



# Something So Horrible

## The Springfield Race Riot of 1908

By Carole Merritt

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## Curator's Statement

It has been an honor to serve as guest curator of Something So Horrible: The Springfield Riot of 1908. As one of the worst race riots in American history, the Springfield Riot was an extreme expression of America's sad tradition of violence. That it happened in Springfield was shocking but as the historical record reveals, not entirely unexpected. That violence has so often occurred in a nation that claims dedication to the rule of law and justice is the central paradox of American history

Springfield's riot tells the story of how racial divisions and inequities, inflamed by fear and resentment, erupted in uncontrolled violence – violence that not only brought damage and destruction to Blacks, but also undermined the peace and security of the entire community. The riot speaks to the present, pointing to the racial divisions that continue to confound us. Today some Springfield residents no doubt stand unready or unwilling to recognize the truth and meaning of the riot. This is cause for despair. But that a major political party has selected its first Black presidential nominee, an Illinois senator who launched his campaign in Springfield, offers pride and hope that equality and justice have gained much ground in our nation in the last one hundred years.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked with the administrators and staff of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. As we worked together to present this compelling story of the Springfield Riot, their knowledge, skill, and commitment have taught me much and inspired me greatly.

# CONTENTS

Preface	2	Community Response	51
Cry of Rape	5	A National Response	55
The Other Black Prisoner	9	Justice Promised	58
A Threatening Black Presence	12	Justice Betrayed	60
“On to Loper’s!”	19	Peace at a Price: Another Hanging	64
Invading the Levee	23	Denying Racism	66
Black Armed Defense	28	Memory and Commemoration	69
Attacking the Badlands	30	Selected Bibliography	72
Black Flight	34	Acknowledgments	74
The Lynching of Scott Burton	35		
The Lynching of William Donigan	38		
A Tradition of Violence	42		
Failed Law Enforcement	46		

# “WHY SHOULD WE KEEP BRINGING UP SOMETHING

This question was asked in response to a news article promoting the centennial commemoration of the Springfield Race Riot of 1908. “Get over it,” another reader demanded, confident that the racism of a hundred years ago is a thing of the past. But still another insisted: “It is not history. Racism is very much alive in Springfield, Illinois, and everywhere in ... America.”<sup>1</sup> The dialogue on the riot centennial uncovers the confusion, frustration,

The dialogue on the riot centennial uncovers the confusion, frustration, and, indeed, the deep and abiding anger that the issue of race continues to provoke. Few people today know much, if anything, about the riot that erupted in Springfield a century ago. Yet many have strong opinions on the meaning it holds for the present.

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The exhibition *Something So Horrible: The Springfield Race Riot of 1908* is a centennial commemoration that recalls the significance of the riot. It tells the little-known story, exposing our tradition of violence, seeking understanding of how race continues to divide us, and reaffirming our commitment to justice and equality.

It is particularly appropriate that the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum present this exhibition. “Race,” says the executive director, Rick Beard, “was in Lincoln’s time and remains today perhaps the most vexing issue that confronts American society.” The Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment issued from Lincoln’s noble struggle for national unity. Progress

# SO HORRIBLE THAT WAS SO HORRIBLE?"

in American race relations has moved at an irregular pace since his day, trudging slowly and with great difficulty through segregation and repression, injustice and inequality. Lincoln's hometown has played a distinctive role in this progression. As one of the worst race riots in American history, the Springfield race riot of 1908 was the impetus for the national organization of the civil rights struggle. The shock that such violence took place in the home of the "great emancipator" spurred leading social activists to issue a call on behalf of Black rights, founding on Lincoln's birthday, February 12, 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

This publication mirrors the narrative framework that structures the exhibition at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. It pinpoints the triggering incident, tracks the mob's destructive path through the city, and surveys the

impact on the Springfield community. In interpreting the significance of the riot, however, the narrative elaborates on the context of race and how it generated violence in cities across the nation in the early twentieth century. "Something So Horrible," therefore, is an account of the American experience as much as it is a story about Springfield.

The narrative rests on a rich collection of historical documents: newspapers, oral accounts, photographs, letters, official documents, and objects. Local newspapers covered the riot extensively. In spite of their often racist and inflammatory rhetoric, they offered invaluable first-person accounts of the violent episodes and the community's response to them. Oral interviews of persons with first-hand knowledge of the event supplemented the news reports. Springfield residents described the conflict and shared observations in letters to



family and friends. The primary strategy, therefore, is to tell the story of the riot in the words of those who experienced it, directly capturing the action and the spirit of an extraordinary event. A large number of photographs supports these first-hand accounts. Image after image engages the viewer in the riot destruction, the militia deployment, and the scenes of family, work, and play that bring Springfield's racial context to life. While most of the materials come from the collections of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, a few items have been made available for use by institutions, record repositories, and publishers. Artifacts of the riot are not as abundant as manuscripts and photographs, but local collectors have made available numerous military and law enforcement items. This

**In this centennial year, *Something So Horrible* calls to mind that terrible time when the divisions and inequities of race left a community at the mercy of mob rule. Commemoration forces us to measure the distance we have traveled in the last century and to ask whether such violence can happen again.**

publication contains much of the text and many of the images of the exhibition, weaving them into a more elaborate narrative and discussion of the riot's significance.

In this centennial year, *Something So Horrible* calls to mind that terrible time when the divisions and inequities of race left a community at the mercy of mob rule. Commemoration forces us to measure the distance we have traveled in the last century and to ask whether such violence can happen again.

Dr. Carole Merritt  
August 2008

<sup>1</sup> Web respondents for "Dave Bakke: 1908 Race Riot can't be Ignored," *Springfield Journal-Register*, 25 November 2007.



The Accuser: Mabel Hallam

“And the White woman had lied about the whole thing.”

Evans E. Cantrall,  
October 1973

# Cry of Rape

# CRY OF RAPE RAPE

One August night about a hundred years ago in Springfield, Illinois, a cry of rape precipitated one of the worst race riots in American history. Mabel Hallam, a young White woman, claimed that on the night of August 13, 1908, a Black man had violated her. “The fellow dragged me into the back yard,” she said, “carrying and pulling me through the kitchen in our home. He pulled and jerked and yanked at me until we were in one of the outbuildings. All the time his fingers were being buried into my neck and the pain was intense.” Mabel lived in a White working-class area in Springfield known as the North End with her husband William Earl Hallam, a streetcar motorman. She soon fingered George Richardson, a Black construction laborer, who had been working on a house not far from the Hallams’. “I believe that you are the man,” she said to Richardson after considerable hesitancy, identifying him at the sheriff’s office in the county courthouse the morning after the alleged rape, “and you will have to prove that you are not.” That Hallam unloaded the burden of

**“Before God, I am innocent of this crime,” Richardson insisted.**

proof on to the accused foretold the grand miscarriage of justice that would follow. “Before God, I am innocent of this crime,” Richardson insisted. “I can explain her identification of me only by the theory that all coons look alike to her.”



**Top:** Mabel Hallam, age 21, claimed she had been raped by a Black man.

**Above:** George Richardson, age 36, a construction laborer, was identified as the assailant.

Richardson was a handsome, dark-skinned man, the well-spoken grandson of one of Springfield's most prominent Blacks, William Florville, who had been Abraham Lincoln's barber. A news report, however, detailed not only Richardson's family background, but also a criminal record of violent encounters, one of which ended in death. If the report were true, then previous clashes with the law may have explained in part the assumption of his guilt in the Mabel Hallam affair and the speed with which he was taken into custody.<sup>2</sup>

In post-Emancipation America, perhaps no criminal accusation was more racially inflammatory than the charge of rape -- the ultimate violation of White manhood and defilement of White womanhood. Rape and attempted rape were the causes of one in four lynchings in America. The charge of rape, however, in Springfield, as elsewhere, was often the excuse for wholesale violence, the justifi-

cation for punishing an entire race for individual crimes and misbehavior, real and imagined. Two weeks after the riot, Mabel Hallam would confess to the grand jury that her story of rape by a Black man was a lie. "He was innocent as anybody could be," recalled Evans Cantrall, a young office worker at the time of the riot. "And the White woman had lied about the whole thing."<sup>3</sup> But that Friday morning, August 14, her cry of rape set the mob in motion and evoked death, destruction, and untold hardship for which Hallam was never held accountable.

Within fifteen minutes of Mabel's arrival at the courthouse to identify her assailant, a crowd formed, many of them her angry neighbors from the North End. Sheriff Charles Werner, fearing trouble, sent to the Sangamon County Jail for rifles. Armed deputy sheriffs led Richardson to jail on North Seventh Street at Jefferson, where he was locked up and guarded. By



Illinois State Journal, August 15, 1908: "Frenzied Mob Sweeps City, Wreaking Bloody Vengeance for Negro's Heinous Crime"

3:00 that afternoon, however, scores of men had gathered at the jail.<sup>4</sup>

Governor Charles Deneen, aware of the threatening crowd, inquired of Sheriff Werner whether he needed the protection of the Illinois National Guard. The reluctant Werner agreed to request local troops to be held in readiness at the State Arsenal, if needed, and soon after agreed to the assembly of the Fifth Infantry and its gatling platoon. The sheriff apparently believed that he had a better plan than calling up the militia to disperse the crowd. Removing the prisoner from the jail, he thought, would effectively thwart the mob's murderous intent. Werner called upon Harry Loper, owner of a restaurant and a movie theater, to transfer the prisoner in his car to a place near Sherman, where he was placed on a train headed to the McLean County Jail in Bloomington, nearly sixty miles away. Creating a false fire alarm, the sheriff drew the crowd's attention from the jail

while the prisoner was taken down an alley and pushed into Loper's gray automobile.<sup>5</sup>

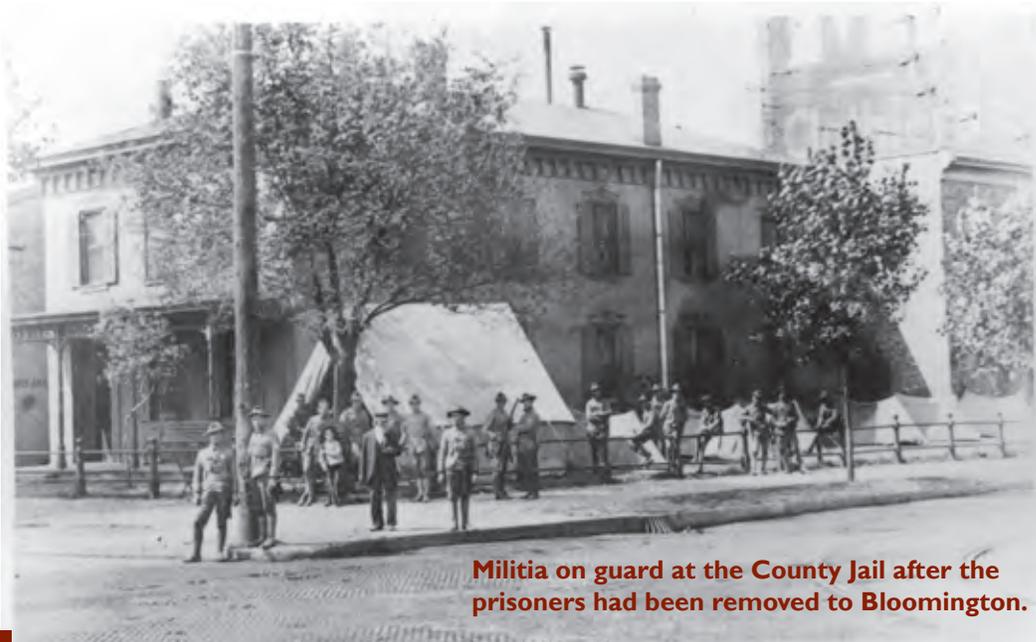
1 Evans E. Cantrall, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, October 1973. Many of the quotations throughout this publication are drawn from the University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection. The interviews were conducted during the early 1970s and captured the memories of a number of individuals who had been alive during the riot, or who had family stories to share.

