

Document Reader Five: Crime, Violence, and Lynching

The collection of primary sources documents is designed to provide context for K-12 educators who are participating in the Quest for Freedom workshop examining the Long Civil Rights movement with a focus on landmarks in Thomasville and the Red Hill region of southern Georgia and northern Florida. With minor exceptions we have strived to provide verbatim transcripts with only minor editorial revisions--added texts are placed in square brackets. As historical documents they reflect many of the biases and prejudices of the period in which they were written. In using them in classroom care must be used as to place them in the proper context.

Striving to capture of the Black voice is often problematic. For instance, through much of Thomasville's history there existed no African American newspaper for the period before 1954. Fortunately, Black newspapers in other parts of Georgia and nationally sometimes carried news regarding Thomasville. We also often have to rely on letters, diaries, and newspapers accounts of white residents, nonetheless the documents in this reader underscore the resilience of the African American community during from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the U.S. Supreme Court issuing the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954.

G. Kurt Piehler, Editor

Livia Dicmetiere-Monod, Stella Contente, Aaron Contente, Editorial Assistants

The Quest for Freedom: The African American Community and the Aftermath of Slavery, 1865-1954.

Gregory Mixon & G. Kurt Piehler, Co-Directors

Anne McCudden, Executive Director, Thomasville History Center, Grants Administrator

This documentary reader was funded in part with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy Demands Wisdom.

Document One

Georgia

Thomasville, December 27, 1869

A PROSPEROUS YEAR

In this section the year has been a prosperous one. There is *some* meal and *some* bacon in every house, and this holiday week has been one of the merriest and happiest for years. The relation between whites and blacks are also improving.

NO JUSTICE FOR THE BLACKS.

There is virtually no justice in the courts between a white and black man, but there is a great deal of thought, discussion, and agitation which will result in action in the right direction. As an instance of the state of feeling: ---

One negro was brought by another and lodged in jail about three weeks since. A few nights afterward a band of men in disguise forced open the jail, took the prisoner half a mile from town and shot him. These disguised men are known, but when the grand jury meet next week, some of whose members must have know the parties, no bill was found. At the coroner's inquest a colored Justice of the Peace, who is also a Baptist clergyman, expressed the opinion that Mob Law was not the best kind of law. He was immediately knocked down by a tall heavy Georgian in the presence of several witnesses, and half a dozen others drew their knives prepared to cut him in small pieces if there was any resistance. Yet the Grand Jury could not ascertain *positively* that the man was struck, and found no bill against his assailant.

Yours truly,

W. L. CLARK

Source: *The American Missionary*, 14:3 (March 1, 1870); 53.

Document Two

Another Burglary

On Monday night about 11 o'clock policeman Allen hearing a noise in the rear of Col. Remington's went around to investigate it and found the back door open. Some sneak thief or probably worse, incendiary, had evidently concealed himself in the store before closing. *He* ransacked the money drawers without finding any of the "lucre" and made his escape as shown. Before leaving, he either purposely or accidentally set fire to a pile of cotton samples but the fire seemed to have burned out itself. We are not in favor of lynch law, but, we should like to see some of the midnight incendiaries who have fired this town in the past, and who evidently linger around here yet, hanging to a lamp post some morning.

LATER.---On Wednesday the supposed thieves, Frank McLeod and Arthur Austin, two colored chaps were arrested. Each, during the day, had sold a knife, and the knives were recognized by Mr. Remington as his property. Upon examination he found that a few cases of these patterns were missing from his shelves. The knives were purchased by Mr. Boon and Mr. Fitzgerald, who showed them to Mr. Spair. He, after the property was identified, proceeded to the capture of the boys. Arthur was soon found and said he got the knife from Frank.---About 11 o'clock at night the Marshall stationed his police force around the premises of Frank Cray the

home of young McLeod, and then knocked at the door for entrance. McLeod attempted to escape by side window, but was covered with a pistol and ordered back. After despairing of escape he opened the door and quietly submitted to arrest. Others of Col. Remington's knives were found on his person and two of the cases from which they had been taken were found in his sleeping apartment. He said he got the knives from Arthur, but stated that he received them at a time after he had sold them to Mr. Boon--- They were taken before Judge Hopkins on Thursday and bound over to Superior Court. In absence of \$500 bond they were taken to jail.

