

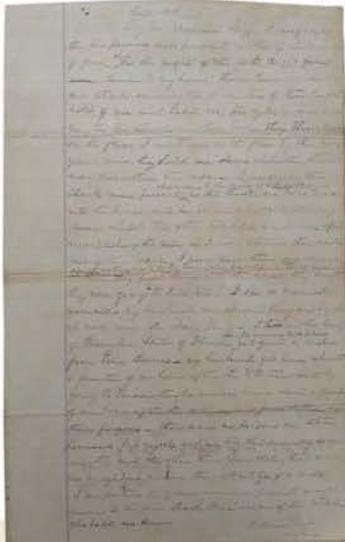
The 1875 Pensacola Lynchings and the “Right Way” to Protest Racial Injustice

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INTRODUCTION

In August 1875, two Black men suspected of raping a white woman in Escambia County, Florida were pulled from their jail cell in the middle of the night and hanged near Pensacola’s Seville Square. The 100-person mob then riddled their bodies with bullets. In the following days, racial tensions nearly boiled over as a local Black militia was met by armed white residents called into service by Pensacola’s mayor, a former Confederate colonel. This event was the first recorded lynching in Pensacola and presaged the campaign of terror and disenfranchisement that would be waged against Black residents in subsequent decades.

Testimony of Malissa Taylor

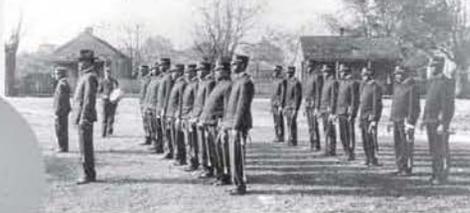


CONTEXT & QUESTIONS

- In 1875, Pensacola was in the middle of a lumber boom. Between 1870-1880, the city more than doubled in population and grew to 48% Black, yet many of the people in power were white former Confederate officers or enslavers. How did former slaves and former enslavers coexist during this period?
- White Democrats resented Circuit Judge William W. Van Ness, “the carpet-bagger from New York,” appointed by Republican Governor Marcellus Stearns and assigned to the case. Van Ness had left the city because of an outbreak of yellow fever, and local newspapers mocked him as “a foreign Judge who tries prisoners at convenience and has already abandoned the country... because there is a rumor of epidemic disease.” How did political enmities of Reconstruction exacerbate racial tensions?
- The absence of Van Ness was also blamed for a July 10 double lynching in nearby Milton, when a white man named Carroll was accused of committing “a most revolting outrage” on a five-year-old girl. The Black man who was hanged alongside him was sharing the cell with Carroll at the time the mob arrived. “Justice cannot wait on the satraps who are sent to take charge of our affairs, and if Judge Van Ness is not on hand to attend to duty, Judge Lynch will attend to it for him.” Was the extrajudicial killing of a white man in Milton proof that the Pensacola lynchings were not racially motivated?
- Many Pensacola residents, both white and Black, were suspicious of circumstances leading up to the killings. Is there evidence that city or county officials enabled the mob?
- The county jail was almost 600 yards away from the reported site of the lynchings. Why did the mob take Brown and Morse so far away?



The Pensacola Guards Colored Military Company, also known as the Garfield Guards, was organized in 1861 with more than 80 members. It was the successor militia of the Butler Guards, who patrolled the county jail after the 1875 lynchings.



Left: William W. Van Ness, Union Quartermaster during the Civil War

“The movement of the representatives of the colored population, and the threats openly made on the streets, induced the Mayor to call on citizens to aid in police duty. This appeal met with prompt response. The city has been vigilantly patrolled for two nights past, and order maintained without the occurrence of violence. ... The respectable majority of our colored people know and appreciate the fact that their living depends on the commerce and industries which are conducted by white men.” – Pensacola Gazette

CONCLUSIONS

In 1875, the Black citizens of Pensacola knew that Brown and Morse had been killed without due process, and they were mad. Their anger turned into protests, and those protests were promptly quashed by physical and economic intimidation.

Nobody in the lynch mob was ever brought to justice, yet “quite a number” of the Black protesters were arrested for “threatening conduct.”

These events clearly have parallels to the modern Black Lives Matter movement, showing that expressions of Black outrage have always been ridiculed, dismissed, and attacked, and that for many, there has never been a “right way” to protest racial injustice.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

- August 10 Mrs. Malissa Taylor, mother of two, was raped in her Pine Barren home by a group of four Black men: one committed the rape, two held her down, and one kept watch outside.
- August 13 Jeff Brown and Morris Morse were arrested by Sheriff A.M. Greene and jailed by County Judge W.W.J. Kelly.
- August 14 Taylor gave sworn testimony identifying Brown as the rapist and Morse as one of the men who held her. The men maintained their innocence and “asked for further time to get witnesses to prove that they were in another locality at the time the outrage was committed. ... The deputy sheriff had a subpoena for two weeks to bring witnesses for the men, but he neglected to do so, which shows gross neglect on the part of that official.”
- August 20 Berry Dorson died in the hospital after allegedly confessing to City Marshal Frank Touart and Jailer Richard Evans that he had participated in the rape but “repented of his crime on leaving the scene, and had threatened to inform on [the other three], and that they then attacked him and tried to kill him, and left him on the railroad track for dead.” Greene or Evans separated Brown and Morse from a third prisoner, Col. George E. Wentworth warned Evans to keep a close watch because “reports he saw published... might excite the people to extreme measure.” Evans left the jail at 11:30 p.m.
- August 21 Shortly after midnight, someone with a key to the jail’s outer door opened it. The inner lock was burst open. Brown and Morse were removed and taken to a vacant lot “corner of Sarragossa and Florida Blanca streets” and hanged from separate trees. Their bodies were riddled with bullets from the mob. The noise attracted the police at 2:30am, who chased and exchanged gunfire with members of the mob. During the coroner’s inquest, Black citizens “came where the bodies were laying to look at them, collecting in knots on the streets discussing the merits of the case, many of them became excited.” The Butler Guards, a local Black militia, patrolled the area near the jail, and other Black citizens threatened retribution. Mayor Joseph Pickett Jones called on white citizens to help keep the peace. Black demonstrators were arrested.
- August 22 Armed white citizens continued to patrol the streets.
- August 23 “Many leading colored citizens held a meeting and adopted resolutions denouncing the conduct of the few, and the Mayor made a speech in the public square, requesting good citizens of all classes to return to their business.”



Composite of 1884 Sanborn fire insurance maps showing the path and distance from the county jail on Zaragoza Street to the intersection at Florida Blanca Street near the site of the lynchings. The exact location is unclear. In both the 1884 and 1887 Sanborn maps, the area east and south of the intersection are too sparse to warrant inclusion, which may explain why they were selected by the mob.