2 *Illinois State Register*, 19 August 1908; *Springfield News*, 14 August 1908, 22 August 1908; *Illinois State Register*, 16 August 1908. Known as Billy the Barber, Florville had a barbershop on Adams Street between Sixth and Seventh streets that was frequented by Lincoln. Also a friend of Lincoln, Florville served as a pallbearer at the President's funeral.

3 Evans E. Cantrall, October 1973.

4 *Springfield News*, 14 August 1908.

5 *Biennial Report of the Adjutant General of Illinois: 1907-1908* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Journal Co., State Printers, 1909); *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908.



**Militia on guard at the County Jail after the prisoners had been removed to Bloomington.**

“ I was so drunk I don't know where I was or what I did. ”

Joe James, imprisoned for the murder of Clergy Ballard.



Joe James

# The Other Black Prisoner

# PRISONER

## THE OTHER BLACK PRISONER

George Richardson was not the only Black prisoner who escaped the mob in Loper's automobile that Friday evening. Joe James, a nineteen-year-old newcomer to Springfield, was also carried to safety. He had been held at the county jail since the Fourth-of-July weekend for the murder of Clergy Ballard, a White mine engineer. Ballard's murder had aroused racist passions in Springfield and may in some respects have inspired Mabel Hallam's fabrication.

Blanche Ballard, Clergy's sixteen-year-old daughter, recalled the events leading to her father's murder. She had just fallen asleep after returning home from White Amusement Park on Saturday night, July 4. "I woke up suddenly and I grabbed hold of a man's hand," she stated in her deposition before the coroner. "I thought it was my brother and I said to him 'Is that you, Charles?' He just made a groaning noise." A second time she asked the man if he were her brother and what he was doing and why he did not go to bed. "I still had hold of his hand," Blanche continued, "and tried to pull something out of it -- something rough." It was a

confusing account of an intruder who entered a modest home through an unlocked front door, went to the daughter's bedroom with a rough object in his hand and, ignoring the daughter's repeated questions, went back and forth from room to room, awaking the mother and father, and finally ending on the porch, where Clergy fought with the man and was stabbed twice. "[They] kept fighting," said Blanche, "until they got to the fourth house from our house. Then the man let go of my father and ran away." It seems incredible that the fighting, which must have lasted at least several minutes, failed to arouse Ballard's adult sons who were in the house, or to attract the attention of the neighbors.<sup>1</sup>



Clergy Ballard



Joe James

Early Sunday morning, Joe James was found sleeping several blocks from the Ballard home. He had spent the night drinking heavily, gambling, and playing the piano in the Levee, Springfield's Black district of saloons and brothels. Somehow he had found his way to the North End, far afield of the Levee. Discovered by four girls who spread the news of his presence, James was rudely awakened and beaten severely by Ballard's sons and neighbors. The arrival of the police probably saved James's life. Eyes swollen shut, lips split, and bleeding from his nose and ear, James insisted at the jail that he could not remember what he had done after midnight Saturday. "I was so drunk I don't know where I was or what I did," he said. Clergy Ballard died later that Sunday morning, escalating James's crime to a capital offense. The

The two men awaiting trial in the Sangamon County Jail for rape and murder represented twin threats to what the community perceived was its honor and security. Their alleged criminal misbehavior was not only a violation of law but also an extreme challenge to White authority.

motion of James's attorney, Octavius V. Royall, to continue the case to the next term of court was granted, postponing the trial until October and further infuriating a White public eager for swift revenge in the death of a respected citizen. The *Springfield News* concluded from Blanche's deposition that James's intent was sexual assault. Clergy Ballard, the paper stated, "gave his life to save his daughter such a fate." In the eyes of many, Ballard was the chivalrous White man who was called upon to protect the purity of his daughter from the lust and brutality of a Black intruder.<sup>2</sup>

The two men awaiting trial in the Sangamon County Jail for rape and murder represented twin threats to what the community perceived was its honor and security. Their alleged criminal misbehavior was not only a violation of law but also an extreme challenge to White authority.

1 *Springfield News*, 6 July 1908.

2 *Springfield News*, 6 July 1908, 4 August 1908.



Unidentified  
Springfield residents



“Why, the  
niggers came  
to think they  
were as good  
as we are!”

Quoted in William English Walling,  
“The Race War in the North,”  
*The Independent*, September 3, 1908

# A Threatening Black Presence

# THREATENING A THREATENING BLACK PRESENCE

The violent response to Mabel Hallam's charge laid bare Springfield's underlying racial agenda. Like the rest of America, Springfield had always been in conflict, the realities of race distinctions clashing sharply with the ideals of democracy. In the North, the Black social order was much the same as that in the South: separate and unequal. While the North lacked the legal supports for racial segregation and discrimination, an ingrained body of social and economic practices kept Blacks nevertheless subordinate in every area of life. To be non-threatening Blacks had to stay in their place. Getting out of place meant challenging their separate and subordinate status by word, deed, or attitude.

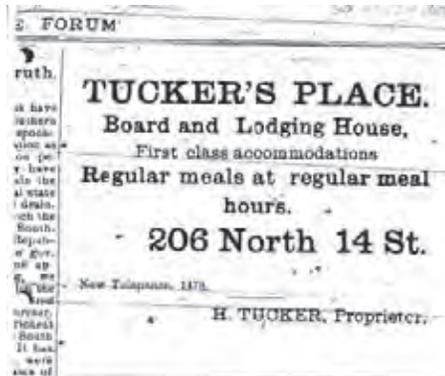
In Springfield, the very presence of Blacks was perceived by many Whites as threatening. Blacks, therefore, had

**“We will have no more niggers living out here. We are respectable people.”**

**North End resident**

long been relegated to separate areas of the city. Most lived in two districts located northeast and southeast of downtown, with a few residing in smaller concentrations on the west side. “We will have no more niggers living out here,” said a North End resident. “We are respectable people.” Joe James's very presence in the North End neighborhood of Clergy Ballard was a keenly felt intrusion and served as in-

**Below:** Advertisements for Black businesses and *The Forum*, a Black newspaper



criminating circumstantial evidence of his guilt. More formal housing restrictions were in place in other areas, such as the southeast neighborhood of Harvard Park. “There were clauses in all those deeds that not a lot could be sold [to] Blacks,” recalled Margaret Ferguson many years later. “They were afraid that maybe more [Blacks] would come out there.”<sup>1</sup>

Black subordination to Whites was most evident in the world of work. Nearly a third of Black males in Springfield at the time of the riot were common laborers. Approximately another third held positions such as porter, driver, waiter, janitor, houseman, or coachman. In all of these jobs, Blacks were in service or subservient to Whites. Acquiring material wealth and professional success, even achieving middle-class status, threatened the racial order, because it so openly belied the myth of Black inferiority. “There was a great deal of animos-

ity,” Margaret Ferguson recalled, “toward any well-established Negro who owned his own house and had a good job.”<sup>2</sup>

Separation and exclusion were also the order of the day in public accommodations. “There

### Black Population of Springfield, Illinois, 1850-1930

YEAR	BLACKS	% OF TOTAL POPULATION	% INCREASE
1850	171	3.9	
1860	203	2.2	18.7
1870	808	4.7	298.0
1880	1,328	6.7	64.4
1890	1,798	7.2	35.4
1900	2,227	6.5	23.9
1910	2,961	5.7	33.0
1920	2,769	4.7	-6.5
1930	3,324	4.6	20.0

Federal census data compiled by Roberta Senechal, *Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908*



Black groom in service to White horsemen





**Left:** Black bricklayers  
**Bottom left:** Black food workers in militia encampment



were places you could go and there were places you couldn't go," recalled Leroy Brown. "You could go in the front door [of the Majestic and Sheridan theaters] but you couldn't sit anywhere you wanted.... If you [Blacks] go down around the Union Station, you had to watch yourself and you had to avoid crowds....You didn't know what they [Whites] might do."<sup>3</sup>

The racial order reigned even at play. About two weeks after the Clergy Ballard murder, the *Illinois State Journal* began publishing the comic strip "Sambo and his Funny Voices." Its appearance represented another revealing attempt to diminish Black Springfieldians through ridicule and caricature. It not only confirmed White beliefs in Black inferiority, but also masked and justified White hostility. Through crude, stereotyping comedy, Whites kept Blacks in their place and sought to deny their deep-seated fear of Blacks. A bumbling Black "boy" is a reassuring image in the face of a murderous Joe James.<sup>4</sup>

Black political power was particularly threatening. "The male citizen of the black belt in late years has come to pose as a political factor in Springfield," the *Springfield News* noted. The numbers of Blacks in the First and Sixth wards were enough to provide the margin of victory in aldermanic elections, making the threat of both real and imagined Black political power a concern at the time of the Springfield riot. "Do you want niggers to make white mans' laws?" a Black Hand letter



asked a month after the riot. “If not, get busy,” it demanded. “Have all the men who have made our laws for the past thirty years been elected by the intelligent white vote or by the majority of an ignorant, vicious Negro vote?”<sup>5</sup> The mob targeted for destruction the Levee saloons out of which local Black political party leaders operated. Separation and subordination maintained the peace for a time, but challenging inequities and getting out of place were inevitable threats to the social order.

1 *Illinois State Register*, 17 August 1908; Margaret Ferguson, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, February 1975. For a discussion of Black residential patterns in Springfield, see Roberta Senechal, *Sociogenesis of a Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 66-72.

2 Margaret Ferguson, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, February 1975.

3 Leroy Brown, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, April 29, 1974.

4 For a helpful analysis of the Sambo cartoon, see Senechal, *Sociogenesis of a Race Riot*, 124-125.

5 *Springfield News*, 17 August 1908; *Illinois State Register*, 17 September 1908.



**Left: White partygoers in stereotypical costume**



Harry Loper

# “On to Loper’s!”

“You hauled the negro out of town, now we will haul you.”

Member of the mob

# LOPER'S

## “ON TO LOPER’S!”

Sheriff Werner had grossly underestimated the crowd's passion for blood. The announcement that the prisoners were no longer in the jail enraged the crowd. “The mood of the masses was ugly, and appeals by Sheriff Werner were without effect,” the *Illinois State Journal* reported. The sheriff had ordered Troop D of the First Cavalry to report to the jail at 8:00 that evening. But by 7:30, the crowd surrounding the jail had become a mob numbering between 5,000 and 10,000. Werner ordered the streets to be cleared, but the mob resisted, throwing bricks and other objects. When the militia arrived, it fired two volleys over the heads of the crowd, bringing quiet for a time. The sheriff and the militia succeeded in pushing the crowd back across the sidewalk and into the street.<sup>1</sup>



Harry Loper

When it became known, however, that Harry Loper had driven the prisoners out of town, the mob seized upon a specific target for its growing anger. “On to Loper’s!” they cried, and headed to Springfield’s finest restaurant, about five blocks away at 223 South Fifth Street.. “Well, what business was it of his to try to be a policeman and to take a prisoner out of town that they wanted to hang?” asked eyewitness Murray Hanes, who recalled the attack many years later. Hanes

**When it became known, however, that Harry Loper had driven the prisoners out of town, the mob seized upon a specific target for its growing anger. “On to Loper’s” they cried, and headed to Springfield’s finest restaurant.**

claimed he saw Loper with the prisoner in his car. “Oh, he was a good show-off. And a nice fellow too...” The forty-nine-year-old Loper defended his action in the newspapers the next day. “I wanted to avoid the bloodshed that would be the result of an attack on the jail...I have been through one riot in Cincinnati in '83,” Loper explained, “the greatest in this country, when 100 men were killed. It was to avoid loss of life that I took these men out of town.”<sup>2</sup>

But many in the crowd were desperate to spill the very blood Loper had sought to save. Maddened to an extreme, the mob smashed the plate glass

## “Lynch him.... Bring him out.... Nigger lover.”

windows of his restaurant with rocks, bricks, and other missiles. Mayor Roy R. Reece arrived to appeal personally for law and order, but a smaller contingent of the mob roughly forced the mayor to retreat into Mueller’s Cigar Store. Sheriff Werner had dispatched ten men from the National Guard Cavalry unit to the restaurant, holding the rest to guard the jail until militia reinforcements could arrive. Werner, however, refused the small contingent permission to fire. Kate Howard, owner of a rooming house on North Sixth Street, goaded the crowd on. Hundreds poured into the restaurant, which had been elegantly outfitted in hardwoods and antique furnishings. For the next hour or more they went on a rampage, smashing mirrors, tables, chairs, and fixtures, and looting

the contents of linens, dishes, flatware, and other utensils. Loper had quickly become the target of the venom the crowd had generated toward Halam’s presumed rapist: “You hauled the negro out of town, now we will haul you,” the mob shouted. “Lynch him....Bring him out....Nigger lover.” Loper was forced to retreat to the basement of the restaurant and eventually escaped the building through an underground exit. His car, which had been parked in front of the restaurant, was turned on its back, pushed into the street, its cushions doused with gas and set afire. According to a news report, “The crowd danced in frenzied delight and fiendish glee [around the car].” The fury of the growing mob rendered the police department powerless to extinguish the flames.<sup>3</sup>



Loper's was the scene of the first casualty of the riot. The body of Louis Johnston, a White eighteen-year-old shoe factory laborer, was pulled from the restaurant wreckage. Apparently following the mob, Johnston had gotten caught in the rush for the cellar and had been shot in the neck. Roy Wilson, his companion, reported that "somebody fired a shot...and that is when I lost track of Louis." Johnston's death proved to be prophetic of the riot's higher death toll in the White community.<sup>4</sup>

1 *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908; *Biennial Report*, 263, 271.

