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BLACK VIGILANTISM: THE RISE AND DECLINE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LYNCH MOB ACTIVITY IN THE MISSISSIPPI AND ARKANSAS DELTAS, 1883–1923

Karlos K. Hill

In Issaquena County, Mississippi, in April 1884, Samuel T. Wilson, a white convict guard, allegedly ordered the murder of Negia McDaniel, a black fisherman. According to the newspaper account, Wilson and a crew of African American convicts under his command were hauling lumber aboard a river flatboat and landed near McDaniel, who was fishing. After Wilson and McDaniel started arguing, Wilson allegedly ordered two African American convicts to take McDaniel aboard the flatboat, beat him, and throw him overboard. Wilson was subsequently arrested for the alleged crime, and arraigned before Adam Jenkins, an African American justice of the peace, who allowed testimony from two African American witnesses, but allegedly refused to allow persons “friendly with Wilson” to testify. Based on the testimony of the two witnesses, Jenkins ruled that a grand jury should decide Wilson’s fate. However, after hearing the testimony of the two witnesses describing Wilson’s role in McDaniel’s death, the African Americans in attendance, up to three hundred in number, began shouting that they intended to lynch Wilson. The outburst was so threatening that Jenkins requested Deputy Sheriff Lawson, a white officer, to escort Wilson out of town, presumably to a nearby jail. Sheriff Lawson arrived with three armed guards, and escorted Wilson away. About a half mile from the hearing location, however, a mob of local black residents forced the sheriff and guards to turn Wilson over to them. Wasting little time, the mob allegedly took Wilson to a nearby tree and lynched him. The newspaper reported that afterward the white residents in the area condemned the lynching because they considered the two convicts who testified against Wilson of poor character, but the report did not mention whether or not the white citizens took any action against the black vigilantes.¹

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The 1884 lynching of Samuel T. Wilson is important because it highlights heretofore submerged aspects in the complicated history of lynching in the United States. In the early 1880s African Americans had not yet become the primary targets of lynch mob violence, nor had it become a dominant symbol for white supremacy. In 1884, for example, it has been estimated that 160 whites were lynched compared to only 51 African American victims.² Moreover, in the 1880s intra-racial lynching—African American mobs lynching other African Americans, or white mobs lynching other whites—was a more common occurrence. Yet, in less than a decade, the number of African American lynching victims increased dramatically. It was not until 1886 that the number of African Americans lynched (74) exceeded the number of whites lynched (64). In 1892 more than 160 African Americans were lynched, as opposed to only 69 whites.³ In addition, in the 1890s, white mobs began to stage “spectacle lynchings” of African Americans so that hundreds of whites could witness the execution.⁴

The dramatic increase in African American lynchings was accompanied by the emergence of the “black beast rapist” discourse, which posited that as a result of emancipation, African American men were retrogressing to a “bestial” and “sexually depraved” condition. Whites were being told that this retrogressive behavior explained why so many African American men were being accused of raping white women. Thus, lynching was viewed as a necessary and appropriate response to subdue these “black savages.”⁵ By the late 1880s and early 1890s, lynching was becoming a more racialized phenomenon in which African Americans were the primary targets of white lynch mobs, and racist discourses were increasingly employed to justify these actions. These developments altered the social relations and meaning of lynching and mob violence for both whites and African Americans, particularly in the South.

Despite significant lynch mob activity among black southerners, only two scholars have examined the subject. Sociologist Stewart Tolnay in “When Race Didn’t Matter” provided a comprehensive overview of black lynch mobs and highlighted the statistical trends in lynch mob activity among black southerners between the years 1882 and 1930, identifying several overall patterns. Black lynch mobs occurred primarily in the late 19th century, principally between 1882 and 1900, and were concentrated in less developed, rural areas with weak judicial systems. These incidents took place more frequently in areas with large black populations such as the Mississippi and Arkansas delta regions. Moreover, black lynching victims were accused of much more serious crimes when compared to white-on-black lynchings. Tolnay reported that 36 percent of the incidents of black lynch mob activity involved the removal of black suspects from police custody. This led him to conclude that black mob action constituted a form of “popular justice” because of the belief that the white-dominated criminal justice system

would not act swiftly or severely to punish crimes perpetrated against African Americans.⁶

Historian Bruce Baker's "Lynch Law Reversed" chronicled the lynching of Manse Waldrop, a white man, for raping and murdering Lula Sherman, a black child, in Pickens County, South Carolina, in 1887. According to Baker, Lula Sherman's father, Cato Sherman, and several other black men forcibly removed Manse Waldrop from police custody, shot Waldrop in the head, and hung him from a tree. In response, Cato Sherman and four others were arrested and subsequently charged with murdering Waldrop. Eventually, two of Cato Sherman's accomplices were sentenced to death, but curiously, Cato Sherman was found not guilty. In addition, black and white residents petitioned the governor of South Carolina, John P. Richardson, to pardon the two who were convicted. The governor eventually pardoned the two black defendants in the lynching of Manse Waldrop.⁷

These earlier scholars outlined the basic contours of the phenomenon and convincingly argued that black lynch mobs embraced extra-legal "justice" because they believed certain violent crimes warranted lynching. However, several important issues and questions remain. What factors contributed to the frequency of lynch mob activity among African Americans in areas with weak legal systems and large black populations? Although serious offenses such as murder or rape accounted for the bulk of the allegations that precipitated mob violence, it is often unclear who was murdered or raped and the circumstances surrounding these incidents. Who exactly were the victims of black lynch mob violence, long-term residents or strangers to the community? What patterns characterized this mob action? What information do we have on the size and composition of black lynch mobs? Were their victims simply hanged, or did they employ "rituals of violence" that came to be associated with spectacle lynchings such as burning and mutilating lynch victims' bodies? Why did black lynch mob activity peak during the 1880s and 1890s and dramatically decline after 1900?

