from their evil practices, we will inflict such corporeal punishment on him or them, as to us shall seem adequate to the crime committed or the damage sustained.”

If lynching began as a method of punishing suspects for alleged specific crimes — that is, the dispensing of justice where officially constituted justice was deemed nonexistent or too slow — it quickly changed into something else. It changed from non-capital to capital punishment, and it moved away from punishing people for specified misdeeds to a practice that mostly existed to reinforce social norms — such as racism in the South — and to help various social classes maintain and impose their views and beliefs on the other classes, the out-groups. In the end the practice of lynching was no longer about supplying justice when it was not provided by the state

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but it was about power, control, terror and intimidation; it was about rage and hate, and the unleashing of all that was bestial in humankind.

Writing in the *Criminal Justice Review* (volume 33, 2008, pp. 64–88), David V. Baker looked at “black female executions in historical content” and found the lynching of women had an antecedent in the legal execution of female slaves. Beginning with the execution in Massachusetts of Maria, a young slave woman, for arson and murder in September 1681, officials executed 58 slave women before 1790 and 126 slave women from 1790 to Emancipation. That is, three times as many slave women were executed in antebellum slavery as in colonial slavery. Of the 109 slave women executed for murder where historical records sufficiently identified victims, 67 murdered a member of their master’s family and 35 murdered unrelated victims. White people constituted more than 91 percent of the victims of slaves condemned to hang in colonial Virginia. An example was the slave Jenny, hanged in chains for poisoning to death her master in Maryland in 1770; it amounted to a punishment of death by starvation. Authorities in Virginia burned alive a slave named Eve for poisoning her master with a spiked glass of milk. After the execution officials quartered Eve’s body and displayed it in public.

Sexual brutality often marked a slave woman’s life, and later, after Emancipation, it was often visited upon the females who were lynched. Celia was judicially executed in Missouri in one such case in the slave era. Seventy-year-old Robert Newsome bought 14-year-old Celia and forced sexual relations on her immediately after the purchase, and repeatedly. One night when Newsome went to Celia’s cabin to rape her yet again, she hit him with a piece of wood, killing him instantly. Celia was pregnant for the third time by Newsome and was quite ill when Newsome approached her for the last time. On the occasion of her trial the court was concerned only whether Celia had a right to defend herself against her master’s assault. The trial judge declared she had no such right. As far as the court was concerned, Celia had no sexual rights over her own body because she was Newsome’s property and she should have submitted to the demands of her master. Celia was found guilty of murder and executed by hanging on December 21, 1855.

Baker found that legal and duly constituted jurisdictions executed far fewer black women during Reconstruction than in colonial and antebellum slavery. Records confirmed that five black women were hanged for murder between 1866 and 1877 in mostly Southern jurisdictions.

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One incident happened when Kentucky authorities hanged 12-year-old Eliza in February 1868 for murdering Walter Graves, a two-year-old white child who was in her care. The babysitter confessed to the killing after the family's white neighbors threatened her with lynching. During the girl's trial the judge rendered her confession involuntary and inadmissible, given the threats of lynching she received. However, a jury still convicted Eliza of murder.

By 1866 all the Southern states had enacted codes to regulate the lives of black people. After 1865, newly emancipated black women swelled the ranks of Southern prison populations, with black females numbering 40 to 70 percent of all women committed to Southern penitentiaries. Contributing to the reduced legal executions of black women during Reconstruction, argued Baker, was an increase in white violence to black people as a means of imposing punishment. Black lynchings became commonplace during Reconstruction, he wrote. Racial violence was a pervasive feature of everyday life for black people during that period, with Southern whites employing the activities of vigilante groups to terrorize blacks. Thus, the assault, murder, lynching, politically repression, and execution of black people continued throughout Reconstruction. In Baker's view the vulnerability of Black women to white male sexual violence was greater in the postbellum period than it had been during slavery.