2 Murraray Hanes, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, Fall 1972; *Illinois State Register*, 15 August 1908; *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908.

3 *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908; *Springfield News*, 15 August 1908; *Illinois State Register*, 15 August 1908.

4 *Illinois State Register*, 22 August 1908.



Louis Johnston, first riot casualty



Top: Loper and family in their automobile

Right: Crowd gathers around the destruction

**“The crowd danced in frenzied delight and fiendish glee [around the car].”**

REMAINS OF LOPER'S \$5,000 AUTO.



This auto was used by Mr. Loper in spiriting the prisoners away from the jail.



**Above:** Militiamen guard a Washington Street business after the riot.

# Invading the Levee

“ On to Washington Street! ”

Member of the mob

# INVADING INVADING THE LEVEE

At 10:00 that night, having demolished the Loper restaurant and car, the mob refocused its attention on what had organized it to begin with: the alleged rape of a White woman by a Black man. Foiled in its attempt to lynch a rapist, it now launched a wholesale attack on the Black presence in Springfield. “It goes as it lays,” a member of the mob said. “Niggers must depart from Springfield. We want the nigger and we will apply the rope.”<sup>1</sup>

The closest target was the levee, a commercial area of saloons, barbershops, restaurants, pool halls, groceries, and other small businesses.

The closest target was the Levee, a commercial area of saloons, barbershops, restaurants, pool halls, groceries, and other small businesses adjacent to the county jail and a few blocks away from Loper’s. Most of the Black businesses in the Levee were located on Washington Street between Seventh and Eighth. The “heart of the black belt,” as the *Illinois State Journal* described the Levee, also sheltered the sporting dives, the brothels, and the illegal dens for gambling, prostitution, and after-hours liquor that Springfield law enforcement unofficially tolerated. “On to Washington Street!” cried a member of the mob. By the time the mob

**Below:** The damage of East Washington Street between Eighth and Ninth streets, including the Star Theater (center right)



arrived, however, most Blacks had escaped, alerted by word of Hallam's rape charge and by the yelling during the destruction of Loper's. The noise of the rioting was loud and fierce. "All this time we could hear the yelling," reported Deanna Wright, who lived near the State Capitol. "They tolled the old fire bell every little bit and blew some kind of whistle for signals that with the shooting and barking of dogs made the night hideous."<sup>2</sup>

One of the first places attacked in the Levee was the Washington Street pawnshop of John Oberman, a Jew. "He is a nigger lover," someone in the mob said. They stole guns and ammunition and wrecked his shop. The local authorities and the militia were helpless in the face of the mob's onslaught. According to Colonel Shand, Commander of the Third Regiment, Sheriff Werner refused to spare men to head off the Washington Street invaders. He was still waiting for reinforcements that would not arrive till after

2:00 on Saturday morning. The mob then headed east on Washington, left White businesses for the most part untouched, and targeted the saloon of Dandy Jim at the southwest corner of Washington and Eighth streets. Dandy Jim, whose real name was Thomas Steele, was a prominent Black saloonkeeper. He had closed his saloon, but the mob, suspecting that Blacks had taken refuge in the upper story, stormed the building. Dandy Jim and presumably others fired at the crowd below from the second-floor windows. Unable to hold his business against the attack, however, Dandy Jim left the area through an alley way, took refuge for a time in a feed yard, and finally escaped the Levee. The mob made quick work of his saloon, tearing out the front and completely demolishing the interior.<sup>3</sup>

There was considerable destruction and looting at other Black businesses on Washington Street. Maggie Neal's restaurant, the restaurant and bicycle repair shop of Henry Sallie, the barber shop of Ben Gordon, the saloon of S. J. Morton, and

**Below:** The damage on East Washington Street, including Dandy Jim's Saloon, left



“If a cyclone had passed that way it would have done no more damage,” reported the *Springfield News*.

many others -- an estimated total of thirty-five businesses -- were damaged and riddled with bullets. Entire building fronts were torn away, plate glass windows at ground level and windows on the upper floors were shattered by bricks that the mob had torn from sidewalks and pavements. “If a cyclone had passed that way it would have done no more damage,” reported the *Springfield News*. Two Black businessmen in particular, who were local leaders in party politics, were targeted. Republican C.C. Lee suffered the total destruction of his saloon, poolroom, barbershop, restaurant, and theater complex, while William Johnson, who was prominent in Democratic circles, lost his saloon to the work of the mob.<sup>4</sup>

1 *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908.

2 *Illinois State Journal*, 16 August 1908; *Biennial Report*, 272; letter of Deanna Wright, Springfield, 19 August 1908.

3 *Illinois State Register*, 18 August 1908; *Biennial Report*, 272; R.L. Polk & Co., *Springfield City Directory*, 1906; *Illinois State Journal*, special city edition, 15 August 1908; *Illinois State Register*, 17 August 1908.

4 *Springfield News*, 15 August 1908; Senechal, *Sociogenesis of a Race Riot*, 132-133.



**Above:** Newspaper ad for the destroyed Neal & Brown's Restaurant  
**Right:** Passersby survey the damage to Fishman's Pawnshop and William Johnson's Saloon.



**Above:** Interior of Fishman's Pawnshop after the riot

# BLACK ARMED DEFENSE

**“The Blacks did defend themselves and they did it very well,”**

**Margaret Ferguson relating her mother’s riot memories.**

Dandy Jim initiated the armed defense of the Levee when he made his stand at his saloon. Other Blacks, armed with revolvers and shotguns, stationed themselves on the upper floors and roofs of Washington Street stores and fired into the invading mob below. “The Blacks did defend themselves and they did it very well,” Margaret Ferguson related of her mother’s riot memories.<sup>1</sup> “When the niggers commenced shooting on East Washington Street,” Roy Young confessed, “some of us broke into Fishman’s Pawnshop to get some guns. I took three or four revolvers and some cartridges...”

If there were Black casualties from the gun battles in the Levee, they went unreported. There were, however, four White deaths from gunshots, apparently inflicted by the armed Blacks defending the buildings in the Levee. John Colwell, a forty-two-year-old coal miner, died at St. John’s Hospital Saturday morning from the combination of a gunshot to his abdomen and injuries received when the mob trampled him. Another coal miner, Frank Delmore, age twenty, died Sunday, August

16, from a gunshot through his left lung. Delmore’s role in the mob was confirmed by an attending physician, who later reported that Delmore had said: “I had the satisfaction of seeing one nigger shot and if I live to get out with the bunch I will see some hung.” A day later Thomas Jefferson Scott, a seventy-two-year-old real estate agent, died from a gunshot fired from the roof of the Allen Building on East Washington Street. The last White man to die from wounds inflicted during the riot was Lewis Hanen, an employee of the Chicago, Peoria, & St. Louis Railway. He died in Chicago in December during surgery to repair damage from a gunshot to his right lung.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike any other race riot in the United States that targeted Blacks, the 1908 Springfield violence resulted in the deaths of more Whites than Blacks. This was due no doubt to the armed Blacks, defending themselves and their interests in the Levee. Of the injuries reported in the newspaper, most were White, but no doubt countless injuries to Blacks and Whites went unreported. Half of the injuries recorded were from gunshots and one quarter from bricks -- evidence of the work of the mob, the militia, and armed Blacks.

<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, February 1975.

<sup>2</sup> *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908; *Springfield News*, 18 August 1908; *Illinois State Register*, 12 December 1908.

Death certificate for Frank Delmore

**STATE OF ILLINOIS, }  
SANGAMON COUNTY.**

**CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.** 12118 ✕

No body can be legally interred until a Permit has been issued. "No such Permit shall be issued until there shall have been delivered to the proper official a Certificate of Death made in the manner directed." See back of form for directions. WRITE PLAINLY WITH UNFADING INK. THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD.

Full Name of Deceased Frank Delmore 38859

---

**PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS AND MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.**

Sex Male Color white Age 20 Years — Months — Days  
 Place of Birth New York Lived in Illinois 17 Years.  
 Occupation Coal Miner (State or Country)  
 Died on the 16th day of August \*Single, Married, Widower or Widow  
 Place of Death St. Jons hospital 1908, at about 4:30 A.M.  
 Place of Burial Cadbury (Township, Village or City. If in City, Number of Street and Ward.) Date of Burial Aug 17-08  
 Name of Undertaker Hirsh & Egan (City) Address 411 East Adams St

**CAUSE OF DEATH.**

Immediate Cause <u>Gun shot wound</u>	DURATION								
Contributory Cause or Complication <u>Homicide 176</u>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <th style="width: 25%;">Years</th> <th style="width: 25%;">Months</th> <th style="width: 25%;">Days</th> <th style="width: 25%;">Hours</th> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">2</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Years	Months	Days	Hours			2	
Years	Months	Days	Hours						
		2							

I HEREBY CERTIFY That the above stated personal particulars are true, to the best of my knowledge and belief, and that the cause of death of the above named and described deceased was as above written by me.

Witness my hand, this 29 (Signature) Chas. Stordruff  
 day of Aug 1908 Address Springfield Ill  
(Physician, Midwife or Coroner)

“The eastern sky is lurid with the reflection of raging fires.”

*Springfield Journal*

Black residents amidst the ruins



# Attacking the Badlands

Hosing the embers



# BADLANDS

## ATTACKING THE BADLANDS

The mob continued the rampage it had begun at Loper's at 8:00 Friday night. Having wrecked the targeted businesses of the Levee by midnight, it moved on to the Badlands about 1:00 Saturday morning. The Badlands was Springfield's major Black settlement, an area characterized by substandard, single-family housing rented at exorbitant rates. Northeast and adjacent to

The press described the Badlands as an area “infested with negroes” living in “huts” and rife with crime. “Practically all of the black belt was disreputable,” the *Springfield News* declared.

the Levee, the Badlands extended from East Jefferson on the south to East Reynolds on the north and from Ninth Street east to the city limits. In a sense, the Badlands was the residential extension of the Levee and was particularly vulnerable to the encroachment of illicit gambling, liquor sales, and prostitution. The press described the Badlands as an area “infested with negroes” living in “huts” and rife with crime. “Practically all of the black belt was disreputable,” the *Springfield News* declared. “The houses were hovels, mere makeshifts for coverings.” Although most residents in the Badlands were low-income, several middle- and upper-income Black homeowners resided in the area, particularly east of Twelfth Street and along Mason Street.<sup>1</sup>

The mob torched its way through the Badlands, totally destroying a four-square-block area between Mason and Jefferson, Ninth and Eleventh streets. “A few men would enter a shack,” an onlooker reported, “and after tipping over the bed and tearing open the mattress would pour on a little oil and

“Not a stream of water was permitted to be thrown upon one of the burning buildings.”

apply a match. That was all there was to it. They left then feeling sure that the fire would not be interfered with and it wasn't.” As the *Illinois State Journal* reported, “Not a stream of water was permitted to be thrown upon one of the burning buildings.” Yet the mob gave permission to protect the Schuck, Baker, and Eielson lumber yards. Whites were told to hang white sheets outside their houses so that the mob would know to spare them. “The eastern sky is lurid with the reflection of raging fires,” the *Journal* observed.<sup>2</sup>

At 2:00 Saturday morning, the militia from out of town had yet to arrive. The sheriff asked the crowd at Twelfth and Madison streets to disperse three times, but was greeted each time with jeers.