Source: *Thomasville Times*, November 24, 1877, p. 3

Document Three

The Prevalence of Lynch Fervor

We have more lynchings in the United States than at any period in the history of the country. The demoralization of civil war may have something to do with it, but it most probably because we have more people. The lynching spirit remains and asserts itself with the increase of population because we effective protest is so seldom made against it. The reader will have no difficulty in remembering lynchings all over the country. He will have great difficulty in recalling any effective protest made against the habit besides the one recently made by the faithful sheriff at Birmingham, Ala. This paper has reported hundreds of columns of lynchings in the last twenty years. During that time it has never reported the legal hanging of a single lyncher for his crime Sheriff Smith of Birmingham held the just and legal view that to attempt lynching means to attempt murder. When this view is enforced as he enforced it, the truth will come home and banish the spirit of murder from the minds of those who would not commit murder unless urged on by the mob spirit and sustained by the mob presence.

Thomasville Daily Times, December 28, 1888, p. 2

Document Four

A NEGRO LYNCHED

WOULD BE RAVISHER RIDDLED WITH BULLETS

Renny Jefferson Attempts an Outrage And Meets The Usual Fate—The Scene of the Lynching Newar Metcalfe—Thomas County's First Lynching.

The first lynching that has occurred in Thomas county within the memory of the oldest inhabitant took place within three hundred yards of the peaceable little village of Metcalfe some time during Sunday night.

About eight o'clock yesterday morning Sheriff Doss received a telegram from the marshal of Metcalfe telling him to come down at once and bring the coroner, that negro had been lynched.

Several citizens accompanied the officers to Metcalfe, all going down on the 9:30 train. A TIME ENTERPRISE MAN was in the party. When the little town was reached everything was quiet. A good many people were on the streets, but there was absolutely no excitement. Coroner Miles selected a jury and repaired at once to the scene of the lynching, which was about three hundred yards north of the town. There, hanging by the neck to a limb of a small oak tree, on the edge of a little pond, they found the negro, his body riddled with bullets.

The negro, whose name is Renny Jefferson, was a small black negro about twenty-two years of age. When viewed by the coroner's jury his feet were touching the ground, but it likely that when first strung up he swung clear. A plow line was use to hang him with and it is likely that this stretched considerably under the weight of the body. Several bullet holes were plainly visible on the face and head and a number of holes in the clothing showed that he had been riddled with balls.

As soon as the place was reached the coroner's jury went to work. After examining several witnesses the following verdict was ordered:

"We, the jury, find that Renny Jefferson came to his death by hanging and gun shot wound by the hands of parties unknown.

"C. C. Wheeler, Foreman;

"T. C. Sparks,

"H.T. Cay,

"J. H. Davidson,

"C. H Young

"J. J. Cone."

Of course nothing could be learned as to how the lynching occurred. A great many of the people of Metcalfe heard the shooting, but knew nothing of what had occurred yesterday morning, when they found the caboose broken open and Jefferson who had been put in the day before gone. A short search resulted in finding him as above stated.

The crime which resulted in Jefferson's violent death at the hands of an infuriated mob is the same that has caused so many similar executions by Judge Lynch. Jefferson had been employed on the farm of one of the best know families in that section, and had always borne a good reputation.

The following are the facts as told the reporter by citizens of Metcalfe:

Saturday afternoon, late, the father left home to spend the night at his son's home, near by, and left only two grown-up daughters and a son 16 or 17 years old at his house. The young man invited two other young men of about his age to spend the night with him. Jefferson, who had borrowed a mule to visit his father, returned about 9 o'clock and took in the situation at a glance, and arranged with the young men to go with him a short distance on a mission of fun, the

arrangement being that, as soon as the young ladies retired for the night, the boys were to come to his house, where he would join them. But instead of going home, he made a circuitous route the back way and secreted himself under the room the girls would occupy---he was about the house enough to know everyone's bedroom---planning that as soon as the boys got a safe distance on their way to his house, to enter the girl's room, and after accomplishing his purpose, fulfill his part for the young men's pleasure thus throwing off any suspicion that might attach to him. Fortunately before the young ladies retired, one of them detected him in his place of hiding, and intensely frightened, she gave the alarm and fell in a swoon. The young men ran to her rescue, and as soon as she could talk told them what the trouble was and who was its cause--- Jefferson in the meantime, having made his escape. The young lady was suffering so intensely from fright and prostration no one left her till early next morning. One of the young men went over to Metcalf and reported the matter, when pretty soon a crowd had gathered and a plan for arrest perfected. Thus early in the day Jefferson and his wife, having married three months ago left to go to church at "Dawkins' Pond" in Leon county. Bailiff Hancock and two or three deputies repaired to Mr. Marshall Courtney's, the Leon county officer, and got him to serve papers and bring him to the state line, when he was turned over to Georgia officers. The posse brought him back and, had the young lady identify him, and they locked him up in the calaboose at Metcalfe.