This essay explores the impact that the racialization of lynching had upon the trajectory of lynch mob violence among black southerners. Specifically, I will offer some explanations for the rise and decline of lynch mob activity among African Americans in the Mississippi and Arkansas delta regions between the 1880s and early 1900s. I argue that prior to the racialization of lynching in the South, African American mobs lynched other African Americans because they viewed extra-legal violence as a necessary response to violent crimes. It appears that African American lynch mob incidents within the Delta region and throughout the South steadily declined in response to the racialization of lynching.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND LYNCH MOB ACTIVITY ON THE DELTA FRONTIER

The rise of African American lynch mob incidents within the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas occurred within a frontier context. Historian John Solomon Otto described the lower Mississippi valley region, including Arkansas, Louisiana, the Mississippi deltas, as the country's "final frontier" because it was a sparsely populated and agriculturally undeveloped region in the postbellum United States.⁸ Prior to the Civil War, settlement in the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas was concentrated along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, whereas the interior Delta counties were comparatively unsettled. Therefore, unlike older cotton producing areas, the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas were dotted with only a few large plantations along the Mississippi River.⁹

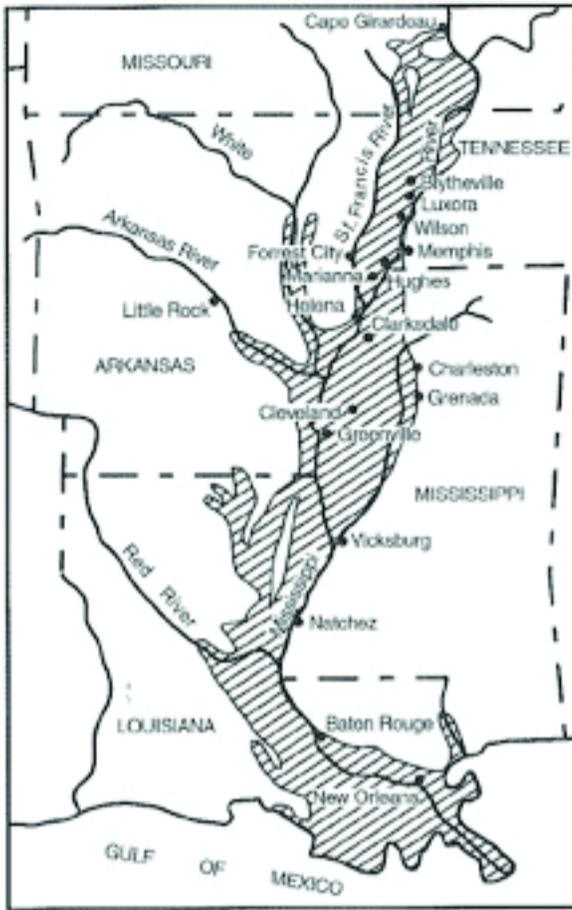
The dense forest cover and continual flooding prevented large-scale settlement and development until the 1870s when federal, state, and local governments funded flood control programs in the Mississippi Delta, which soon prompted railroads, lumber companies, and land speculators to heavily invest in Delta real estate. Given the deteriorating social and agricultural conditions in older plantation regions, thousands of African Americans then began migrating to the Delta region due to the prospect of landownership and higher wages.¹⁰ In 1880, for example, African Americans constituted 65 percent of the total population in the Arkansas and Mississippi deltas; however, by the end of the decade, the African American population had risen to 69 percent of the total (see table 1).¹¹

**Table 1. African American Population as a Percentage
of Total Population in the Delta Region, 1880–1900**

Year	Total Population, Arkansas Delta	African American Population, Arkansas Delta	Total Population, Mississippi Delta	African American Population, Mississippi Delta	African American Delta Population as Percent of Total Population
1880	218,103	115,359	253,121	190,976	65
1890	318,230	185,094	335,955	262,171	68
1900	383,022	219,362	412,528	328,650	69

Source: Adapted from the *Historical Census Browser*, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

Figure 1. Map of the Lower Mississippi River Valley



Adapted from Nan Woodruff, *The American Congo: African American Freedom Struggles in the Delta*, (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 9.

The period of African American migration into the Delta region also witnessed the emergence of African American lynch mob activity. According to Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck's inventory of southern lynching between 1882 and 1930, of the estimated 148 victims of African American lynch mobs in ten southern states, fifty-four were executed in the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas.¹² However, my analysis of these data revealed that at least fourteen of the fifty-four victims were executed by interracial mobs, or mobs composed of black and white southerners. My examination of African American and interracial mobs suggests that they should be treated separately because, with respect to interracial mobs, it is difficult to gauge

the degree of African American participation, and to tell whether it was voluntary or coerced. Therefore, when interracial lynch mobs are removed, I would estimate that African American lynch mobs executed about thirty-six individuals in the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas between the 1880s and 1920s.