He ordered one volley over the heads of the rioters, who responded again with jeering. In the confusion of conflicting orders, however, some officers had fired low, wounding several, and temporarily dispersing a defiant crowd. On Mason Street west of Twelfth, Sheriff Werner again insisted on not firing into the crowd, leaving that area of the Badlands under the rule of the mob.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Senechal, *Sociogenesis of a Race Riot*, 16; *Illinois State Journal*, 16 August 1908; *Springfield News*, 17 August 1908.

<sup>2</sup> *Springfield News*, 15 August 1908; *Illinois State Journal*, special city edition, 15 August 1908; Ruth Ellis as reported in *State Journal-Register*, 12 May 1998.

<sup>3</sup> *Biennial Report*, 272-273.



Sunday strollers view burned homes on East Madison Street (top) and at Twelfth and Mason streets (bottom).



# FLIGHT

## BLACK FLIGHT

Without local protection or militia relief, Blacks were chased through the streets -- beaten, injured, and forced to leave behind unprotected property and valuables. Governor Deneen arranged for the homeless to take refuge in the State Arsenal and in tents at Camp Lincoln. Many of the fleeing hundreds went to the arsenal, while others sought safety with friends and strangers in Springfield and elsewhere. A White resident in the Capitol area witnessed the desperate flight: "All this time we could hear the yelling and the niggers were going by here in flocks going to the outskirts."<sup>1</sup>

Some found shelter in unusual places. "Sister took us," Phoebe Mitchell Day recalled years later, "and we went over at the railroad here on Nineteenth Street and Reynolds, and got up in the boxcar until they called the militia out." Others made it to outlying rural areas where Black families took them in. "We sheltered, I guess, above twenty or twenty-five," Mattie Hale remembered. "We had a large barn...and a lot of them went up there and stayed all night in the barn loft. Some slept out underneath of our fruit trees and we'd taken some in the house.... And we fed them; we went to the garden and we gathered vegetables and cooked."<sup>2</sup>

When a group of Blacks entered the village of Greenridge in Macoupin County and begged for food, residents denied them anything and stoned them out of town.

Other quarters, however, refused refuge. "We have all we can do to take care of our own colored population and we will run no risks," said the Peoria Chief of Police. "Negroes are not allowed to enter Peoria.... If a black alights in [Peoria], he is taken in charge and at the first opportunity sent from the city." When a group of Blacks entered the village of Greenridge in Macoupin County and begged for food, residents denied them anything and stoned them out of town.<sup>3</sup>

1 Wright letter, 19 August 1908.

2 Phoebe Mitchell Day, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, March 1974; Mattie Hale, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, 30 April 1974.

3 *Illinois State Journal*, 16 August 1908.



“Get the rope.”

Member of the mob

# The lynching of Scott Burton

# LYNCHING

## THE LYNCHING OF SCOTT BURTON

The first building to be torched by the mob in the Badlands was at Ninth and Jefferson streets, where Scott Burton, a Black barber, operated a three-chair shop. Like the mob targets in the Levee, some of the properties attacked in the Badlands were owned or operated by successful Blacks, whom many Whites perceived as economic threats. Burton, a fifty-nine-year-old Georgia native, lived with his wife Kate in the Badlands on North Twelfth Street. His barbershop catered exclusively to a White clientele.

The news accounts are conflicting, but it appears that the mob sought him out. "Father was sitting in the house with us when the mob came around the corner," said his daughter. "Some of them came into the house.... Several of them struck him with bottles, and one man had an axe, which he hit him with.... The men then took him out of the house, and that is the last we saw." It was about

2:30 Saturday morning when the mob mercilessly beat Burton unconscious before dragging him one block south to Madison and Twelfth streets. "Get the rope," one of the members of the mob cried out. A clothesline was found and the noose was fit around Burton's neck. The mob had stripped him of his clothes and mutilated his body, shooting it, gashing it with knives, and trying unsuccessfully

Scott Burton's burned barbershop



## “Look at the nigger swing.”

to set the body on fire. He was dead by the time he was hauled off the ground and hung to one branch of the dead tree as a gallows. “His feet dangling and within reach,” the newspaper reported, “the men and boys played with the corpse by swinging it back and forth against the building to hear the dull thud.... Look at the nigger swing,” a member of the mob cried. At about the same time Burton was being murdered, additional militia began arriving in Springfield. When one contingent reached Twelfth and Madison, it fired into the knees of the mob and charged it with bayonets. This time the crowd dispersed, but not before Burton had been slaughtered.<sup>1</sup>

The mob had stripped him of his clothes and mutilated his body, shooting it, gashing it with knives, and trying unsuccessfully to set the body on fire.

**Record of Funeral.**

No. \_\_\_\_\_ Date Aug 15 1908

Name of the Deceased Scott Burton

Charge to Metropolitan S. & C. Co.

Order Given by John Butler

How Survived \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Funeral \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Death \_\_\_\_\_

Funeral Services at \_\_\_\_\_

Time of Funeral Services \_\_\_\_\_

Clergyman \_\_\_\_\_

Attending Physician \_\_\_\_\_

His Residence \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Burial Certificates \_\_\_\_\_

Cause of Death \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Death \_\_\_\_\_

Composition of the Deceased \_\_\_\_\_

Single or Married \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months \_\_\_\_\_ Days

Body to be shipped to \_\_\_\_\_

Sex and Style of Casket or Coffin \_\_\_\_\_

Manner/Method of \_\_\_\_\_

Metallic Lining \_\_\_\_\_

Outside Box \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Handles \_\_\_\_\_

Interment at \_\_\_\_\_

Lot or Grave No. \_\_\_\_\_

Section No. \_\_\_\_\_

Price of Casket or Coffin 118 00

Metallic Lining \_\_\_\_\_

Outside Box \_\_\_\_\_

Glass Vault \_\_\_\_\_

Burial Slab \_\_\_\_\_

Burial Slippers and Hair \_\_\_\_\_

Expressing Plate \_\_\_\_\_

Embalming Body (with \_\_\_\_\_) Full 12 00

Washing and Dressing \_\_\_\_\_

Shaving \_\_\_\_\_

Empty Body on its \_\_\_\_\_

Manufacturing Room \_\_\_\_\_

Use of Catafalque and Drapers \_\_\_\_\_

Rolling Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Caulking \_\_\_\_\_

Casket \_\_\_\_\_

Glaze \_\_\_\_\_

Carriage \_\_\_\_\_

Wagon \_\_\_\_\_

Wagon \_\_\_\_\_

Death Notice in \_\_\_\_\_

Flowers \_\_\_\_\_

Chalice for Lid \_\_\_\_\_

Opening Glass \_\_\_\_\_

Lining Glass \_\_\_\_\_

Shipping Charges, prepaid \_\_\_\_\_

Removal Charges \_\_\_\_\_

Carriage Charges \_\_\_\_\_

Cash Advance 3 00

Total Filing of Bill 75 00

By Amount Paid in Advance \_\_\_\_\_

Balance \_\_\_\_\_

External Inter Ledger, page \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_

To Special Charge \_\_\_\_\_ Total \$ \_\_\_\_\_

By Cash \_\_\_\_\_

Scott Burton funeral record

Scott Burton became the first Black to die in the Springfield Riot of 1908. Perhaps to many in the mob, his murder provided a substitute for the George Richardson lynching they had been denied. Burton was interred quietly that night at Oak Ridge Cemetery without a funeral and without the presence of family and relatives. Murray Hanes, an eyewitness to the lynching, recalled later: “I just remember the tree they hung him on. A day or two later I saw it again and it was all chopped up for souvenirs.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Illinois State Register, 16 August 1908, 15 August 1908; Springfield News, 15 August 1908; Biennial Report, 281.

<sup>2</sup> Murray Hanes, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, Fall 1972.

“

[They] came through the statehouse grounds yelling like fiends and went on down Spring Street and hung that poor old man.”



Deanna Wright

William Donigan as a young man

# The Lynching of William Donigan

# LYNCHING

## THE LYNCHING OF WILLIAM DONIGAN

The militia units arrived throughout Saturday morning, and by 7:00 in the evening the command had established headquarters at the county jail under Major General Edward C. Young. Twenty-four companies consisting of about 1,000 officers and men were sent to various parts of the city, including Black neighborhoods. The sheriff remained ineffectual, failing to disperse the crowds that continued to gather downtown. A threatening throng of 1,000 went to the arsenal, intending harm to the Blacks sheltered there, but the cavalry stopped its advance. Not to be outdone, however, the mob regrouped and headed for southwest Springfield.

There was deliberation in their march to that part of the city. Although few Blacks resided there, one in particular who lived at Edwards and Spring streets stood out. William K. H. Donigan, an eighty-four-year-old shoemaker, had lived in Springfield since he was seventeen years old. A self-made man who had imported slave labor for hire during the Civil War, he had acquired substantial wealth through cobbling and real estate. Also of significance to the mob was his marriage to a White woman, Sarah Rudolph, who was near-



Sarah Donigan



ly thirty years younger than he. His success and his marriage sparked the resentment and ire of the mob. “They did not stop at the arsenal,” Deanna Wright wrote to her cousin, referring to the mob that evening, “but came through the statehouse grounds yelling like fiends and went on down Spring Street and hung that poor old man.” The Donigan family had sought protection long before the mob arrived. “We telephoned to the jail and the militia headquarters several times asking for protection,” Donigan’s sister explained, “and though we were promised each time that the soldiers would come, none came until after the mob had accomplished its purpose.”<sup>1</sup>

**They pulled Donigan, who was afflicted with rheumatism, from the house and beat him. “Have mercy on me, boys, have mercy,” Donigan cried. But there was no mercy from the mob.**

About 9:00 that Saturday evening, several members of the mob smashed the doors and windows of the Donigan home. They pulled Donigan, who was afflicted with rheumatism, from the house and beat him. “Have mercy on me, boys, have mercy,” Donigan cried. But there was no mercy from the mob. “Drown him in the water trough,” a member of the mob suggested. Instead, they slashed Donigan’s throat from ear to ear with a razor, tied a thin clothesline around his neck four times and once around his face and mouth, and hung him to a small tree in the Edwards School yard across the street from his house. The tree was small and Donigan was only half suspended by the rope, his feet resting on the ground. When the police finally arrived, Donigan was still breathing through the rope gashes in his windpipe. For some reason, he was allowed to hang for several minutes half standing, half hanging. The police finally cut him down, while Troop D of the militia dispersed the mob. Donigan was first taken to the police station, where a militia surgeon sewed up the gashes in his throat and was then moved to

St. John's Hospital, where he died Sunday morning at 11:30. He had lost considerable blood and never regained consciousness. "People came around and took ... pieces of the tree and everything for souvenirs," Frances Chapman remembered years later. "As a child it seemed terrible."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Biennial Report*, 264-265; *Springfield City Directory*, 1908; U.S. Census, manuscript schedule, Sangamon County, 1900; Wright letter, 19 August 1908; *Illinois State Register*, 17 August 1908.

<sup>2</sup> *Illinois State Register*, 16 August 1908, 17 August 1908; Frances Chapman, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, 15 April 1975.

# W. DONNIGAN LYNCHED LAST NIGHT AT CORNER SPRING AND EDWARDS

Tragedy Took Place at Edward's  
School Corner Within Two Blocks  
of Governor Deneen's Office in  
the State House.

