

STRANGE FRUIT ON THE SOUTHERN
PLAINS: RACIAL VIOLENCE, LYNCHING, AND
AFRICAN AMERICANS IN OKLAHOMA, 1830-1930

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Abstract:

To varying degrees, African-descended people in Oklahoma encountered racial violence in every era of history between 1830 and 1930. The first African-descended people to set foot in Oklahoma were those slaves who endured the Trail of Tears along with their Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole masters. While there was a great deal of variance in racialized violence used in dealing with Black slaves between and within tribes, the system of Black chattel slavery practiced by a tiny minority of members of the Five Tribes was nonetheless predicated upon racial violence. The role of racial violence in the ensuing processes of emancipation, land allotment, and the granting of tribal citizenship to freedpeople further demonstrates the varying degree to which the different members of the Five Tribes understood themselves in relation to Whites and Blacks in Indian Territory.

Having evolved from Western frontier justice in the territorial period to Southern racial control by the early years of statehood, racial violence – in the form of lynching – peaked in the 1910s. In conjunction with Jim Crow segregation, Whites sought to use lynching as a tool to shape the racial hierarchy of the new state. This decade of increased lynching and sharpened segregation culminated in the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, the most wide-ranging and destructive example of White racial violence against African Americans in Oklahoma between 1830 and 1930. The massive loss of life and destruction of property that stemmed from the invasion of Greenwood is evidence of the power of lynching as a social and political force, as well as the unique nature of race relations in Oklahoma – a state which was purportedly more welcoming to Blacks than was the Old South.

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INTRODUCTION

Like the “Strange Fruit” that soured the pastoral scene of Billie Holiday’s gallant South, the mutilated Black bodies of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Wil Stewart lay in a field about a mile north of Memphis, Tennessee on the morning of March 9, 1892.¹ These three men owned and operated The People’s Grocery Store, which was in direct competition with a White-owned grocery store across the street. A week earlier, a blend of racial animosity and economic competition had boiled over into physical violence between the opposing store owners. Three White men were wounded in an ensuing shootout. In response, White Memphis police officers arrested dozens of African-American men in the area and confiscated Black-owned weapons. Despite the fact that no one was killed during the violent exchange, White Memphians broke into the jail cell where Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were held, put them on a railroad car heading north of town, and shot them dead in a field. Before killing the three men, the White mob asked Thomas Moss if he had any last words. He said “Tell my people to go

¹ Lyrics by Abel Meeropol, *Strange Fruit* (1937); song version first performed by Billie Holiday in 1939.

West – there is no justice for them here.”² Immediately following the triple-lynching in Memphis, Ida B. Wells – soon to become the nation’s most prominent anti-lynching activist – took his advice. She traveled west to Oklahoma to survey the region as a potential escape from the racial violence of Southern Whites.³

The last words of Thomas Moss inspired more than just Ida B. Wells. Millions of African Americans heeded his final words in the 1890s and 1900s, fleeing the racial violence of the South for western and northern destinations like Kansas and Chicago. Some of these Black migrants came to Oklahoma and joined the region’s small number of existing African-descended residents: freedpeople who also carried memories of racial violence, dating back to their experiences as the slaves of southeastern Native Americans in Indian Territory. Having either fled the violence of the post-Civil War South or been emancipated from Native American masters, Oklahoma’s Black population grew significantly during the 1890s and 1900s even as the overall population of Oklahoma grew and diversified. During these decades, many African Americans in Oklahoma experienced peace, safety, and even prosperity – often to a greater degree than their Southern counterparts.

But with the approach of statehood in November of 1907, the specter of White racial violence found its way back to the doorsteps of Black Oklahomans. Lethal mob violence had existed in Oklahoma long before 1907, but it was not as explicitly racial in

² Royster, ed., *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s Publishing, 1997), throughout, but especially 2-3. See also Paula J. Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2008), 177-187 and Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (University of Chicago Press, 1970), 50-51.

³ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 188-201.

nature and was usually connected to horse or cattle theft. This more Western form of mob violence soon developed into a more Southern form, in which Whites sought to use lynching to target African Americans and shape the racial hierarchy of the new state. Oklahomans carried out this evolution along their path to statehood, to the degree that thirty-three of Oklahoma's forty lynching victims in the statehood era were Black. Comparatively, only seventeen of the 110 lynching victims in the territorial era were Black (see Chart 1, "African-American Lynching Victims in Oklahoma by Year"). Operating within the context of the strong White-supremacy ideology of Jim Crow segregation, the refusal on the part of Oklahoma's law enforcement and criminal justice systems to punish White lynchers made the 1910s an especially lethal decade for Oklahoma's African-American population, with White mobs lynching twenty-eight Blacks between 1910 and 1920. In response to this increased frequency of lynching, Black Oklahomans petitioned the Oklahoma government and organized to defend themselves, at times even taking up arms against White lynch mobs. Along with the negative publicity that lynchings brought the new state, Black efforts at petition and self-defense helped slow the rate of lynchings in the latter part of the 1910s, to the point that 1917 and 1918 saw just one Black lynching victim in Oklahoma and 1919 saw none (see Table 1, "African-American Lynching Victims in Oklahoma").

Despite lynching's sharp decline at the end of the 1910s, the story of White racial violence and lynching against African Americans in Oklahoma did not end in 1920. In fact, the largest outburst of racial violence in the history of the state – and perhaps the most costly in the history of the United States – took place in 1921. The Tulsa Race Riot unfolded more like a massacre or pogrom than the "riot" that has become its

namesake. The violence that destroyed nearly all of Black Tulsa may have been ignited on May 31st, but it had a variety of long-term causes that went back for years. Jim Crow segregation and the relative wealth of Tulsa's all-Black Greenwood District, for example, had built up racial animosity for several decades in newly-urban Tulsa. But the initial spark or immediate cause of the violence was lynching, or at least the threat of lynching. Like many in Black communities across Oklahoma had done in previous years, Black Tulsans took up arms to oppose a White lynch mob that sought to illegally kill an alleged African-American criminal. From this point, the situation escalated dramatically. At the end of the second day of violence, White Tulsans had rampaged through Black Tulsa, almost completely destroying the all-Black neighborhood and business district of Greenwood. During the violence, White men and boys acted much like the lynch mobs that illegally took the lives of forty-seven Black Oklahomans by May of 1921 (see Table 1). In fact, some of them had been members of a would-be lynch mob just minutes before being sworn in as special deputies by the Tulsa Police Department and given weapons. With both implicit and explicit support from Tulsa's local law enforcement and the National Guard, White Tulsans looted and burned Black-owned homes, businesses, and churches, killing hundreds of African Americans in overwhelmingly one-sided street warfare. What began as an attempt to lynch one African American developed into an attempt to completely destroy an entire Black community.

In some ways, the Tulsa Race Riot can be understood as a lynching on a broad scale. The culmination of decades of racial animosity and violence that had built up in the new state of Oklahoma by 1921, the pogrom completely unique in Oklahoma's history because of the scale and degree of its destruction and killing and because of its

blatantly racist nature. In the aftermath of this mass lynching, or metalynding, individual lynching incidents in Oklahoma decreased dramatically. So strong during the years before the Riot, the spirit of resistance and militancy among Black Oklahomans became more muted. In terms of race relations, Oklahoma entered a period of uneasy silence. Black Tulsans – and Black Oklahomans more generally – rarely spoke about what happened to Greenwood, for fear that it might happen again. To some degree, the Riot passed from Oklahoma’s collective memory, and the state’s race relations entered an era of subdued anxiety that would go largely undisturbed until the Civil Rights Movement awoke in Oklahoma.

Ongoing debates about how to classify what happened in Tulsa (as a race riot, a mass lynching, massacre, etc.) demonstrate the abstract and fluid nature of the concept of lynching. The word carries different meanings for people with different backgrounds or hailing from different parts of the United States. Because of this ambiguity, it is necessary to define lynching as I have used it for this study. I employ a patchwork definition generally accepted by early twentieth-century anti-lynching activists like Ida B. Wells and the N.A.A.C.P., of which there are four major components.⁴ First, there must be legal evidence that a person was killed. The victim does not necessarily have to have been identified, but the body of a lynching victim must have been recovered. Second, the killing must be extralegal. An important aspect of the lynching phenomena is that of mob violence, or the process by which common people band together to take

⁴ The N.A.A.C.P.’s lynching criteria were reprinted by researchers Elizabeth Hines and Eliza Steelwater for their Historical American Lynching data project ([http://people.uncw.edu/hinese/HAL/HAL%20Web%20Page.htm#DEFINITION OF LYNCHING](http://people.uncw.edu/hinese/HAL/HAL%20Web%20Page.htm#DEFINITION%20OF%20LYNCHING)). See also National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *30 Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (Published by author, 1919).

the law into their own hands. So however racially biased the state-sanctioned use of the electric chair or firing squad may have been, I have not classified these killings as lynchings. Third, the killing must be carried out by three or more people. As I have defined them, lynchings were more than just racially-motivated homicides or revenge killings. Lynching was representative of a collective mindset, carried out by a group of people seeking to overwhelm an individual with combined force. So regardless of what factor race may have played, I have not considered a one-on-one White-on-Black murder to be a lynching at any point in this study.