Table 2. Least and Most Populated Delta Counties, 1880

Least Populated Counties	1880 Total Population	African American Victim, African American Mob, 1880–1930	Most Populated Counties	1880 Total Population	African American Victim, African American Mob 1880–1930
Quitman (MS)	1,407	0	Carroll (AR)	17,795	0
Poinsett (AR)	2,192	0	Bolivar (MS)	18,652	2
Sunflower (MS)	4,661	2	Phillips (AR)	21,262	2
Cross (AR)	5,050	1	Jefferson (AR)	22,386	1
Sharkey (MS)	6,306	2	Desoto (MS)	22,924	4
Craighead (AR)	7,037	0	Washington (MS)	25,367	0
Mississippi (AR)	7,332	1	Holmes (MS)	27,164	0
Arkansas (AR)	8,038	0	Panola (MS)	28,352	1
St. Francis (AR)	8,389	0	Warren (MS)	31,238	3
Tunica (MS)	8,461	3	Pulaski (AR)	32,616	0
Woodruff (AR)	8,646	0	Yazoo (MS)	33,845	1
Desha (AR)	8,973	1	Total	281,601	14
Crittenden (AR)	9,415	0			
Monroe (AR)	9,574	0			
Issaquena (MS)	10,004	2			
Chicot (AR)	10,117	0			
Ashley (AR)	10,156	2			
Leflore (MS)	10,246	2			
Tallahatchie (MS)	10,926	1			
Lonoke (AR)	12,146	2			
Drew (AR)	12,231	1			
Coahoma (MS)	13,568	0			
Lee (AR)	13,288	1			
Total	198,163	22			

Source: Adapted from the *Historical Census Browser*, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

Interestingly, the bulk of African American lynch mob activity occurred in the Delta’s least populated areas. For instance, the Delta’s least populated counties,

14,000 inhabitants or less, accounted for 61 percent of African American lynch mob activity, (twenty-two of thirty-six incidents), whereas the most populated counties with more than 14,000 inhabitants accounted for only 39 percent of African American lynch mob episodes, fourteen of thirty-six incidents (see table 2).¹³

Historian David T. Courtwright has argued that frontiers were “violent lands” because they have contained the largest proportion of single males. Courtwright observed that the prevalence of male frontier violence stemmed from “the surplus of young men, widespread bachelorhood, sensitivity about honor, racial hostility . . . and inadequate law enforcement.”¹⁴ The Delta exemplified this “violent lands” thesis. For example, in the most remote areas of the Delta, justices of the peace represented the legal system and exercised tremendous discretion in punishing those accused of criminal activity. In addition, lax law enforcement seemed to have encouraged a culture of vigilantism. In Bolivar County, Mississippi, for example, in the 1890s, after a white railroad agent murdered an African American man, the local white justice of the peace fined the railroad agent five dollars and then bragged that he would not attempt to collect the fine. It was reported that in response to the justice of the peace’s failure to act “every [black] man carried his own weapons and was his own peace- or trouble maker.”¹⁵

At the same time, law enforcement officers’ failure to prosecute crimes perpetrated against African Americans may have also encouraged extra-legal violence. During Congressional or “Radical” Reconstruction (1868–1877), African Americans participated in the legal system in unprecedented numbers. In Warren County, Mississippi, for example, African Americans accounted for at least 50 percent of grand jurors between 1870 and 1873.¹⁶ Despite African Americans’ unprecedented participation on grand juries during Reconstruction, over 70 percent of prosecutions for murder involved white victims and white defendants, whereas African American victims and African American/white defendants involved no more than 8 percent of all cases.¹⁷ When the race of the victim could be identified, 66 percent of murder cases in Warren County involved white victims and defendants.¹⁸ However, grand juries indicted people for the murder of whites 50 percent more often than for the murder of African Americans. Moreover, in Warren County African Americans tended to be arrested for crimes against persons, while whites were arrested more frequently for crimes against property; and these statistics suggest that even under the best circumstances, crimes perpetrated against African Americans were seldom prosecuted.¹⁹

With the overthrow of Reconstruction in the Delta region after 1877 and when conservative white Democrats came to power, African American representation on grand juries and in elective offices dropped precipitously. However, from as early as 1873 whites in Vicksburg and other parts of Warren County, Mississippi, consciously chose lawlessness and extra-legal violence to oust African Americans

from political offices. African American grand jury representation shrank to 25 percent of total grand jurors by 1874 and white jurors increasingly resisted returning indictments based upon African Americans' criminal complaints.²⁰ Consequently, "the injustice of southern courts . . . [even] whites . . . admitted, alienated African Americans, [and] made them see the law as white law."²¹ Therefore, given these circumstances, African Americans in the Delta region may have increasingly resorted to vigilante action. It should be noted that historically black vigilantism, or vigilantism in general, was not unique to the United States. The scholarship on vigilantism in Africa and South America has convincingly illustrated that vigilantism emerged to a certain degree in response to the state's failure to adequately prosecute or punish criminal activity.²² Ultimately, it is impossible to know to what extent the criminal justice system's refusal to prosecute crimes perpetrated against African Americans served as the motivation for black vigilantism. However, during the same period that African American participation within the legal system greatly diminished in the Delta, there was an increase in African American lynch mob violence.