### Negro Very Old.

Donnigan was a peaceful citizen and is comfortably fixed financially. He is over 84 years of age. During the civil war he imported southern negroes here and hired them out to contractors.

This fact may have been known by some of the men of the crowd, who probably concluded that Donnigan was the cause of a great many negroes being in the city, and acted upon the supposition.

### Married White Woman.

Mr. Donnigan was a cobbler in the city and is said to be worth \$15,000. He owns considerable real estate throughout the city and is well known. His wife is said to be a white woman, whom he married many years ago. It is thought by many that this fact is the direct cause of the lynching of last night.

When taken to the police station in the police patrol, the colored man was thought to be dead. It was later found that he was breathing and the physicians of the hospital corps gave him such assistance as they could. Dr. Mendonca was called and an ar-

riving gave the prostrate negro an anesthetic. The gash on the negro's neck, which was eight or ten inches long, was sewed up and then the man was taken to St. John's hospital.

*Illinois State Register*, August 16, 1908  
Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library  
Newspaper/Microfilm Collection

### Terrible Wounds.

After considerable work on the part of the attending physician, the negro showed signs of life, but did not regain consciousness. While it is thought that he has a slight chance to live, no hopes of his recovery are entertained. Beside the gash across his neck and face and head of the negro were beaten and bruised and the skin was broken in several places.

The small rope with which the frenzied mob attempted to hang the negro to the tree, was wrapped about his neck four times and once across his face and in his mouth. When cut down the rope was cut from his neck, but a piece of rope, several inches in length, was left in his mouth, being held there by his jaw, which had become firmly set. One of his eyes was badly bruised and his limbs were limber and lifeless. His wound bled profusely, and so much blood was lost before the wound was dressed that it is thought he can not survive this loss, even though the wounds would, of themselves, not be fatal.

### Men Arrested.

Soon after the injured man was taken

to the station A. Raymer, a young Hebrew 20 years of age, of St. Louis, was arrested by Detective Jones. It is said that Raymer made an attempt to drag Jones from a street car on which a part of the mob rode and when a suitable point was reached, Detective Jones took Raymer in custody and, with assistance, took him to the county jail. After considerable trouble, during which Raymer was beaten by the police until he begged for mercy, he was forced to give the names of several others thought to be implicated in the riot movement.

It is the central paradox of our history that a nation based on respect for law and order should have so often resorted to violence to maintain the inequities of race and class.



# A Tradition of Violence

# VIOLENCE

## A TRADITION OF VIOLENCE

The Springfield Race Riot of 1908 was one of the worst in the nation's history. The Burton and Donigan lynchings, the wholesale destruction of Black businesses in the Levee, and the burnings in the Badlands were all shocking. These occurrences, however, had more than local significance. They were not peculiar to Springfield. Rather, the death and the destruction that came to the city that August weekend were part of a larger tradition of violence in America. Violence has long been a major component of the American experience. It



Lynching of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie, circus workers erroneously accused of rape, Duluth, Minnesota, June 15, 1920

is the central paradox of our history that a nation based on the respect for law and order should have so often resorted to violence to maintain the inequities of race and class.<sup>1</sup>

From Duluth, Minnesota, in the far North, to Atlanta, Georgia, in the deep South, Whites had long used terror to control Blacks and maintain White supremacy. Springfield is one of six race riots that are considered the worst in the nation before World War II. Of these, half occurred in Illinois: Springfield in 1908, East St. Louis in 1917, and Chicago in 1919. It was as though Springfield introduced Illinois and the North to the worst of urban racial warfare. The first significant race riot in the country, however, occurred in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898. From that riot to the Tulsa, Oklahoma, riot of 1921, a period of less than twenty-five years, the worst racial violence in our nation occurred. It was a battle waged by the forces of White supremacy to defeat the political gains of Reconstruction. And it was waged





undermine Reconstruction. Federal legislation significantly curbed its activities in the 1870s during President Grant's administration, but a new Klan was organized in 1915 in Stone Mountain, Georgia. The terror of the reorganized Klan primarily targeted Blacks, but was also directed at Jews, Catholics, and immigrants. At its height in the 1920s, Klan membership has been estimated at two to four million. Springfield was part of its network.

1 For the development of this idea, see Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

2 For a catalog of lynching victims, see James Allen, Hilton Als, John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).



**Left:** Brick-wielding Whites in pursuit of a Black victim, Chicago, Illinois, July 1919

**Below:** Man with shotgun standing over Black corpse, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 1921





The militia march through a section of Springfield.

“Incompetent mayor,  
police and other  
officers were what  
made the rioting and  
murdering possible.”

Katherine Enos,  
September 27, 1908

# Failed Law Enforcement

# FAILED FAILED LAW ENFORCEMENT

All levels of authority, from the local police to the governor, failed to protect life and property during the Springfield Race Riot of 1908. Governor Charles Deneen had acted promptly when the large mob formed at 3:00 that Friday afternoon at the county jail in response to Mabel Hallam's cry of rape. Through the efforts of Colonel Richings J. Shand, commander of the Third Infantry, Deneen had succeeded in getting a reluctant Sheriff Werner to call at least for local militia units. But the units were not ordered to assemble until 8:00 that evening, too late and too few to control the crowd that by then had grown to thousands before the brutal attack on Loper's restaurant. The Springfield police were unable or unwilling to enforce the law, either because they identified with the mob or feared its retaliation. "The police never resisted," said Murray Hanes, a witness to the destruction of Loper's. "They joined the mob." One of the mob boldly challenged the police: "What do we care for a policeman? He looks like anyone else to us." The news reporter who recorded

**"The police never resisted. They joined the mob."**

**Murray Hanes,  
witness to the riot**

these remarks observed that the policeman just smiled, knowing that to make a move could bring him injury. Mayor Roy R. Reece, whose administration tolerated vice and courted the saloon interests, had little moral authority over the crowd at Loper's. In spite of his appeals for law and order, he was hustled from the scene. "Incompetent mayor,



Mayor Roy R. Reece



Gov. Charles Deneen



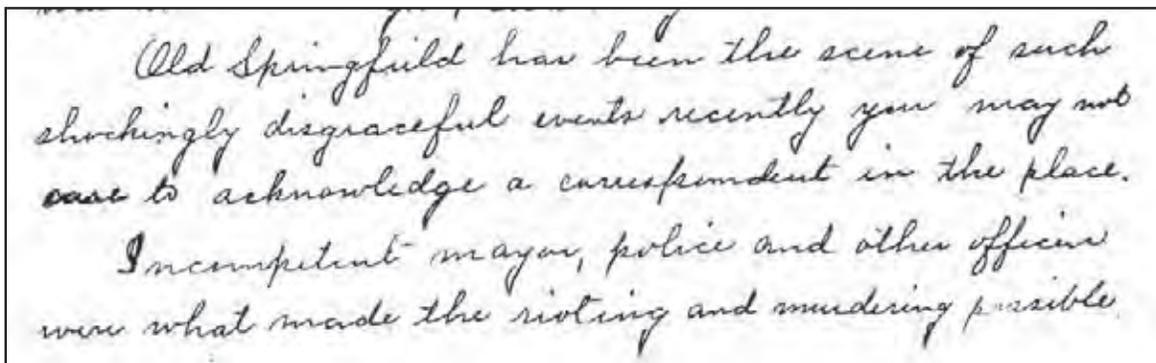
Sheriff Charles Werner

Reliable men, who saw the beginning of the first riot, say that any two policemen doing their duty could have stopped it, for then the participants were only young boys -- some in knee pants.”

Katherine Enos, September 27, 1908

police and other officers,” wrote Springfield resident, Katherine Enos, “were what made the rioting and murdering possible.... Reliable men, who saw the beginning of the riot, say that any two policemen doing their duty could have stopped it, for then the participants were only young boys -- some in knee pants.”<sup>1</sup>

Much of the failure of Springfield’s law enforcement lay at the feet of Sheriff Werner, who consistently refused to use effective force to control the mob. Werner had been reluctant to call upon the Illinois National Guard, confident that the mob would lose steam once the prisoners were gone. Werner paid dearly for this serious miscalculation. But perhaps his greatest neglect was his repeated refusal to authorize his officers and the militia to use guns on the mob. “There was a crowd assembled [at Loper’s after the destruction];” said Colonel Shand. “[There were about] ... five thousand, and there being no



Old Springfield has been the scene of such shockingly disgraceful events recently you may not care to acknowledge a correspondent in the place. Incompetent mayor, police and other officers were what made the rioting and murdering possible.

Letter of Katherine Enos, September 27, 1908

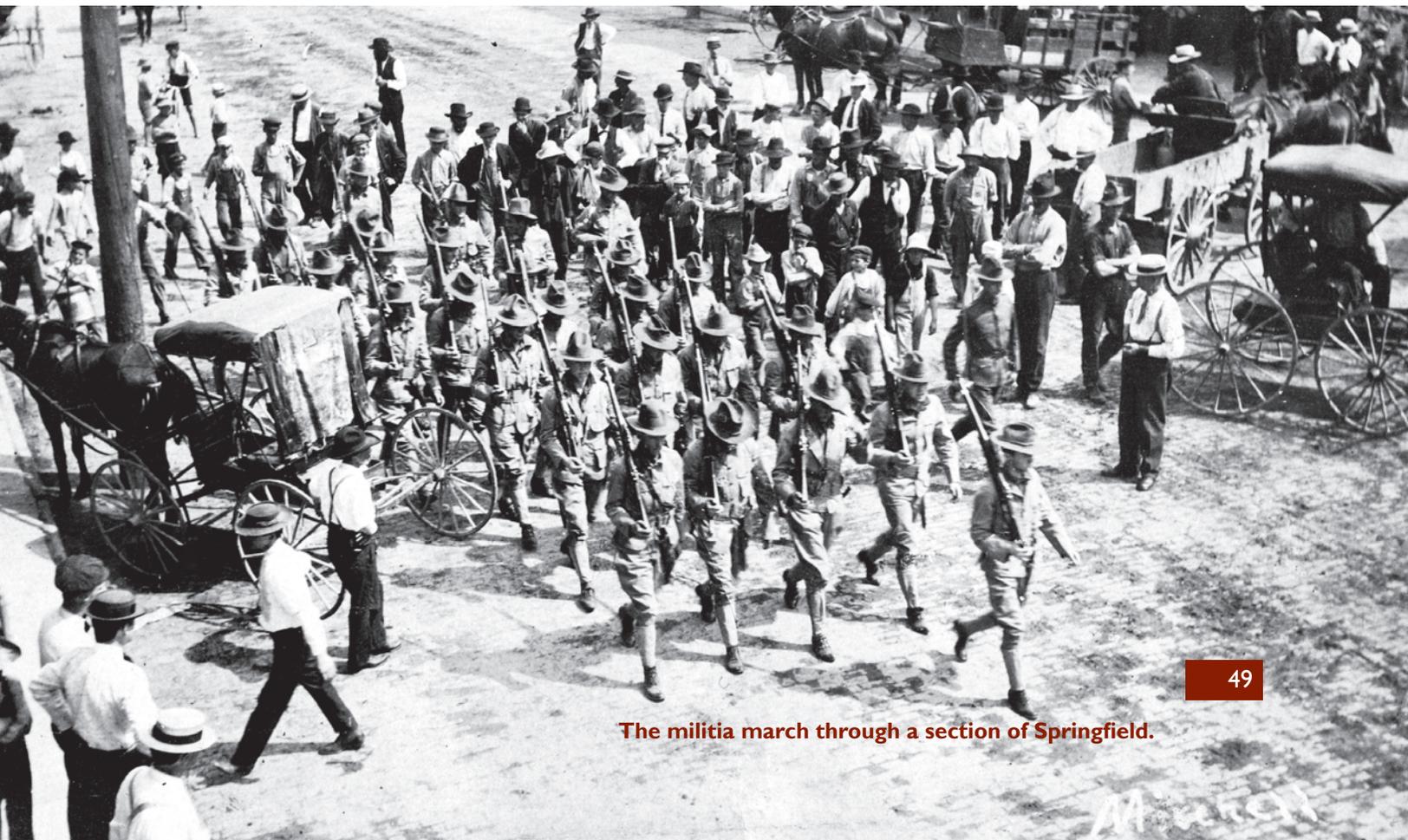
disposition on the part of the civil authorities to assist [the militia], and the sheriff having refused [the militia] permission to fire, [the militia] was utterly powerless to clear away the crowd.” The county authorities and the militia command never worked together as a team. “I ... reported to the sheriff” said Shand “that they [the mob] were about to proceed down Washington [S]treet, and suggested to him that we go down and head them off. He refused to allow the troops to leave the jail, claiming they were needed there to guard it.” Disagreement with the sheriff continued over the deployment of the militia in the Badlands, where Werner again kept militia at the jail and refused permission to fire, leaving in the hands of the mob the area where Scott Burton would be lynched. “At no time during the riot,” said Shand, “did the actual command pass from the sheriff to the mili-

tary authorities.”<sup>2</sup>

The militia had problems of its own, independent of the sheriff’s failings. Militia deployment was slow. None of the out-of-town militia had arrived by 2:00 Saturday morning. The Decatur unit had not even embarked by then. Most of the companies arrived later Saturday morning and afternoon. Few men, therefore, were