Bailiff Hancock stated to the reporter that the negro confessed to his captors that he was in hiding under the house for the purpose of assaulting the young ladies and that he had been awaiting an opportunity to do so for some time. He further stated that if necessary he would have killed them to accomplish his purpose. The prompt appearance of the young men, however, prevented him from carrying out his designs.

From what we were able to learn no one had any idea that the negro would be lynched, but about one o'clock Sunday morning a mob broke the door of the calaboose open with a crowbar and took him out and dragged him through woods to the place where his body was found. He was hastily strung up to a tree, a few volleys were fired and Jefferson had paid the penalty of his crime with his life. The mob left the body hanging where it was, a silent warning to all who would dare attempt to violate the persons of the women of this country.

This is the first lynching in the history of Thomas county, and we sincerely trust it may be the last. Our people are a law abiding people, and we are very sure that every good citizen sincerely regrets that a lynching has occurred in the county. But, as has been so truly said, the surest way to stop lynching is to stop committing the crime which calls for summary punishment.

Lynchings are to be deplored, all violations of the law are to be deplored, but there is one crime which will, as it should, always meet sure and swift punishment in the south. Our women must and will be protected at any hazard and at all costs. It would seem that with the sure fate which is meted out to the rapist throughout the land, the perpetrators of this revolting crime would hesitate about committing it, but scarcely a week passes that somewhere in the south, and occasionally in the north, some black fiend, with an uncontrollable lust seizes some white women in his foul embrace.

When condemning lynching of negroes for this crime of crimes, let the critics stop and think of the frail and helpless girl in the arms of her black assailant; think of the humiliation which she must carry to the grave; think of the living death which she must suffer if her assailant has spared her life. Daily T. E. June 12.

Source: *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, June 16, 1900, p. 1.

Document Five

The Assistant is the name of a new monthly publication of Thomasville, Ga. It says: "Lynching seems to be on a boom this year. Thirteen states, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia have stained their fair seals with lawlessness. Texas takes the lead with fourteen, and Alabama follows with ten. What a shame on Christendom."

Source: *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, Indiana, August 7, 1892, p. 4.

Document Six

VAGRANT BILL

BEING ENFORCED IN THOMASVILLE

Provisions of the Calvin Act Under Which Thomasville's Idling Negroes Are Being Arrested or Made to Travel

The Calvin vagrancy law is now being enforced in Thomasville. There has been considerable inquiry as to whom the law defined as vagrants. According to the bill vagrants are:

"1. Persons wandering or strolling about in idleness, who are able to work and have no property to support them.

"2. Persons leading an idle, immoral or profligate life, who have no property to them, and who are able to work, and do not work.

"3. All persons able to work, having no property to support them, and who have no visible or known means of a fair, honest and reputable livelihood. The term visible and known means of a fair, honest and reputable livelihood as used in this section, shall be construed to mean reasonably continuous employment at some lawful occupation for reasonable compensation or fixed and regular income from property or other investment which income is sufficient for the support and maintenance of such vagrant.

"4. Persons drawing a fixed abode, who have no visible property to support them and who live by stealing or by trading or bartering stolen property.

"5. Professional gamblers living in idleness.

“6. All ablebodied persons who are found begging for a living or who quit their homes and leave their wives and children without the means of subsistence.

“7. That all persons who are able to work and who do not work, but hire out their minor children an live upon their wages, shall be deemed and considered vagrants.

“8. All persons over 16 and under 21 years of age able to work and who do no work and have no property to support them, and have not some known and visible means of a fair, honest, and reputable livelihood, and whose parents are unable to support them, and who are not in attendance upon some educational institution.”

It is the duty of our officers of the law to arrest by warrant such persons and have them bound over to the county court. If the fact of vagrancy is proved, the Judge can bond the offender to any amount he wishes for one year, the bond providing for his future industry and good behavior.

When no bond can be given the vagrant shall be punished for a misdemeanor.

“Provided That it shall be sufficient defense to the charge of vagrancy, under any of the provisions of this act, that the defendant has made bona fide efforts to obtain employment at reasonable prices for his labor and has failed to obtain the same.”