The bulk of African American lynch mob activity occurred within the Delta's least populated counties. The Delta's frontier conditions very likely contributed to its development. It should also be noted that in the cotton growing, plantation regions with African American majorities such as Alabama and Georgia's black belt during the 1880s and 1890s, there was much less African American lynch mob activity reported.²³

AFRICAN AMERICAN LYNCH MOBS AND THEIR VICTIMS

In Keo, Arkansas, in Lonoke County, within a span of two weeks in 1910, an African American man and woman, Wiley Mitchell and Mrs. Frank Pride, went missing.²⁴ The missing persons were the spouses of Laura Mitchell and Frank Pride. According to a newspaper account, the Mitchell and Pride families lived and worked on plantations in Keo, Arkansas. Shortly after both disappearances, close friends of Mrs. Pride prevailed upon the local justice of the peace to question Frank Pride about his wife's whereabouts. Frank Pride merely claimed that his wife was visiting relatives in nearby Conway, Arkansas. However, Mrs. Pride's friends learned later that the relatives whom she was supposedly visiting had been dead for many years. After their spouses' disappearances, Laura Mitchell and Frank Pride left their respective plantations in Keo, found work on another plantation in the county, and moved in together.²⁵

The search for Mrs. Pride and Wiley Mitchell was continued by friends and relatives in Keo who suspected foul play. During their search on the plantation where Frank Pride had been employed, they soon discovered Wiley Mitchell's body

buried in one of Frank Pride's garden plots. Wiley Mitchell appeared to have been bludgeoned to death, and it was reported later that a club was found in a nearby forest.²⁶ Both Laura Mitchell and Frank Pride were arrested, and at their preliminary hearing, they evidently told "conflicting stories" about the death of Wiley Mitchell and the disappearance of Mrs. Pride. Upon hearing their inconsistent accounts, African Americans present in the courtroom began shouting threats that the two should be lynched and a angry mob formed outside the courthouse.²⁷

Based on their testimony at the preliminary trial, the local magistrate charged Frank Pride and Laura Mitchell with first degree murder pending a formal grand jury investigation and trial. Given the threatening actions of the mob, the constable and his deputies were ordered to take the defendants out of town. However, when the couple was being taken to a safe haven outside of Keo, a mob made up of local black residents stopped and cornered the group and forced the constable to hand over the pair. It was reported that within minutes their shackles were broken, and the two were hung from a tree and shot to death.²⁸

The lynching of Frank Pride and Laura Mitchell was representative in many ways of African American lynch mob actions in the Delta region at the beginning of the 20th century. Of the fifteen victims of reported black lynch mob action in that area, the majority were young African American males who were married (93 percent) and employed as farmers or farm laborers (88 percent), with an average age of 33.²⁹ Since the crimes usually took place on the plantations, it is very likely that the African Americans who participated in the mob violence knew their victims well. Historian Charles Aiken argued that in the aftermath of the Civil War, large cotton plantations, particularly in the Delta region, were subdivided into smaller allotments that, depending on the size of the plantation, could be divided among several African American families. In general, African American sharecroppers and farm workers lived together on the plantations, and once a critical mass of African American families settled in an area, community institutions such as churches and social and mutual benefit societies were established on the grounds of the plantations. Social bonds developed and were nurtured by these community institutions and networks. While African American institutions were primarily sites for community building and a refuge from white domination and violence, they also facilitated acts of revenge when these social bonds were broken.³⁰

In Tunica County, Mississippi, in November 1923, Ed Hardy allegedly murdered an unnamed African American woman who lived on a local plantation. Hardy then fled to Arkansas but was soon captured by the plantation supervisor and his assistant and brought back to the plantation. The local police were notified of Hardy's capture; however, before the police arrived, the local black residents formed a mob that kidnapped Hardy, bludgeoned him to death, and threw his body into the Mississippi River. The newspaper account revealed that the murdered

woman was well liked by many whites and African Americans in the county, who responded in shock and horror at her murder.³¹ This mob was typical in that it included a small number of people, and the participants in the mob action were friends and relatives of the murdered woman. For example, in only five out of the thirty-six African American lynch mob incidents reported did the number of participants exceed twenty people.³²

Alleged murders were most often the acts of violence that precipitated mob action by African Americans in the Delta. Twenty-two of the thirty-six reported incidents (61 percent) involved charges of murder, oftentimes precipitated by domestic disputes. For example, in July 1887 Lloyd Martin allegedly assaulted his wife and murdered Bob Jones, his wife's father, in Sunflower County, Mississippi. According to the newspaper account, after Martin's arrest, an African American mob formed, took him from police custody, and lynched him.³³ It was reported that in July 1907 in Desoto County, Mississippi, Andrew Trice allegedly murdered his mistress with an axe and tossed her body into the Mississippi River. After Trice's arrest for this brutal murder, a mob composed of about thirty African Americans removed Trice from his cell, took him down to the river, lynched him and threw his body in where his alleged victim's body had been tossed.³⁴

It appears that it was often the case that African American participants in lynch mob actions were provoked by the murder or attempted murder of well-respected members of the community. Although the exact reasons remain unclear, in January 1889, a group of nine African American men were allegedly responsible for the beating and subsequent death of Dan Reynolds, a prominent farmer, near Coffee Creek, in Phillips County, Arkansas. According to the newspaper report, the attackers beat Reynolds with barbed wire, rubbed mud on his wounds, and left him for dead. Reynolds survived the initial attack but later died from his wounds. Prior to his death, however, he named three of his attackers, and eventually seven of the nine were arrested. Members of the local African American community were incensed at the brutal attack and "there [was] strong talk among them of lynching the miscreants. . . ."³⁵ There was also a report in June 1895 of Rev. Frank King in Portland, Arkansas, who allegedly killed William Toney when Rev. King was confronted by Toney over an alleged affair with Toney's wife. The two argued and Toney was shot in the abdomen and later died. Rev. King purportedly "was locked up and after dark a mob of infuriated [N]egroes repaired to the lockup, took King to a tree, and lynched him."³⁶