Col. Richings J. Shand



The militia march through a section of Springfield.

available with the necessary weapons in the critical early stages of the riot. “We had orders to proceed on Friday night to Fifth and Monroe streets and protect Loper’s restaurant,” reported Lieutenant Herbert Styles, who was in command of the Gatling gun section. “I had only six men with me and with no ammunition and not even bayonets I could do nothing, and the mob disarmed my men.”<sup>3</sup>

On Saturday afternoon, local and state officials, including Sheriff Werner and Governor Deneen, met to decide whether to declare martial law in Springfield. Believing that the worst was over, the officials decided against it. Four hours later, William Donigan was lynched, the police and the militia having arrived

“I had only six men with me and with no ammunition and not even bayonets I could do nothing and the mob disarmed my men.”

Lieutenant  
Herbert Styles,  
Gatling gun section of the  
militia

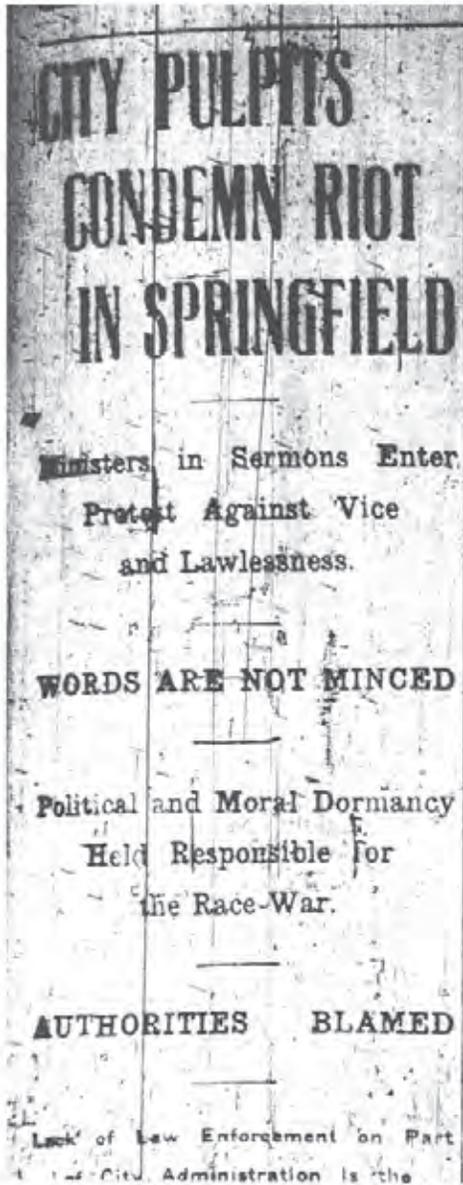
too late in spite of the Donigan family’s repeated calls for help. Shortly after 12:00 Sunday morning, Deneen advised that additional militia be ordered. By early Monday morning, the total number of officers and men in Springfield reached 3,691. With all sections of the city covered by troops, gunfire by then was only occasional and fires of suspicious origin were few. By Monday night, it was determined that order had been restored, and selected troops began to return home. Blacks, however, under the protection of local authorities again, continued to be beaten and harassed for weeks to come.<sup>4</sup>

1 Letter of Katherine Enos, 27 September 1908: Hanes, University of Illinois-Springfield, Oral History Collection, Fall 1972; *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908.

2 *Biennial Report*, 273.

3 *Illinois State Register*, 20 August 1908.

4 *Biennial Report*, 268; Senechal, *Sociogenesis of a Race Riot*, 151.



*Illinois State Journal,*  
August 24, 1908

“It is as intolerable as it is inexcusable.”

Governor Charles Deneen

“The colored people are themselves partly to blame.”

Reverend E. E. Frame,  
Plymouth Congregational Church

# Community Response

# COMMUNITY

## COMMUNITY RESPONSE

As the state's chief executive, Governor Deneen was the leading spokesperson in response to the riot. "It is as intolerable as it is inexcusable," he said. "The idea of wreaking vengeance upon a race for the crimes of one of its members is utterly repugnant to all notions of law and justice. No government can maintain its self-respect and permit it." Deneen stated clearly what the riot signified: "The mob spirit which has been exhibited in Springfield is a species of anarchy, and must be suppressed by force for the good of society."<sup>1</sup>

E. L. Chapin also spoke firmly against the violence on behalf of the Businessmen's Association. "The question before us is whether law and order shall prevail in this community or whether it shall be committed to the rule of riot, ruin, and rebellion." In spite of some opposition within the group, the association passed a strong resolution acknowledging the rights of everyone, Black and White. "We demand that the life, liberty, and property of citizens be protected without reference to nationality or color," the resolution said. The riot had closed downtown stores, shut saloons, and disrupted public transportation. Businessmen knew well that without law and order, their profits were in serious jeopardy.<sup>2</sup>

**"The question before us is whether law and order shall prevail in this community or whether it shall be committed to the rule of riot, ruin, and rebellion."**

The religious community in Springfield had perhaps the most to say in response to the riot. "The colored people are themselves partly to blame," said the Reverend E. E. Frame of Plymouth Congregational Church. "Too many partakers in different crimes -- too many ready to sell their votes -- too many to vote for saloons -- for rioting themselves, although the blame in all these is shared by the whites." Many Whites and some Blacks in Springfield would have agreed with

E. L. Chapin,  
Businessmen's Association

him. The Reverend W. N. Tobin of the Douglas Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church probed deeper to find the culprit. The burden of guilt fell most heavily on Blacks, nevertheless: "Sin is at the bottom of it all. This murder of Ballard and the assault of last Thursday are simply outcroppings of an evil nature." The Reverend Billy Sunday, who spoke often in Springfield, supported the rule of law while at the same time making racial distinctions. "Mr. Sunday," a news article reported, "said that while he does not believe the blacks to be equal to the whites, still he believes in giving to all full protection of the law." Black Baptists passed a resolution condemning all law breakers: "As law abiding citizens, [we] condemn mob violence ... and ask that these thugs, cut throats and outragers and all the violators of the law be brought to speedy justice." The statement's intent was to condemn Blacks and Whites alike.<sup>3</sup>

There was a tendency among many Springfield citizens to blame the lower elements of both communities. Wesley L. Edwards, a Black state employee, said, "The ruffian, rowdy hoodlum element of the white race is possessed of envy and prejudice against the entire negro race

because of the lawlessness of the vicious element of our race, permitted by officials and partially condoned by the better element of the negro race and the politicians." The Reverend Thomas D. Logan of First Presbyterian Church, however, spread the blame for mob rule, reminding Springfield that "There are no innocent spectators of mob violence.... Everyone in these crowds is an assistant rioter."<sup>4</sup>



The Reverend  
Billy Sunday

Many if not most people in the community, Black and White, assumed that the immediate cause of the riot was Black misbehavior. The press expressed the tone and substance of the community's

racist sentiment. “It was not the fact of the whites’ hatred toward the negroes,” said an editorial, “but of the negroes’ own misconduct, general inferiority or unfitness for free institutions that were at fault.” The newspaper headlines, for example, implied that the riot was a just outcome of Black misbehavior. “Frenzied Mob Sweeps City, Wreaking Bloody Vengeance for Negro’s Heinous Crime” was the *Illinois State Journal* headline for the first day of rioting. The newspaper had already determined the nature, intent, and seriousness of the offense, implicitly assigning guilt to the Negro in custody. The mob, however, was charged primarily with an excess of righteous indignation. No such indignation was assumed for the Black victims of the violence.

Before the trials began, the guilt of Joe James and George Richardson was assumed. The papers drew negative profiles of both men: Joe James was the drunken drifter and George Richardson

**“There are no innocent spectators of mob violence.... Everyone in these crowds is an assistant rioter.”**

**Reverend Thomas D. Logan,  
First Presbyterian Church**

was the convict. The validity of the murder and rape charges was never questioned. News articles always identified the race of accused Blacks, implicitly confirming the inherent link between Blacks and crime. “Victim of Negro Assailant,” was the caption of the front-page photo of Mabel Hallam, implying that the race of the accused was critical to understanding the assault. The crime was more despicable if the offender was Black. “Joe James is your typical southern darkey,” said the *Illinois State Journal*. The derogatory term “darkey” and the criminal implications of “typical” revealed the assumptions about race and crime that the press and many in the White community had long harbored.<sup>5</sup>

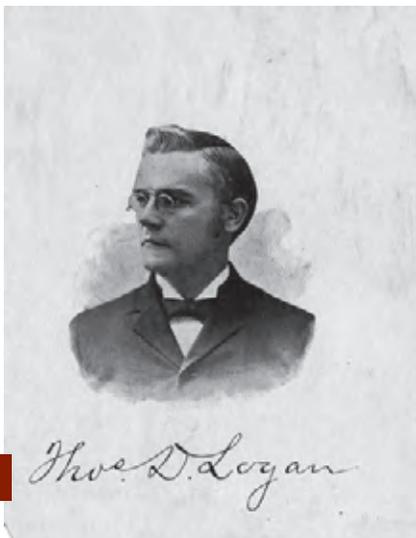
1 *Illinois State Register*, 16 August 1908.

2 *Illinois State Journal*, 19 August 1908, 15 August 1908.

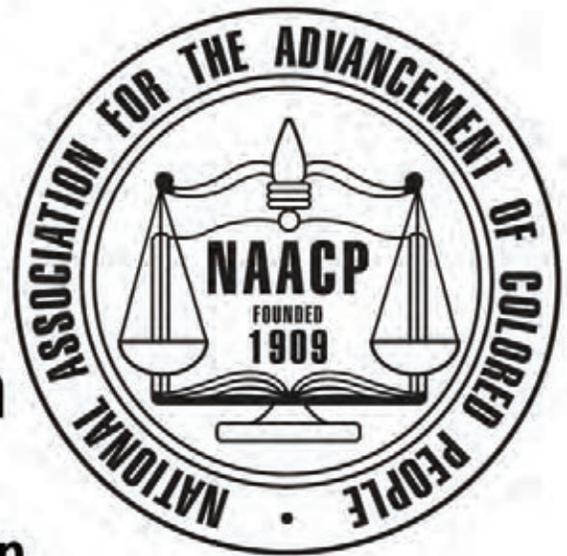
3 *Illinois State Journal*, 24 August 1908; *Springfield News*, 17 August 1908; unidentified article in Governor Deneen scrapbook, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

4 *Illinois State Journal*, 24 August 1908; Governor Deneen Scrapbook.

5 *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908, 6 July 1908.



“ Either the spirit of the abolitionists [and] Lincoln ... must be revived and we must come to treat the negro on a plane of absolute political and social equality, or Vardaman and Tillman [Southern White supremacists] will soon have transferred the race war to the North.”



William English Walling, September 3, 1908.