Jim Crow segregation came to dominate as an institutional means of subordinating blacks with the collapse of Reconstruction, and by 1890 Southern society had fully established the legal separation of black people. That Jim Crow era ushered in another killing period for black people. Judicial and extrajudicial executions killed more than 8,100 black people in the period, reported Baker. The white justice system killed 4,707 black prisoners while white lynch mobs killed another 3,445 blacks. "The killing of Black women was particularly heinous; White mobs lynched White females but there is no confirmation that White female lynching victims suffered the savagery inflicted on Black women," concluded Baker.

Between 1882 and 1968 the Tuskegee Institute recorded 3,437 lynchings of black people and 1,293 lynchings of white people ("Lynching in the United States," Wikipedia). Numbers for lynchings prior to around 1880 seem to be nonexistent, although the totals for the years after that seem to be reasonably reliable. Dr. Arthur Rapper was commissioned in 1930 to produce a report on lynching. He found that 3,724 people were

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lynched in America from 1889 through to 1930. Over 80 percent of those victims were black; less than one-sixth had been accused of rape. Practically all of the lynchers were native whites. "The fact that a number of the victims were tortured, mutilated, dragged or burned suggests the presence of sadistic tendencies among the lynchers. Of the tens of thousands of lynchers and onlookers, only 49 were indicted and only 4 have been sentenced," said Rapper ([spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USALynching.htm](http://spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USALynching.htm)).

More or less accurate numbers for lynchings exist for the later years due to the pioneer work in compiling such records that was undertaken by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was to be found in their publication *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States 1889–1918* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969 [1919]). For the period 1889 to 1918 the NAACP found a total of 3,224 lynching victims across America — 2,522 (78.2 percent) were black victims and 702 (21.8 percent) were white victims of lynch mobs. Of the total number, 390 (12.1 percent) of the lynchings took place in the North and West of the nation while 2,834 (87.9 percent) took place in the South. For that period the NAACP found a total of 61 females (1.85 percent) were lynched. Fifty of them were black; 11 were white women. Thus, white males comprised 691 (98.5 percent) of the 702 white victims while black men totaled 2,472 (98.0 percent) of the 2,522 black victims. From the NAACP data, women were lynched in the following states in the period 1889 to 1918: Alabama (seven blacks, no whites); Arkansas (5, 0); Florida (2, 0); Georgia (5, 0); Kentucky (3, 1); Louisiana (4, 1); Mississippi (11, 1); Nebraska (0, 1); North Carolina (0, 1); Oklahoma (2, 0); South Carolina (4, 0); Tennessee (1, 2); Texas (6, 3); Virginia (0, 1).

Figures given in the Wikipedia entry "Lynching of Women" (a link from the main entry "Lynching in the United States"), were slightly different. According to this source the total number of women lynched in the United States since 1889 was 83; 66 being black women, 17 being white. Those victims were spread over 17 states as follows: Mississippi (14 blacks, one white); Texas (8, 2); Alabama (9, 0); Georgia (8, 0); Arkansas (6, 1); South Carolina (6, 0); Louisiana (4, 1); Tennessee (3, 2); Kentucky (2, 2); Oklahoma (2, 2); Florida (3, 0); Missouri (1, 1); North Carolina (0, 1); Virginia (0, 1); Nebraska (0, 1); West Virginia (0, 1); Wyoming (0, 1).

Somewhat different statistics were presented for the state of Mississippi in *Lynchings in Mississippi: A History 1865–1965* by Julius E. Thompson

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(Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2007). For the period 1890 to 1939, Thompson found 18 black women and no white women were lynched in Mississippi. Totals by decade were as follows: 1890–1899 (184 black men, six black women, five white men); 1900–1909 (137, 4, 11); 1910–1919 (100, 5, 2); 1920–1929 (60, 2, 2); 1930–1939 (49, 1, 2). Overall, for the entire period 570 people were lynched in the state; 530 black men (92.9 percent), 18 black women (3.1 percent), and 22 white men (4.0 percent).