Regardless of any extenuating circumstances, the friends and family members of murder victims became criminals themselves when they took the law into their own hands and executed the accused perpetrators of the offenses. In July 1891, for example, Henry Gentry was accused of murdering George Hillyard on the Palmyra plantation in Warren County, Mississippi. After Gentry had been arrested and was

being escorted to trial by two armed guards, an African American mob made up of Hillyard's friends and fellow plantation workers overpowered the guards, seized Gentry, and hung him.³⁷ In another incident in April 1905, John Barnett quarreled with and then allegedly killed Albert Wakefield. Both men were levee workers in Lee County, Arkansas, and in response to Wakefield's death, a group of twenty African American men tracked Barnett down and hung him from a tree.³⁸

Accusations of rape also excited the rancor of those who knew or were related to the alleged victims, and those allegations also precipitated black mob actions. Eleven out of the thirty-six incidents of black mob violence in the Deltas between 1883 and 1923 involved charges of rape.³⁹ My analysis also revealed that 82 percent of the rape allegations involved African American children.⁴⁰ For example, in Lee County, Arkansas, in July 1892, Robert Donnelly was arrested for allegedly raping a 12-year-old girl. Robert Donnelly was a farm worker and married, with at least four sons and a daughter.⁴¹ The unidentified girl survived Donnelly's attack and informed her parents of the assault. Donnelly was subsequently arrested, and at the preliminary hearing was found guilty. It was reported that after his conviction, Donnelly was removed from his cell by a group of black men, taken out into the streets, and hung.⁴²

The alleged rape and/or murder of African American women and children represented almost 50 percent of total allegations that led to lynch mob actions by African Americans in the Delta during these decades. This suggests that African American lynch mobs may have been activated by a masculine ethos that called for the protection of women and children by male relatives and friends. Historian Nancy Bercau in *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861–1875* argued that in the post-Civil War South, for African Americans the household was seen as the foundation for their freedom. As the legal heads of households, African American men gained patriarchal power over their wives and children, which allowed them to claim ownership over their labor. Moreover, wives and children came to be considered symbols of manhood, and along with military service, became a strong basis on which they claimed political equality with white men. Given this context, it is likely that some African American men interpreted sexual and violent crimes against women as attacks on their manhood.⁴³

Since the prime objective of these mob actions was revenge and to rid the area of individuals deemed dangerous, African American lynch mobs typically eschewed rituals of violence such as mutilation, castration, and burning that later became associated with spectacle lynchings. Although African American mobs typically hung or shot alleged criminals, in instances involving rape and incest, there were

reports that the alleged perpetrators were tortured. For example, in Jefferson County, Arkansas, in July 1885, David Scruggs, a 42-year-old farmer, married, with two daughters, ages 10 and 11, was arrested following accusations of incest with one of his daughters.⁴⁴ When Scruggs failed to make bail, he apparently “sued a writ of habeas corpus” and was released by the local circuit judge. After his release Scruggs tried to flee the area, but was later captured by a group of black residents who, according to the newspaper report, “carved him to pieces with knives, and the most unusual wounds [were] inflicted on him.” Subsequently, he “crept away in the woods and died.”⁴⁵

According to a report in November 1893, after tenant farmer Dan Nelson was accused of murdering his landlord Ben Betts in Lincoln County, Arkansas, he was tortured and lynched. It was reported that Betts went to Nelson’s home to collect a rent payment, but the two men quarreled over the payment, and Nelson allegedly shot and killed Betts. Nelson was arrested and taken to the nearby jail. However, in response to the murder, “the [N]egroes [became] worked up to a fever pitch-heat over the affair.”

[T]he mob secured a long piece of steel . . . and with this battered down the door of the jail. This accomplished they had no difficulty securing the prisoner. The men were armed with Winchesters, and as soon as Nelson was taken out of the jail they leveled their guns and filled his body with lead. They then threw him on a pile of trash and set his clothes on fire.⁴⁶

It is unclear in these reports why David Scruggs or Dan Nelson were allegedly tortured, given that other African American victims accused of similar crimes were rarely tortured.

Based on these newspaper reports, it appears that African American lynch mob violence in the Delta was primarily carried out against young African American male farm laborers who allegedly committed violent crimes. The belief that the criminal justice system would fail to prosecute violent crimes perpetrated against African Americans increased the likelihood of black vigilantism, particularly in remote rural areas. Those who participated in these mob actions seemed to be especially agitated when the victims were women and/or children, and the lynchers believed that retribution was warranted. Those African American males in the Delta who were legal heads of households very likely interpreted violent attacks by other black males on female relatives and children as attacks on their manhood. This suggests that lynch mob incidents involving African Americans in the Delta in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were as much about exerting masculine control over the household as they were about enacting revenge against alleged criminals in the community.