# A National Response

# NATIONAL

## A NATIONAL RESPONSE

One of the most significant impacts of the Springfield Race Riot of 1908 was the impetus it provided for the organization of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The race riot in Springfield shocked the nation. Extreme racial violence had long been considered a Southern tradition, but with one of the worst riots in American history now having occurred in the urban north, social activists across the country took note. William English Walling, a socialist from Kentucky, was in Chicago when the riot erupted. He and his wife took the train to Springfield, a town with which he was very familiar. They spent most of their time in the hospital, at the jail, and in Black residential areas, where they had an opportunity to observe conditions and talk with people. He reported on those conditions in a weekly New York journal, *The Independent*.



William English Walling

Concerned should Springfield's violence become the norm in the North, Walling voiced his fear that American civilization and political democracy would experience a rapid decline. "Yet who realizes the seriousness of the situation," he asked in his article, "and what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to [the Negroes'] aid?" This question was a call to organize on behalf of Black rights. Mary White Ovington, a journalist and social activist from New York City, answered the call. "I wrote to Mr. Walling," she recalled "and ... we met in New York in the first week of the year of 1909. With us was Dr. Henry Moskowitz.... It was then that the National Associa-



Mary White Ovington

tion for the Advancement of Colored People was born.” They chose Lincoln’s birthday, February 12, to open their campaign, issuing on that date a call for a national conference on the Negro question. W.E.B. Du Bois, scholar and social activist, joined the initial organizational efforts as did Oswald Villard, Ray Baker, Mary Church Terrell, Archibald Grimké, Ida Wells, and many others. From the shame and violence of the Springfield riot rose the promise of organized civil rights activity in America.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Walling, “Race War in the North,” *The Independent* 65, 3 September 1908, 534. Mary White Ovington, “How the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Began” (Mary Dunlop Maclean Memorial Fund), 1914.



W.E.B. Du Bois



Ida Wells

**“Yet who realizes the seriousness of the situation and what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to [the Negroes’] aid?”**

William English Walling,  
September 3, 1908

**“I wrote to Mr. Walling,” she recalled “and ... we met in New York in the first week of the year of 1909. With us was Dr. Henry Moskowitz.... It was then that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was born.”**

Mary White Ovington, 1914

“ It is the duty of citizens to see that the perpetrators of the [mob's crimes] and those who aided, abetted, advised or encouraged their perpetration are brought to a speedy justice.”

Governor Charles Deneen

## EIGHTY-FIVE ARRESTS AS RESULT OF RIOT

City Prison and Jail Crowded for Room Owing to Numerous Arrests.

### EVIDENCE BEING OBTAINED

Police Claim Some of the Prisoners Have Broken Down and Confessed - Implicating Others.

With eighty-five arrests since 6:30 p. m. Friday the county jail and city prison are filled with men wanted on various charges connected with the bloody riots that commenced that evening.

Springfield News, August 19, 1908



Peoria Herald Transcript, August 20, 1908

# Justice Promised

# PROMISED

## JUSTICE PROMISED

The initial shock over the riot violence quickly gave way to the resolve that those responsible for the destruction should be held accountable. Governor Deneen again took the lead in stating the community's high expectations for the judicial process. "It is the duty of citizens," he said "to see that the perpetrators of the [mob's crimes] and those who aided, abetted, advised or encouraged their perpetration are brought to speedy justice." The newspapers came on board, the *Illinois State Journal* editorial speaking to accountability: "Sure and swift punishment is staring into the faces of those who are responsible for the horrors of Friday and Saturday nights." Springfield's officials expressed confidence that the rioters would be punished. "Before the grand jury finishes its work," said one official, "the man who placed the noose around the neck of Burton and the man who did a like service in the case of old man Donigan will be under arrest."<sup>1</sup>

The newspapers noted what appeared to be substantial evidence against the rioters. "A constant stream of witnesses is going through the grand jury room, and almost every witness knows the names of some in the mob," reported the *Springfield News*. The expectation of fifteen murder indictments promised solid evidence for the prosecution. The special grand jury issued a total of 117 indictments and made eighty-five arrests for murder, burglary, larceny, incitement to riot, dis-

orderly conduct, concealed weapons, and suspicion.<sup>2</sup>

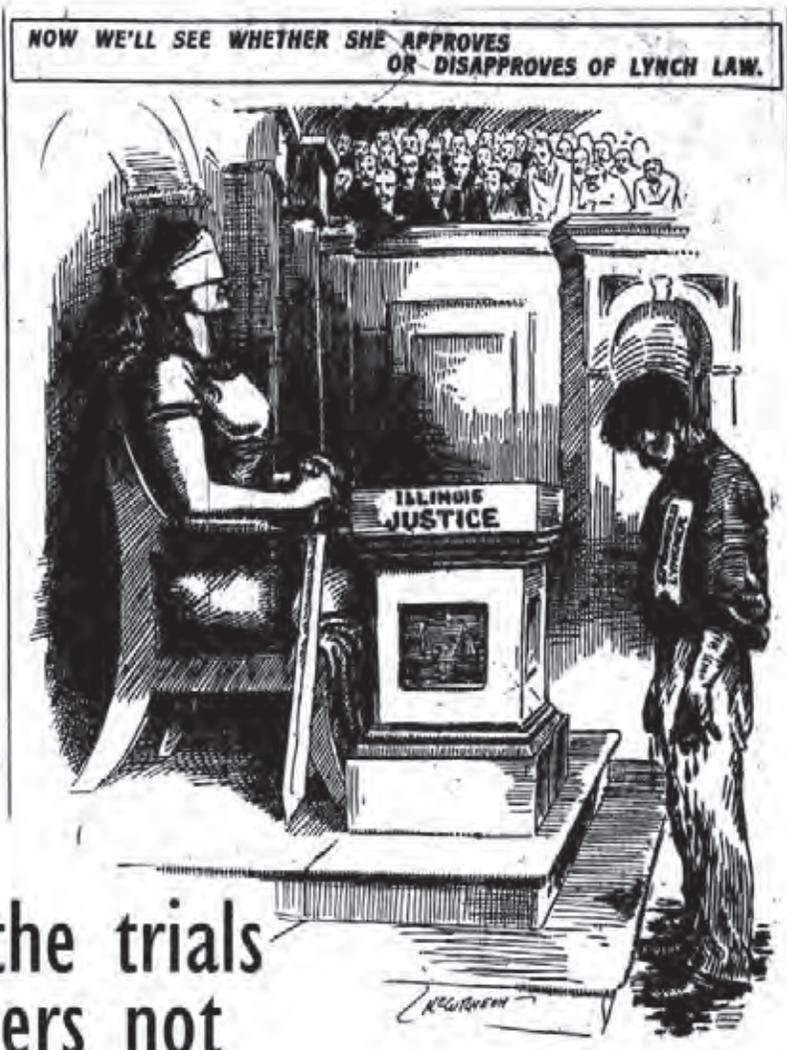
Political cartoons promoted good citizenship. In one from a Peoria paper, a man representing the Springfield businessmen is holding up the arm of the law in one hand and in the other carries the direct appeal that "Our assistance and our testimony will be freely given." It was as though the official word was out to stand behind the prosecution of the rioters, but the appeal in the cartoon suggested that there were concerns that the public might not step forward to bear witness.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Illinois State Journal*, 18 August 1908; *Springfield News*, 21 August 1908.

<sup>2</sup> *Springfield News*, 21 August 1908; *Illinois State Register*, 4 September 1908.

<sup>3</sup> *Peoria Herald Transcript*, 20 August 1908.

**"A constant stream of witnesses is going through the grand jury room, and almost every witness knows the names of some in the mob," reported the *Springfield News*.**



Chicago Daily Tribune,  
August 20, 1908

“So far in the trials of the rioters not one has been convicted, although there could really be no doubt of the part they took.”

Katherine Enos,  
November 10, 1908

# Justice Betrayed

# RETRAYED

## JUSTICE BETRAYED

However noble and strong the sentiments expressed on behalf of law and order, what actually happened in court was more telling of the community's regard for justice. Persons who had previously admitted participation in the mob denied the same under oath. Witnesses to the Loper Restaurant destruction and the lynching of Scott Burton claimed they were unable to identify any of the members of the mob. "I was across from Loper's during the disturbances there," said M. S. Oder at the coroner's inquest. "I did not recognize anyone in the crowd, for I did not get close enough." "So far in the trials of the rioters," wrote Katherine Enos, "not one has been convicted, although there could be no doubt of the part they took."<sup>1</sup>

Charles Wolf, another member of the mob, had gotten drunk and was brought to the police station holding in his pockets two bottles of beer that he had looted from the Black saloons on East

**Most of the riot cases were dismissed, and State's Attorney Hatch admitted with disappointment, "It would be impossible to secure a conviction in Sangamon County."**

Washington. He had also suffered a gunshot. The newspaper reported that he had said, "I helped to lynch one nigger, anyway." At the coroner's inquest, however, Wolf denied involvement in the Burton lynching. "I got [to the place of the Burton lynching] about the time the soldiers got there," he said. "I was on the south side of Madison [S]treet and [Scott Burton] was hanging on the north side.... I never heard



Abraham Raymer



Kate Howard

[the shots of the militia].... I do not know whether it was one of [the militia shots that] struck me.”<sup>2</sup>

Securing witnesses became very difficult for the prosecution, which was led by State’s Attorney Frank Hatch. Even members of the business community ignored the pleas to assist the prosecution and to testify freely. The confidence that officials had expressed in bringing the rioters to justice was betrayed by the realities of race, for the grand jury officials were seriously out of touch with Springfield’s White citizens. For the most part the prosecution had to rely on the testimony of law enforcement officers and a few Blacks. Not even money could break the code of White silence. Governor Deneen had offered \$200 each for the arrest and conviction of persons responsible for the deaths of the seven riot victims. No one stepped forward to claim the reward.<sup>3</sup>

# LYNCHERS OF BURTON ARE NOT LOCATED

The Coroner’s Inquest  
Yesterday Proves to  
Be a Fruitless  
Inquiry.

## SOME WITNESSES BUT NO GUILT

Several Persons Testify to  
Having Been There at Time  
of Tragedy but Know None  
Who Participated.

In spite of the 117 indictments and the more than eighty-five arrests, the juries, which were composed of White men from all social classes, convicted only one person. Most of the riot cases were dismissed, and State’s Attorney Hatch admitted with disappointment, “It would be impossible to secure a conviction in Sangamon [C]ounty.”<sup>4</sup>

Only one person suffered serious punishment for his role in the riot. Roy Young, a fifteen-year-old, confessed that during the invasion of the Levee he had broken into Fishman’s pawnshop and had taken three or four revolvers and some cartridges. “When the fighting got bad,” he said, “I commenced shooting at negroes....When we went over on Madison [S]treet some one started setting fire to the houses of negroes and I helped. I guess I poured oil on about fifteen or sixteen houses and set fire to them.” Young was sentenced to the state reformatory at Pontiac.<sup>5</sup>

The case of Abraham Raymer illustrated clearly the betrayal of Springfield’s criminal justice system. Raymer, a twenty-year-old peddler, was arrested for inciting to riot and for the murders of Scott Burton and William Donigan. He was also charged with burglary, theft, and finally with petty larceny. Witnesses testified to Raymer’s leading role in the mob.