James Elbert Cutler in *Lynch Law* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969 [1905]) presented different figures as well. During the period 1882 to 1903 he found that a total of 40 black women and 23 white females had been lynched in America.

While the lynching of men was pervasive and numbered into the thousands, it was relatively rare for a woman to be lynched, with the proportion of females lynched being, roughly, about two percent of the victims. It was as rare, relatively, to lynch a black woman as it was to lynch a white woman. Part of that likely had to do with the place held in society by women. That is, they were viewed as non-violent, passive, and the moral and ethical centers for humankind, and so forth. It was not fair play for a man to hit a woman and, apparently, not fair play to lynch a woman. While black people were treated vilely in America during the period covered by this book, the women as much as the men, that treatment stopped short of lynching, most of the time. The fact that women, black and white, were lynched relatively rarely, and in roughly the same proportion by race, indicated that when it came to lynching gender trumped race, apparently.

When a woman was lynched it sometimes generated editorial comment from newspapers, sometimes expressing outrage over such activity and sometimes expressing surprise over the rarity of such a thing. When Charlotte Harris (see herein, 1878 March 11) was taken from legal custody by a mob in Rockingham County, Virginia, and lynched, her murder was decried in many news accounts. It was one of the first lynchings of a female that drew editorial comment—that is, something other than a brief recounting of the facts. Remarking on the case the *Washington Post* declared, “The lynching of a woman is the latest novelty in crime.” More attention than usual may have been devoted to her case because the first women’s rights movement was then in the first decade of its life and was drawing much media coverage. However, not all the observations of the media were critical of the Harris lynching. An editor with the *Independent* newspaper

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of Helena, Montana, stated, "The strong-minded females are continually raving about women being deprived of rights that men enjoy. They have gained one point already. A woman was lynched last week in Virginia, a distinction that has hitherto been accorded to men only."

After Mrs. Cuddigan (herein 1884 January 18) and her husband Michael were lynched near Ouray, Colorado, an editorial in the *Leaderville Daily Herald* (Colorado) decried the application of lynch law in general and added, "The citizens of Ouray have distinguished themselves by a most outrageous and barbarous act of lawlessness. They have lynched a woman ... it is the boast of Americans that a woman's weakness will shield her from violence at the hands of a true American, except it be commanded by the law." Continued the editor, "The men of Ouray can find no apology for their brutal conduct by the plea that the woman was guilty. All the world knows that a woman may be coerced by the power of her husband and compelled to do a thing at which she herself would naturally revolt." Lynch law was rarely excusable, he argued, and the application of the law was not so lax in Ouray that public policy demanded that "a mob of strong men should drag a weak, defenseless woman out of jail in the middle of the night and choke her to death like they might a dog."

After Kate Maxwell (herein, Ella Watson 1889 July 21), the "Cattle Queen," was lynched near Sweetwater, Wyoming, it was revealed that the entire story had been a fiction. All the supposed events of Kate's life had been invented and, presumably, sold to the Eastern tabloid press to present and reinforce lurid stereotypes of the Wild West, and of women. A woman had been lynched at the time and place specified, but her name was Ella Watson and she had nothing in common with her fictional stand-in, invented by party or parties unknown. A Pittsburgh newspaper did comment on the lynching of a woman with respect to this case, but only to the extent of remarking on its rarity. "In the Northwestern section the other day a woman was lynched for stealing cattle. This is a novelty in the lynching line. The Judge [Lynch] has heretofore confined his attention to the male sex."

Bob Sims led a gang that clashed with the law in and around Mobile, Alabama, in 1891 and into the first days of 1892. Two members of that gang were his daughters Beatrice Sims (see herein 1892 January 5) and Laura Sims, who were most likely lynched. (It was not certain they were lynched but the evidence pointed to that conclusion.) In the wake of the

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reports that the two women had been lynched, a journalist remarked, "The south claims to be chivalrous to women beyond any section of country in Christendom, yet such a thing as the hanging of a woman by lynch law could scarcely have happened in the north under any circumstances." Not long after the report of the lynching of the two women and their uncle, a terse denial of the murders, which raised more questions than it answered, was issued by a law enforcement official. However, few believed it. Another journalist explained that the "lynching of women is such a revolting matter that a denial has been published."