**THE DECLINE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
LYNCH MOB ACTIVITY IN THE DELTAS**

The dramatic rise in the number of African Americans victimized by white mob violence and the emergence of the “black beast rapist” discourse occurred after conservative white Democrats had completely ousted black and white Republicans from power in southern state governments primarily through fraud, intimidation, political chicanery, and violence. The 1890 Mississippi state constitution contained measures designed to eliminate African American citizens from voting through the imposition of poll taxes, literacy tests, and other requirements. As a result, between 1890 and 1892 the number of African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi plummeted from 190,000 to 8,000. In the counties in the Mississippi Delta, the effects of these disfranchisement measures were even more dramatic. In Washington County, for example, there were 9,103 eligible African American voters in 1890; by 1892 there were only 103 African Americans registered.⁴⁷

Table 3. Number and Percentage of Lynch Victims by Decade, 1882–1930*

Year	African American Victim, African American Mob	African American Victim, White Mob	White Victim, White Mob	Percent African American Victim, African American Mob	Percent African American Victim, White Mob	Percent White Victim, White Mob
1882–1889	42	316	81	10	72	28
1890–1899	56	744	123	6	82	12
1900–1909	36	568	33	6	89	5
1910–1919	10	436	16	2	94	4
1920–1930	2	217	22	1	90	9

Source: Adapted from Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana, 1993), Table C-3, 271.

*Statistics reflect lynchings that occurred in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Along with black disfranchisement came a significant increase in white mob violence against African Americans. The pattern is clear, between 1882 and 1889 it is estimated that 316 African Americans died at the hands of white lynch mobs in the South. Between 1890 and 1899, however, approximately 744 African Americans were murdered by white mobs. As the number of African American

victims of lynching rose, fewer whites were lynched. During the period from 1883 to 1889, white-on-black lynch mob violence accounted for 72 percent of all lynching incidents, whereas white-on-white lynch mob violence accounted for 28 percent. In the following decade, white-on-black mob violence increased to 82 percent of total lynching incidents, and white-on-white lynch mob violence decreased to 12 percent (see table 3).

At the national level, the number of whites lynched (411) far exceeded the number of African Americans lynched (227) between 1882 and 1885. However, the number of African Americans lynched increased from 227 in 1885 to 1,524 in 1900, roughly a 600 percent increase. There was only a 69 percent increase in white lynching victims from 411 to 696 during the same period. In the year 1900, 106 African Americans were lynched as compared to only 9 whites.⁴⁸ Therefore, both regionally and nationally, the widening disparities between the number of white and African American lynching victims after the mid-1880s reflected the racialization of lynch mob violence.

In addition, the racialization of lynching accompanied the development of spectacle lynchings in which sometimes thousands of whites routinely gathered in public places to witness the torture and execution of alleged African American criminals. These spectacles placed a premium upon performing racial domination, humiliation, and eliciting excruciating pain. The spectacle lynchings were used to dramatize power relationships through the performance of white dominance over African American bodies.⁴⁹

Southern whites increasingly argued that lynching was necessary to thwart “black beast rapists.” An 1892 editorial in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, a white daily newspaper widely circulated in the Delta region, that appeared after the lynching of three African American men was representative of the rationalizations and justifications of these brutal acts published in the 1890s.

The lynching of three Negro scoundrels reported in our dispatches from Anniston, Ala., for a brutal outrage committed upon a white woman will be a text for much comment on “Southern barbarism” by Northern newspapers; but we fancy it will hardly prove effective for campaign purposes among intelligent people. The frequency of these lynchings calls attention to the frequency of the crimes which causes lynching. The “Southern barbarism” which deserves the serious attention of all people North and South, is the barbarism which preys upon weak and defenseless [white] women. . . . The swift punishment which invariably follows these horrible crimes doubtless acts as a deterring effect upon the [N]egroes in that immediate neighborhood for a short time. But the lesson is not widely learned nor long remembered. Then such crimes, equally atrocious, have happened in quick succession, one in Tennessee, one in Arkansas, and one in Alabama. The facts of the crime appear to appeal more to the [N]egro’s lustful imagination than the facts of the punishment do to his fears. He sets aside all fear of death in any form when opportunity is found for the gratification of his bestial desires. There is small reason to hope for any change for the better.⁵⁰

In direct response to the “black beast hysteria,” Rebecca Latimer Felton, a social activist and writer for the Democratic Party and the first female U.S. Senator, famously declared, “[I]f it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beasts—then I say lynch, a thousand times a week if necessary.”⁵¹ Southern whites’ widespread acceptance of the “black beast rapist” discourse transformed white-on-black lynching into a moral duty to protect white womanhood. Consequently, these developments impacted the meaning and trajectory of African American lynch mob violence after 1890.

CONCLUSION

The 1880s represented the peak of African American lynch mob activity. In the South between the years 1882 and 1889, African American lynch mob activity accounted for about 10 percent of total lynch mob incidents. In every subsequent decade, African American lynch mob violence as a percentage of total lynching incidents decreased. Similarly, in the Delta region, African American lynch mob incidents peaked at 23 percent of total lynching episodes during the 1880s, and declined every decade thereafter.⁵² African American lynch mob violence in the Deltas emerged amidst the political and demographic transformations in the late 1870s and 1880s. At the end of Reconstruction with extensive African American migration into the Delta frontier, the pervasive violence and the unresponsive legal system very likely served as justifications for African Americans to engage in extra-legal mob violence. Alleged murders and rapes, particularly of African American women and children by other African Americans, were the brutal acts that precipitated African American lynch mob violence.