Finally, I require evidence that the killers acted in service to justice, race, or tradition in order to classify a killing as a lynching. This is the most fluid of all four pieces of criteria, and often the most difficult to use to qualify a lynching case. Perhaps the easiest way to imagine this piece of criteria is that there must be evidence that a White mob tried to send a greater social or political message by killing an African American – that Whites designed the killing of a Black Oklahoman to be a part of a broader attempt to influence the attitudes and actions of other Blacks. Here lies the nature of lynching as a form of racial control. This final piece of criteria excludes Black victims of random or anomalous killings like serial murders or killings carried out by people not of sound mind.

While it is not an especially large historical subfield, a significant number of scholars from such disciplines as history, sociology, and journalism have written studies on White racial violence against African Americans in the form of lynching. Most numerous in the lynching subfield are state-specific books like Charles N. Clark

Kiktode's *Lynchings in Oklahoma*.⁵ Clark's book is extremely important because it is the only existing full-length work that focuses on lynching, racism, and vigilantism in Oklahoma. It provides a general overview of all the lynching victims in Oklahoma history – regardless of race – and is relatively light on historical interpretation. As a complement to Clark's overview, I have designed this work as a more interpretive study, focusing on the victimization of African Americans in Oklahoma.

More useful are works that examine lynching in specific regions or compare lynching in different regions. Michael J. Pfeifer has emerged as the most prominent scholar in this area. In his books *Rough Justice* and *The Roots of Rough Justice*, Pfeifer theorizes that extralegal mob violence was the result of a “cultural war” between rural and working-class people in Southern and Western frontier regions and middle to upper-class people in more established areas of the North and East. People in rural and working-class communities in the South and frontier West advocated “rough justice”, or members of a community taking the law into their own hands. Alternatively, Pfeifer posits that people of the middle and upper classes in places like the urban northeast were content with the slower due process of law.⁶ As I will show, the chronology and geography of African-American lynchings in Oklahoma fits neatly into

⁵ Charles N. Clark Kiktode, *Lynchings in Oklahoma: Vigilantism and Racism in the Twin Territories and Oklahoma, 1830-1930* (published by author, 2008). Other state-specific lynching studies include George C. Wright's *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and 'Legal Lynchings'* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Julius E. Thompson's *Lynchings in Mississippi: A History, 1865-1965* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2001); Vann R. Newkirk's *Lynching in North Carolina: A History, 1865-1941* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009); and Harriet C. Frazier's *Lynchings in Missouri, 1803-1981* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009).

⁶ Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2-4; Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Pfeifer, ed., *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2-4.

Pfeifer's framework. Whites rarely lynched African Americans in urban areas of Oklahoma. It was usually in more isolated and rural areas that White mobs took the law into their own hands to enact rough justice upon Black Oklahomans.

Because of its high frequency and blatantly racial nature, lynching in the South has been studied most intently. Sociologist Stewart Tolnay contributed heavily to the history of Southern lynching, as his 1995 book with E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, was a landmark accomplishment in lynching history. His empirical study linked lynching rates in ten Southern states with fluctuations in the price of cotton, demonstrating that lynching often had economic motivations that underlay its use as a form of social control and political terror against Southern Blacks.⁷

While lynching and racial violence make up a growing historical subfield, very little of the emerging literature has been focused on Oklahoma – and scholars have devoted even less attention to the experiences of Black people in the Sooner State, with regard to encounters with lynching and racial violence. Much of the recent work that scholars have done on African Americans in Oklahoma has focused on Black-Indian relations, all-Black Towns, or the Greenwood District and the Tulsa Race Riot. African-American legal scholar Hannibal Johnson has written full-length books on several of these subjects, including *Acres of Aspiration: The All-Black Towns in Oklahoma* and his recent book *Apartheid in Indian Country? Seeing Red over Black Disenfranchisement*.⁸ The Tulsa Race Riot, especially, has become a booming topic in the past few decades

⁷ Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

⁸ Hannibal Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration: The All-Black Towns in Oklahoma* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 20002) and *Apartheid In Indian Country? Seeing Red over Black Disenfranchisement* (Fort Worth, TX: Eakin Press, 2012).