Yesterday morning the officers go after the vagrants here in Thomasville and landed two in the barracks. . They are Tom Brown and Dink Burton. These negroes are traveling gamblers and come within the provisions of the law.

The officers do not intend to start any terrific crusade but they will keep their eyes open and will attend to any one of whom the law says is a vagrant.

It would seem therefore that it behooves the dusky sons of rest to leave or labor.

Thomasville Times-Enterprise, September 5, 1903, p. 7

Document Seven

EIGHT PINCHED

Vagrant Haul a Heavy One Yesterday Afternoon.

The Calvin vagrancy bill had been given a rest for several days, but the officers jumped into the ring Tuesday with redoubled vigor and hauled eight vagrants into court yesterday. There were 5 women and 3 men in the gang. All are Thomasville negroes and re in jail awaiting appearance before Judge Hansell.

Thomasville Times-Enterprise, September 12, 1903, p. 1.

VAGRANT DAY

A Number of the Wandering Tribe Sentenced Thursday.

All great fairs and expositions set aside certain days for certain purposes. In keeping with this custom, Thursday might be called "vagrant day" at county court, as Judge Hansell had a number of offenders in that regard before him.

The new law seems, by the way to have given rise to an aristocracy in crime. It might be supposed that persons charged with vagrancy would consider themselves in the fashion, and up to date. They are by no mean proud of it, however. A by-stander asked the prisoner at the bar one by one what they were charged with, Thursday. "Vagrancy" was the shamefaced response from each until one was reaching who cried in ringing tones---"Vagrancy; no suh! I'se up for misdemeanor."

The following vagrants were each given \$25 and costs or 7 months: Tom Brown, Dink Burton, and Charlie Smith. The first two are negroes and the last names a white man.

Laura Williams, accused of vagrancy, was found not guilty by the jury.

Melvin Richardson was found guilty of aiming a pistol and given seven months or \$30 and costs.

Thomasville Times-Enterprise, September 12, 1903, p. 4.

Got a White Man.

The officers Friday morning arrested Charles Smith, a white man, under the provisions of the vagrancy law and he is now in the guard house awaiting appearance before Judge Hansell who will fix the amount of his bond for future industry and good behavior. Smith's arrest shows that the Thomasville officers intend to enforce the law regardless of color. Of all the arrests made under the Calvin law, but few white people have been among the number.

Thomasville Times-Enterprise, September 12, 1903, p 5.

Document Eight

Harris Hanged at Thomasville

Execution of the Negro Occurred Without the Unusual Incident ***

Several Military Companies On Duty

Howard Harris, the negro convicted during the recent regular term of Thomas Superior Court of criminal assault upon one of the well known women of that county, was hanged in the Thomas county jail at Thomasville last Friday, at twenty-eight minutes after ten o'clock. Twelve minutes later he was pronounced dead by the physician in attendance.

Harris was carried to Thomasville Friday morning from Macon accompanied by the Albany and Americus military companies. The Thomasville Guards were also on duty, the military demonstration being sufficiently formidable to prevent any demonstration of those who might have been disposed to take the law into their own hands. There was no demonstration of any kind, and the execution was accomplished without unusual incident of any kind.

The Cairo Messenger, My 27, 1910, p. 6

Document Nine

LYNCHING SPIRIT THREATENS GEORGIA

Race Men Organize to Defend the Repelling Mob Attack---More Determination to Protect Its Women.

(Special to Chicago Defender)

Thomasville, Ga., Jan. 14.---Sheriff Rheberg of this city, upon complaint of Sidney McRae, a farmer of this county, who, while returning home from Boston Friday night, was fired upon by some one from ambush, arrested two innocent race men who claimed to suspect of the shooting. There is positively no evidence against the accused. The shooting occurred at night and the alleged assassins are impossible of identification. Notwithstanding, this astonishing truth, the crime as usual, falls upon the defenseless. At the courthouse there is talk of lynching, but the race is organized to defend their lives and those who may be in the custody of the law. "We are going to Stop lynching, if we have to die to the man. Unless we fight and defend our homes we will be murdered one by one by a lawless rabble that is a disgrace to the South. Fully realizing these truths, we are prepared to fight, and want the world to know it. "Liberty or death! is the slogan. The spirit of manhood won freedom for our fathers and ----illegible? together, we are going to free Georgia of lynch law. said a brave man ...here today.

Source: *Chicago Defender*, January 15, 1916, p. 1

June 23, 2023