By the early 1890s, however, as lynching became more racialized and the “black beast rapist” discourse emerged and provided a useful justification for white-on-black lynching, many southern whites came to believe that it was their “moral duty” to protect white womanhood and white supremacy, and as a result, the number of black lynching victims soared. However, as Ida Wells revealed in *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record: Lynchings in the United States, 1892, 1893, 1894*—and as the investigators for the NAACP in the early 20th century concluded in *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1918*—alleged attacks on white women were indicated as the precipitating events in less than 20 percent of white-on-black lynching incidents.⁵³ At the same time, given these developments, it is likely that African Americans felt compelled to abstain from lynching after the 1880s because African American extra-legal violence would have implied African American support for lynching as the proper way to deal with those accused of heinous crimes. Perhaps the decline in African American lynch mob violence should be understood as African American resistance to the racialization of lynching after

1890. Further research and investigations are needed to fully unravel the complex circumstances that influenced the decline in African American lynch mob violence in the Delta region and other parts of the South by the early 20th century.

NOTES

¹*Times Picayune*, 29 April 1884, 1.

²Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia, PA, 1980), 6.

³*Ibid.*

⁴For a comprehensive analysis of spectacle lynching, see Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009).

⁵See Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Lynching, 1890–1912* (New York, 1996), 21–22; Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 207–217.

⁶Stewart Tolnay, “When Race Didn’t Matter: Black and White Mob Violence Against Their Own Color,” in *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 137–143.

⁷Bruce Baker, “Lynch Law Reversed: The Rape of Lula Sherman, the Lynching of Manse Waldrop, and the Debate Over Lynching in the 1880s,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (2005): 273–293.

⁸John Solomon Otto, *The Final Frontiers, 1880–1930: Settling the Southern Bottomlands* (Westport, CT, 1999).

⁹The Mississippi Delta includes the following sixteen counties: Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tunica, and Washington. These are considered core counties because their boundaries are wholly contained within the Mississippi and Yazoo river basin. Carroll, Holmes, Panola, Tallahatchie, Warren, and Yazoo counties are considered partial Delta counties because only a portion of their boundaries fall within the Mississippi/Yazoo river floodplain. Similarly, Chicot, Crittenden, Desha, Lee, Phillips, and Mississippi are considered core Arkansas Delta counties. Partial Arkansas Delta counties are Arkansas, Ashley, Craighead, Cross, Drew, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lonoke, Monroe, Poinsett, Pulaski, St. Francis, and Woodruff. See chapter one of Nancy Woodruff’s *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge, MA, 2003) for an overview of the historical development of the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas.

¹⁰John Solomon Otto, *The Final Frontiers*, 11–13.

¹¹*United States Historical Census Browser*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center), <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/> (accessed 3 June 2009).

¹²A comprehensive lynching inventory of Southern lynch victims between the years 1882 and 1930 can be accessed online at *Project HAL: Historical American Lynching Data Collection Project*, <http://people.uncw.edu/hinese/HAL/HAL%20Web%20Page.htm>. According to Project HAL, their lynching data is derived from NAACP lynching records at the Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama. Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck examined these records for name and event duplications and other errors with funding from a National Science Foundation Grant and made their findings available to Project HAL in 1998.

¹³In 1880, the average population across all Delta counties was approximately 14,000. I designated Delta counties with less than 14,000 residents as the least populated, whereas counties with more than 14,000 residents were counted as most populated.

¹⁴David T. Courtwright, *Violent Lands: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 3.

¹⁵John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time*, 43.

¹⁶Christopher Waldrep, *Roots of Disorder: Race and Criminal Justice in the American South, 1817–1880* (Urbana, IL, 1998), 133. According to Waldrep, during Presidential Reconstruction, African Americans were excluded from grand jury service. While African American grand juror participation dramatically increased during Congressional Reconstruction, African Americans were still underrepresented, given that, in 1870, African Americans constituted 70 percent of Warren County’s total population.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 132.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 146 and 167.

²¹Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York, 1984), 230.

²²Angelina S. Godoy, *Popular Injustice: Violence, Community, and Law in Latin America* (Stanford, CT, 2006); Daniel M. Goldstein, *The Spectacular City: Violence and Performance in Urban Bolivia* (Durham, NC, 2005); Justice Tankebe, "Self Help, Policing, and Procedural Justice: Ghanaian Vigilantism and the Rule of Law," *Law & Society Review* 43 (Summer 2009): 245–270; David Pratten, "The Thief Eats His Shame: Practice and Power in Nigerian Vigilantism," *Africa* 78 (Winter 2008): 64–83; Gary Kynoch, "Urban Violence in Colonial Africa: A Case for South African Exceptionalism," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34 (Summer 2008): 629–645; Jokin A. Bidaguren and Danial Nina, "Governability and Forms of Popular Justice in the New South Africa and Mozambique: Community Courts and Vigilantism," *Social Justice* 31 (Spring 2004): 165–181.

²³E. M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay, "When Race Didn't Matter: African American and White Mob Violence Against Their Own Color," in *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 137–8.

²⁴The newspaper report did not disclose the name of Frank Pride's wife.