“That Raymer was in the mob that lynched William Donigan, an aged negro, was established beyond a doubt by the testimony yesterday introduced by the state,” said the prosecution. “He knew that the gang which he joined at Seventh and Washington streets was out on a hunt for ‘niggers’.... Haven’t we produced any amount of witnesses who swear that many members of the mob were shouting ‘Let’s get the niggers!’ Does not Raymer himself admit shouting to people to come on?” The jury declared Raymer not guilty of Donigan’s murder after one ballot.<sup>6</sup>

In a second trial, Raymer was acquitted of property damage, in spite of Harry Loper’s testimony that Raymer had played a leading role in the destruction of his restaurant. Raymer was also acquitted on the charge of rioting. Finally, in a fourth trial, the jury found Raymer guilty of petty larceny for stealing a military sword from the home of Otis Duncan, a Black army major. Raymer was fined twenty-five dollars and sent to jail for thirty days.<sup>7</sup>

In another case, Kate Howard, who owned a boardinghouse not far from the Levee, was arrested the second evening of violence for inciting to riot, burglary, and larceny in the destruction and looting of Loper’s restaurant. “The crowd,” Roy Wilson testified at the coroner’s inquest, “was led by a woman.” During the attack on the restaurant Howard was reported to have said. “What the h[ell] are you fellows afraid of? Come on and I will show you how to do it. Women want protection and this seems to be the only way to get it.”<sup>8</sup> Released on \$10,000 bond, How-

ard was later arrested again, but this time for the murder of Scott Burton. “With God as my witness,” she said, “I never caused the murder of anyone.” Before leaving for prison, Howard secretly took poison and died at the door of the county jail. “If they push me too far,” she had said, “I will end my life.” Had she lived she might well have been acquitted of the murder charge like the other accused rioters.<sup>9</sup>

Few individuals, therefore, were held accountable for the riot, and those few were marginal people with little community standing: a fifteen-year-old boy, who confessed to his crime; a Jewish immigrant from Russia who was acquitted of all charges except petty larceny; and a woman who committed suicide before her case was prosecuted. That witnesses were afraid to testify and that juries ignored the evidence demonstrated that justice was not alive and well in Springfield.

1 *Springfield News*, 19 August 1908; Letter of Katherine Enos, Springfield, 10 November 1908.

2 *Springfield News*, 17 August 1908, 19 August 1908.

3 Senechal, *Sociogenesis of a Race Riot*, 169.

4 *Illinois State Register*, 24 September 1908.

5 *Illinois State Register*, 18 August 1908.

6 *Illinois State Register*, 24 September 1908.

7 *Illinois State Register*, 29 December 1908.

8 *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908.

9 *Illinois State Register*, 22 August 1908; *Illinois State Journal*, 15 August 1908.

“ We, the jury, find the defendant, Joe James, guilty of murder. . . and that he shall suffer the punishment of death. ”

T. C. Torrance, Court Clerk



Joe James

# Peace at a Price Another Hanging

# HANGING

## PEACE AT A PRICE: ANOTHER HANGING

Although the Springfield justice system acquitted the rioters, it moved quickly to hang Joe James for the murder of Clergy Ballard. The racial climate in a city that had just experienced a race riot was hardly conducive to an impartial trial. James had long insisted that he did not remember killing Clergy Ballard. “I don’t remember,” he said. “The last thing I recollect, some one gave me a nickel when I was shooting craps and I don’t know whether I shot it, spent it, or put it in my pocket.... I don’t remember anything that happened after that until someone spoke to me when I woke up in the morning.”<sup>1</sup>

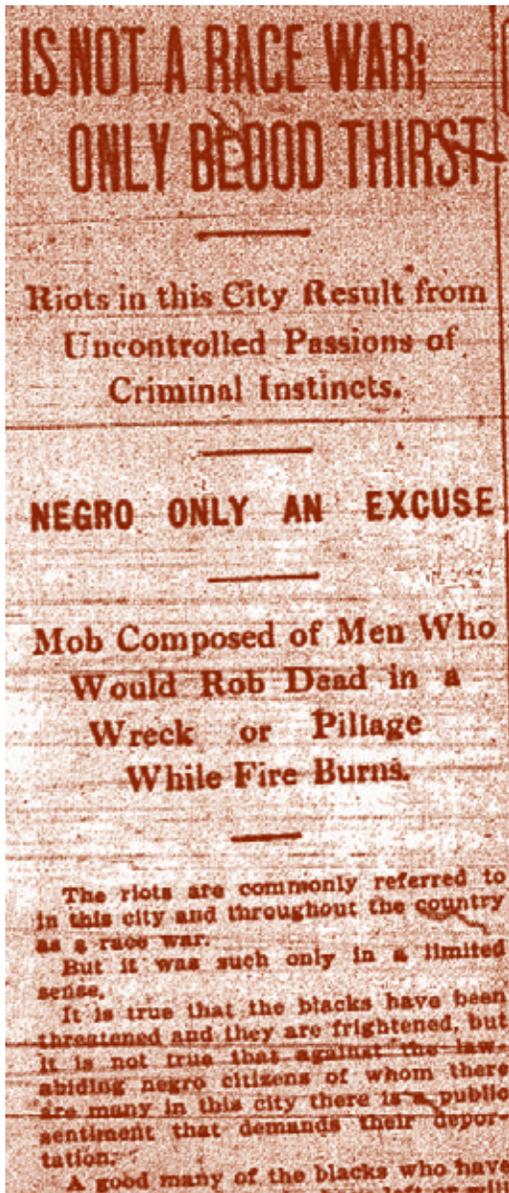
Possibly underage and probably drunk to insensibility, James nevertheless was caught near the scene of the crime around the time of the crime in clothing that matched evidence left at the scene. To save his soul, James assumed guilt, confessing to actions he did not remember: “I am sorry for the crime I committed. Drunkenness was the cause of it.... I have grossly sinned against Mr. Ballard, his family and each and every citizen. But I ask for each and everyone’s forgiveness.... I did not realize the greatness of my crime until I was brought to the city prison the next morning after I committed it.” James, who had no money to appeal his death sentence, was hanged on Oc-

tober 23, less than four months after his arrest. His death seemed to bring an uneasy peace to the White community, which had sought revenge for Ballard’s death, and to the Black community, which feared that an acquittal would provoke another round of White violence.<sup>2</sup>

1 *Illinois State Register*, 17 September 1908.

2 *Illinois State Register*, 24 August 1908.

To save his soul,  
James assumed guilt,  
confessing to actions  
he did not remember:  
“I am sorry for the  
crime I committed.”



Springfield News, August 18, 1908

“There is nowhere in the state of Illinois where there is so little racial prejudice as there is in Sangamon County.”

Judge James Creighton

# Denying Racism

# RACISM

## DENYING RACISM

For the most part, the press and official Springfield acknowledged that the riot was essentially a race war. Others, however, particularly as time passed, began to put another spin on the events of mid-August. A *Springfield News* article, for example, claimed that the riot was “only blood thirst” resulting from “uncontrolled passions of criminal instincts.” The Negro, it claimed, was “only an excuse.” But how to explain the fact that Blacks were the primary victims of the violence? The article maintained that “law-abiding negro citizens of whom there are many in this city” were not the targets of hatred and deportation, but rather are “indispensable in the economic service of the public.” Economic service meant the subservient jobs held by Blacks that were essential to the operation of households, offices, businesses, and city services. The article maintained that it is to the other class of Blacks in the city -- those who have not behaved themselves -- that the violent attacks were directed. The article dismissed those of this group who had left the city as “a fine riddance.”<sup>1</sup>

This argument -- that only Blacks who misbehaved were the victims of violence or mistreatment -- was hardly a new one. To deny the racism of the riot was to relieve White Springfield of charges that it had itself misbehaved. The argument also shifted the blame for the riot violence to the lowest class of Whites -- those considered

the riff-raff and the criminal element. To attribute their behavior to uncontrolled criminal instincts, however, was to strip even this group of racist intent. Research on the background of indicted rioters, however, found that the criminal element was negligible. The typical rioter was a White, working-class male in his mid-twenties, who had been born in the North, most likely in the Springfield area. The indicted rioters were disproportionately of Irish and Italian descent.<sup>2</sup>

The denial of racism infected Springfield at higher levels, reaching, for example, to the criminal justice system. The trial of Joe James abounded with such denial. James’s attorneys moved for a change

**“This was not a race war at all.”**

**Judge James Creighton**

of venue, claiming that a fair and impartial trial could not be had in a town that had just undergone such extreme racial violence. Judge James Creighton denied the motion, claiming that “There is nowhere in the state of Illinois where there is so little race prejudice as there is in Sangamon [C]ounty.” As further evidence of Springfield’s fairness, Creighton reminded the court that there was a Black man on the jury and that the court had treated James’s Black attorney with respect. Attempting to confirm the impartiality of James’s conviction, the newspaper reported that “The jurymen at the outset decided to adhere strictly to the law and the evidence, and based their deliberations on the fictitious supposition that the crime had been committed by a white man.”<sup>3</sup> It is hard to imagine a more counterfeit effort to ignore race.

To deny the racism of the riot was to relieve White Springfield of charges that it had itself misbehaved.

It is precisely this denial of racism -- whether one hundred years ago or today -- that made necessary the commemoration of the Springfield Race Riot of 1908. The resistance to the commemoration was rooted in the society’s denial of its past and present responsibility for the violence, the repression, and the injustice inflicted on its Black citizens.

1 *Springfield News*, 8 September 1908, 18 August 1908.

2 For an analysis of the rioters, see Senechal, *Sociogenesis of a Race Riot*, 93-123.

3 *Springfield News*, 8 September 1908, 18 September 1908.



Carl Madison, President, Springfield Chapter NAACP, and Charles Wilson, great-grandson of William Donigan, at the headstone dedication ceremony, August 13, 1994.

# Memory and Commemoration

# MEMORY

## MEMORY AND COMMEMORATION

Due to denial and neglect, Springfield forgot the hateful violence that overran the city one hundred years ago. No one alive today witnessed the riot. Consequently most people in Springfield know little or nothing about it. “I know the time I was in the public schools here I never learned about it,” recalled Carl Madison, former president of the Springfield NAACP. The tendency to sweep the riot story under the rug has denied generations of students and adults the opportunity to learn about an event of local and national significance.<sup>1</sup>



Velma Carey

In 1991, two White sixth-graders, Amanda Staab and Lindsay Harney, petitioned the Springfield City Council to memorialize the Springfield race riot of 1908. It is significant that renewed interest in the riot came from children who were committed to the confrontation of a horrible event from the past. Their effort inspired others and on August 12, 1994, the city dedicated grave markers of four riot victims and markers commemorating eight downtown riot sites. “It means,” said Velma Carey, Chair of the 1908 Race Riot Memorial Marker Committee, “that, at last, we are recognizing that the community had problems. But the fact that we can look back, and look not in hatred, means that we’re making progress.”<sup>2</sup>

**“It means that, at last, we are recognizing that the community had problems and that it still has problems. But the fact that we can look back, and look not in hatred, means we’re making progress.”**

Velma Carey, September 11, 1994

The centennial offers Springfield still more opportunities to confront the past and better un-

derstand the present. The news supplements that trace the story, the special tours that track the path of violence, the discussion groups that seek racial reconciliation, the commissioned art that inspires a new vision -- all such efforts would have been deemed unlikely just two decades ago. But the speed with which changes are occurring in our world provides renewed hope that the old problems of race can find resolution. A riot like the one that occurred in Springfield a century ago seems unlikely today. Yet the old racial enmities continue to divide us and the venom that poisoned the city in 1908 still resides in the hearts of some. Race remains today the primary indicator of one's quality of life. But in this year of the riot centennial, who can deny that there has been substantial progress in our nation? The shame of Springfield one hundred years ago has been balanced by pride in a city where the first Black presidential nominee of a major political party launched his campaign. This publication and the exhibition it accompanied, *Something So Horrible: The Springfield Race Riot of 1908*, confront squarely the painful truth of the past, acknowledge the racial divisions of the present, and yet embrace the hope for a future in which justice rules.



Carl Madison with students Lindsay Harney and Amanda Staab

1 Carl Madison, *State Journal-Register*, 10 August 1995.

2 Velma Carey, *State Journal-Register*, 11 September 1994.



Springfield Mayor Ossie Langfelder at the 1994 dedication

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Reliable men, who saw the beginning of the first riot, say that any two policemen doing their duty could have stopped it, for then the participants were only young boys — some in knee pants.

By this time there is much to make it doubtful if Mrs. Hallam (the woman who claimed to have been assaulted by the colored man) was ever harmed. She has too many lies to be believed at all.

I think what has followed, the disgrace, the loss of property, of life and the fearful expenses —! And more disgrace to follow for probably not one voter will be punished.

With all good wishes and kindest remembrance  
Yours,  
Katherine S. Erow.

SCENE OF LYNCHING.