among scholars of various fields, including history, sociology, and law. In 1982, Scott Ellsworth's *Death in A Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* became one of the first full-length monographs about the invasion and destruction of Greenwood.⁹ Legal scholars like Hannibal Johnson and Albert Brophy followed suit, as Brophy's 2003 book *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* is another landmark in the historiography of the Tulsa Race Riot.¹⁰

But despite all the well-researched writings on the subjects of Black-Indian relations, all-Black towns, and the Tulsa Race Riot, few works attempt to synthesize these subjects by using racial violence and lynching as their hinge point. Published in 2000, Murray R. Wickett's *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907*, comes close to this kind of synthetic approach, although Wickett focuses on racial relations in Indian Territory and Oklahoma more generally and does not use racial violence or lynching as his primary lens.¹¹ David Chang's *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1909*, published in 2010, similarly examines race relations in Indian Territory and Oklahoma, but through the lens of the politics of land ownership. Both *Contested Territory* and *The Color of the Land* examine the tri-racial nature of race relations in Indian Territory and Oklahoma, but neither book places much emphasis on racial violence and lynching nor uses these concepts as lenses.¹² More importantly,

⁹ Scott Ellsworth, *Death In A Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Albert Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Murray R. Wickett, *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

¹² David Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832- 1929* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

their chronological foci stop just short of Oklahoma's entry into statehood – and thus, both studies end right before Black Oklahomans experienced their worst period of victimization at the hands of White lynch mobs. Despite their seamless integration of concepts of race, power, and land, these books do not fully address the issues I bring forth.

With this historiographical gap in mind, I offer my study as an intersection between three historical subfields: Oklahoma history, the history of lynching and racial violence, and the history of African Americans in the western portions of the United States. I include Oklahoma in regional and national discussions of African-American lynching trends in a way that connects Oklahoma to both Southern and Western traditions of mob violence. Simultaneously speaking to Oklahoma history, the African-American West, and the geographical dimensions of the phenomena of lynching provides the kind of synthetic approach that these fields are missing. I have found that African-descended people in Oklahoma encountered racial violence in every era of history between 1830 and 1930, to varying degrees. Having evolved from Western frontier justice to Southern racial control by the early years of statehood, racial violence – in the form of lynching – peaked in the 1910s as Whites sought to use it as a tool to shape the new state. Finally, the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot stands as the most wide-ranging and destructive example of White racial violence against African Americans in Oklahoma between 1830 and 1930, representing the power of lynching as a social and political force as well as the deeply divided nature of race relations in a state which was purportedly more welcoming to Blacks than was the Old South.

Chapter One focuses primarily on the first Black Oklahomans: the slaves of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole Indians forcibly removed from the Southeast to Indian Territory throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Here, I demonstrate that racialized violence was crucial for holding together the system of Black chattel slavery that a tiny minority of Southeastern Native Americans adapted from Europeans and Southern White Americans. In exploring how racial violence underlay slaveholding practices in Indian Territory, I compare and contrast the degrees of racial violence, cultural exchange, and political participation that existed between Blacks and Indians of these five tribes, from slavery through the Civil War to emancipation and allotment. Towards the end, I introduce the first voluntary African-American migrants to Oklahoma: those Blacks who fled the South for Oklahoma Territory before 1907 and who settled in Oklahoma once it achieved statehood.

In Chapter Two, I demonstrate how Oklahoma's path to statehood coincided with an evolution of racial mob violence from Western frontier justice to Southern racial control. I briefly give background on these two different – but related – forms of mob violence and describe how each form manifested itself throughout Oklahoma's early history. During the first thirteen years of Oklahoma's statehood, Whites embraced the Southern racial-control form of mob violence and lynched dozens of African Americans in an attempt to harden the racial hierarchy of the new state. Along with lynching as a tool of statemaking, Jim Crow segregation emerged in Oklahoma as a way to solidify White supremacy – even as the relative success of Black communities in urban areas like Tulsa and Oklahoma City and small towns like Boley and Langston seemed to disprove it.

In Chapter Three, I establish the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot (more properly understood as an invasion, a pogrom, or a massacre) as the culmination of White racial violence against Oklahoma Blacks during the first fourteen years of statehood. While broad factors like Tulsa's booming oil industry, Jim Crow segregation, and the relative wealth of Tulsa's all-Black Greenwood District set the stage for what happened in the summer of 1921, lynching provided the immediate spark to the violence. Once civil order broke down, White participants in the Riot acted much like White lynching mobs, recklessly destroying African-American life and property with both implicit and explicit approval of local law enforcement and National Guardsmen. While my lynching criteria does not allow me to consider any of the unknown number (possibly hundreds) of Black deaths as lynchings, the events leading up to Greenwood's destruction lead me to understand the Tulsa Race Riot as a metalyching, or a large-scale outbreak of White violence in the same vein as smaller racial disturbances in Oklahoma's history.