²⁵*Little Rock Arkansas*, "Negroes Lynched by a Mob of Negroes," 6 April 1910, 1–2.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹I identified the following seven lynch victims from the Mississippi Delta: James Green, Mose Lemons, Dennis Martin, Raymond Murphy, Allen Nance, Sandy Wallace, and Columbus White. For the Arkansas Delta, I identified the following eight lynch victims: Eugene Baker, John Barnett, Robert Donnelly, John Farmer, Edward Hardy, Henry Jones, Laura Mitchell, and David Scruggs. For complete census information on the above individuals, consult Ancestry.com; "Sandy Wallace," *1870 United States Federal Census* (Provo, UT, 2003) and "James Green," "Laura Mitchell," and "Allen Nance," *1900 United States Federal Census* (Provo, UT, 2004); "Edward Hardy," *1910 United States Federal Census* (Provo, UT, 2006); and for the remaining lynch victims see Ancestry.com, *1880 Federal Census* (Provo, UT, 2005). I identified two additional lynch victims in marriage records. See Ancestry.com, Hunting for Bears, "Frank King," *Arkansas Marriages, 1779–1992* (Provo, UT, 2004); Ancestry.com, "Thomas Mack," *Mississippi Marriages, 1776–1935* (Provo, UT, 2004) (accessed 7 November 2007).

³⁰Charles Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD, 1998), 39–49.

³¹*Memphis Commercial Appeal*, "Negroes Lynch Negro, Slayer of Old Mammy," 11 November 1923, 1.

³²In those five incidents, see *Times Picayune*, "Two Negro Incendiaries Lynched," 3 March 1887, 1; *The Daily Picayune*, 23 February 1913, 1; *Times Picayune*, 30 December 1886, 1; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, "Hanged and Then Shot," 23 September 1894, 1; *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, "His Black Neck," 1 July 1892, 1.

³³*Atlanta Constitution*, 27 July 1887, 1.

³⁴*Atlanta Constitution*, 21 July 1907, 33; *New York Times*, 21 July 1907, 9.

³⁵*Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, "Negro White Caps," 15 January 1889, 1.

³⁶*Fort Wayne (Indiana) News*, 21 June 1895, 10.

³⁷*Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), "A Negro Lynched," 8 July 1891, 2.

³⁸*Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, "Negroes Lynch a Negro," 21 April 1905, 2.

³⁹In addition to murder and rape allegations, three African Americans were lynched for other reasons. Frank King was lynched for shooting a man and adultery; Ernest Williams was lynched for obscene language; and Columbus White was lynched for arson. For complete information on these lynchings, see *Project HAL*, <http://people.uncw.edu/hinese/HAL/HAL%20Web%20Page.htm>.

⁴⁰Eighty-one percent of (or nine of eleven) rape allegations involved children.

⁴¹Ancestry.com, s.vv. "Robert Donnelly," *1880 Federal Census*, (Provo, UT, 2005).

⁴²*Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, "His African American Neck," 1 July 1892, 1.

⁴³Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861–1875* (Gainesville, FL, 2003), 99–116. With regard to "gendered discourses," it was reported in June 1908 that Ernest Williams was lynched by a group of African American women in Ashley County, Arkansas. Williams had supposedly used "objectionable language" toward African American women and this precipitated the lynching. According to the newspaper report, "[N]egro women of that town are reported to have organized a league to enforce better moral conduct by their race, and to protect themselves from [N]egro men." Furthermore, a newspaper report stated that, "Williams . . . used profane language . . . in the presence of some of the women in the reported

league,” and in response, the women captured Williams and hung him from a tree. While intriguing, the newspaper version of the lynching is dubious for several reasons. In no other African American lynch mob incident was someone lynched for “offensive language.” As noted earlier, the vast majority of African American lynch mob incidents were activated by violent crimes. In addition, a lynch mob composed of only women is unlikely given that in no other Arkansas Delta lynching were African American women reported as participants or even witnesses. Further research might likely reveal that the mob was composed of both women and men, and that the allegation that provoked Williams’s lynching was much more serious than his use of “offensive language.” See *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, 21 June 1908.

⁴⁴Ancestry.com, s.vv. “David Scruggs,” *1880 Federal Census*, (Provo, UT, 2005).

⁴⁵*Little Rock Daily Gazette*, “Unnatural Father Lynched by His Colored Brethren,” 25 July 1885, 1. See the following newspaper articles for the remaining four rape allegations that involved children: *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, “Strung Him Up,” 15 July 1892, 1; *Times Picayune*, “A Negro Ravisher Lynched,” 1 July 1885; *Times-Democrat*, 18 November 1890, 1; *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), 20 September 1903, 3.

⁴⁶*Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, “Bullets and Fire,” 15 November 1893, 1.

⁴⁷Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: African American Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, IL, 1989), 43–47.

⁴⁸For comprehensive lynching statistics between the years 1882 and 1968, see Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching*, 4–7.

⁴⁹For a discussion of the ritual aspects of spectacle lynching, see the first chapter in W. F. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, IL, 1993). For an insightful discussion of the cultural and political significance of spectacle lynching, see Jacqueline Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, 1979), 149–57.

⁵⁰This quotation was taken from Ida B. Wells, *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, and A Red Record; Mob Rule in New Orleans*, ed. Patricia Hill Collins (1969; reprinted Amherst, NY, 2002).

⁵¹Rebecca Latimer Felton, “The Needs of Farmers’ Wives and Daughters,” in *Lynching in America: A History in Documents*, ed. Christopher Waldrep (New York, 2006), 143–144.

⁵²Beck and Tolnay, “When Race Didn’t Matter,” 136.

⁵³Wells, *On Lynchings*; NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1918* (New York, 1919).