After the lynching of three members of the Lowman family, including Bertha Lowman (see herein 1926 October 8), in Aiken, South Carolina, an editorial in the *Kingsport Times* (Tennessee) stated it was regrettable enough at any time when a mob defied the laws and constituted officials to lynch helpless prisoners without a trial or justice, "but in the case of the lynching at Aiken still further shame was heaped on the members of the lawless mob because of the fact that one of the victims was a woman! Because of this feature, and because of the number lynched, this was one of the most disgraceful examples of mob lawlessness that has been recorded in recent years." Time passed and there were no arrests in the Lowman lynching. When a second grand jury was formed to investigate the crime, its members were addressed by presiding Judge Johnson who urged them to indict the guilty parties as the eyes of South Carolina and of the United States were on Aiken. Speaking to the issue of the lynching of a woman, Johnson declared, "I do say that a lynching is a deliberate, willful and cowardly murder, than which crime there can be no greater. Any lynching is a cowardly murder, but the lynching of a woman is the lowest form of murder that I have yet heard of."

The Tuskegee Institute, in Tuskegee, Alabama, defined "lynching" in 1940 in the following way: "there must be legal evidence that a person has been killed, and that he met his death illegally at the hands of "a group" acting under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition," with a group defined as three or more people. In a Kansas statute that defined "lynchings," the number of people constituting a mob was not stated: "Any collection of individuals assembled for an unlawful purpose, intending to injure any person by violence, and without authority of law, shall for the purpose of this act be regarded as a mob." There was often little to choose from between a mob and a posse. In theory a posse was legally constituted



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and thus had the right to shoot suspects who were armed and resisted arrest. In practice, though, there was often little or no difference between a mob and a posse.

Lynching had to do with individuals supplanting the law and acting in defiance of the law. On that basis the general practice of compilers of lynching records has been not to include in such records persons put to death in what were commonly classified as riots. In a riot there took place the promiscuous killing of individuals while in a lynching particular individuals were seized and put to death for alleged specified offenses. Such distinctions perhaps accounted for the difference in numbers from various sources presented in this book. However, it was a distinction that often broke down in the case of women who were murdered. Often a specific male was sought by the mob, seized and lynched for a specific crime. That is, it was a lynching by most definitions. But a woman was often seized and lynched as well because she happened to be the man's wife or girlfriend and, most importantly, was present when the man was seized. Members of the mob had not set out to lynch a woman but did so anyway, knowing full well the woman had no role in the supposed crime. Presumably the bloodlust of the mob swept them along. Thus, many of the women portrayed in this book were murdered promiscuously, as happens in a riot, but were just as clearly lynched.

One of the most important, and tireless, figures in the fight against lynching was a black journalist by the name of Ida Wells. In 1884 when she was editor of *Free Speech*, a small newspaper in Memphis, she carried out an investigation into lynching. Ida discovered that during a short period, 782 black men and women had been lynched by white mobs. Of those deaths, some 66 percent were lynched for such minor offenses as public drunkenness and shoplifting. On March 9, 1892 (as reported in the website [spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USALynching.htm](http://spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USALynching.htm)), three black businessmen were lynched in Memphis. When Wells wrote an article condemning the lynchers, a white mob destroyed her printing press. They said that they had intended to lynch her but she was visiting Philadelphia at the time. Unable to return to Memphis, Ida Wells was recruited by the progressive newspaper, *New York Age*. She continued her campaign against lynching and Jim Crow laws, and in 1893 and 1894 she made lecture tours of Britain. While there in 1894 she helped to establish the British Anti-Lynching Committee.

In 1898 Wells wrote to U.S. President William McKinley and asked