Each chapter of this study opens with an episode of White racial violence against Black Oklahomans in a different historical era. Collectively, these openings emphasize the ubiquity of the threat of violence throughout the history of the Black experience in Oklahoma. Indeed, the history of African Americans in Oklahoma – like much of the general narrative of African-American history – is a story of constant struggle to survive, to live meaningfully with loved ones, and to break free of the cruel and limiting consequences of White supremacy. Blacks who voluntarily migrated to Oklahoma came here in search of something. They fled the racial violence and economic oppression of the South and traveled west, joining a small number of African-descended

Oklahomans who themselves were searching for what African-American writer Richard Wright called “the warmth of other suns”.¹³

For a short period of time, Black Oklahomans felt this warmth. They felt it in all-Black towns like Langston: remarkably successful oases of Black independence and self-sufficiency in a post-Reconstruction United States that kept millions of Southern African Americans in the *de facto* slavery of sharecropping debt peonage. Black Oklahomans felt warmth in urban communities like Oklahoma City’s Deep Deuce and Tulsa’s Greenwood, in which African-American life ebbed and flowed in defiance of the ideology of White supremacy and the humiliation of Jim Crow segregation. At times, the sun seemed to wane. The early 1910s and the early 1920s, especially, were dark times for Black Oklahomans. But they did what Blacks have done since Europeans stole them from Africa: they adapted, rebuilt, closed ranks, pooled resources, and petitioned the White establishment. When those strategies did not work, they packed up and moved on – in constant search of the warmth of other suns.

¹³ Quoted in Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 13. Wilkerson titled her book with this phrase from a poem by Richard Wright that describes his exodus from the South and participation in the Great Migration. See also Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937).

CHAPTER I

BLACKS, NATIVE AMERICANS, AND RACIAL VIOLENCE IN THE TWIN TERRITORIES

On a December morning in 1858 in Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory, Richard Harkins went missing. He was a powerful and wealthy Choctaw slaveowner, the brother of then-Chief George Harkins and the son-in-law of Peter Pitchlynn, who was Chief of the Choctaw from 1860 to 1865. Harkins was last seen riding on horseback towards a river on his property, and a day after his disappearance his horse was found wandering several miles away with its saddle under its belly. This led neighboring Choctaws to assume Harkins had drowned in the river, and they began questioning his slaves about their master's disappearance.

After several days a slave named Prince confessed to murdering Harkins, tying a rock to his body, and throwing him in the river. Prince then led a group of Choctaw men to the water where Harkins lay on the riverbed. After the group found Harkins' body and pulled it out of the water, Prince told the men that his aunt Lucy – another slave belonging to Harkins – had been involved in planning the murder. He then jumped in the river and drowned himself. The Choctaw group went to the slave quarters and seized Lucy, a mother of eight and a member of the local Choctaw Presbyterian

Church. Retrieving Prince's corpse from the water, they prepared a pyre and burned his body. Then, at the urging of Hawkins' widow Lavina, the Choctaw party burned Lucy alive on the same pyre. There was little to no evidence connecting Lucy to the murder, and she maintained her innocence even up until her death.¹⁴

Lucy's burning is the most disturbing example of racial violence against African Americans in what would become Oklahoma during the period of slavery. According to the definition used in this study, Lucy's status as a slave does not qualify her burning as a lynching, although the circumstances are extremely similar. Like Blacks whom White mobs killed in later years, Lucy was accused of a crime supported by little to no evidence and executed without a trial in a hurried, gruesome fashion. And like many lynchings, the posse that killed her carried out their action at the direct request of a woman – in this case, the widow of the man Lucy was allegedly involved with murdering. Most importantly, Lucy's burning demonstrated a reality confronted by Black slaves in Indian Territory: that despite supposedly faring better than their White-owned Southern counterparts, the Black slaves of Native Americans faced a system of forced labor often held together by violence. This reality foreshadowed the racial violence that haunted Black Oklahomans in the territorial days and especially the early days of statehood.

¹⁴ Lycurgus Pitchlynn to Peter Pitchlynn, December 31, 1858 and January 3, 1859 and Loring Folsom to Peter Pitchlynn, January 1859 Box 3, Peter Pitchlynn Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman. See also *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Pitchlynn, Peter Perkins"; William G. McLoughlin, "The Choctaw Slave Burning: A Crisis in Mission Work Among the Indians" in *The Cherokee Ghost Dance: Essays on the Southeastern Indians, 1789-1861* (New York: Mercer, 1984), 343-362; Donna L. Akers, *Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830-1860* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 136-138; Jeffrey L. Fortney, Jr., "Slaves and Slaveholders in the Choctaw Nation: 1830-1866" (Master's Thesis, University of North Texas, 2009), 52.

Slavery, Violence, and Black-Indian Relations in the Pre-Removal Period

While the practice of holding Blacks as slaves was limited to an extremely small minority of Native Americans, those Indians who practiced slavery absorbed and adapted ideas about race, social hierarchy, violence, and human bondage from Europeans and Americans. This is true, despite the fact that many Native American masters practiced slavery differently than most Whites. As the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole made contact with Euro-Americans, they engaged in different processes of cultural absorption, negotiation, and adaptation with regard to African-descended people and human bondage.¹⁵ The degree to which racial violence impacted the day-to-day experiences of the slaves of Native Americans is difficult to measure in an exact manner. But nonetheless, Native American systems of slavery – in imitation of European and American slaveholding – were often held together by the threat and use of violence.

Pre-Removal: Choctaw & Chickasaw

The Choctaw and the Chickasaw, who are linguistically and ethnically related, had been intimately involved with New World slavery decades before they began owning slaves. Like the Cherokee and other indigenous peoples of the early colonial period, Choctaw and Chickasaw men and women were captured and sold as slaves by French and British colonizers. But as the colonial period progressed, Europeans and European-descended peoples in the New World began to see those with African ancestry, not Amerindian ancestry, as most ideal for enslavement. Europeans arrived

¹⁵ For a condensed account of the process by which the Five Tribes absorbed White ideas about race, see Hannibal Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country?*, 16-21.

at this conclusion over a period of decades and for a variety of reasons, culminating in the legal concretization of the growing association between Blackness and slavery in the British colonies.¹⁶

As the eighteenth century progressed, Choctaws and Chickasaws became increasingly involved with the Black chattel slavery that had already become so important for European colonial economies. No longer enslaved themselves, Choctaws and Chickasaws volunteered or were forced by the French and British to serve as slave catchers. These encounters were the earliest examples of racial violence between Choctaws/Chickasaws and people of African descent. Additionally, many Choctaw and Chickasaw men had violent encounters with Blacks as official military allies of the French or British. This alliance served a dual purpose for European colonial authorities. It provided an effective way to reduce runaway slave populations because indigenous slave catchers likely knew the land better than European colonizers. But more importantly, it helped to erect a political divide between Blacks and Natives. Colonial authorities feared Black-Indian cooperation, the likes of which developed among the Seminole in Spanish Florida and that sporadically threatened Spanish slavery throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Becoming deeper entwined with Black chattel slavery, Choctaw and Chickasaw men also began acting as slave traders and by

¹⁶ Virginia was the first colony to solidify this connection, in 1705 passing “An act Concerning Servants and Slaves”, William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, (Philadelphia: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 3:447–463.

end of the eighteenth century, some Choctaws and Chickasaws owned slaves themselves.¹⁷

As was the case with all members of the Five Tribes to varying degrees, African-descended people often played an important role in bridging the political gap between Choctaws/Chickasaws and Euro-Americans. Like their Seminole counterparts, the Choctaw and Chickasaw had a tradition of using Blacks – slave or free – as intermediaries when dealing with Whites. This role was significant enough that Whites often perceived Blacks who lived in close proximity to Indians to have a sort of power over them. This perception persisted even though Blacks usually ranked lower than their masters in the Indian social order, and despite the near-constant threat of violence that hung over the system of slavery. This perceived power sometimes manifested itself in a greater knowledge of White customs due to a previous condition of servitude to White masters. This was certainly the case for the Black Seminoles, who were crucial to Indian strategy in the Seminole Wars. But more often, the Blacks' supposed power over their Indian masters was drawn from their knowledge of the English language.¹⁸

One of these Black intermediaries was Dick Roebuck, a Choctaw slave from Kiamichi County who served as a Light Horseman, or tribal police officer, between the time of removal and the Civil War. His son Paul remembered his role as an “interpreter

¹⁷ Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters* 20-23; Daniel E. Littlefield, Jr., *The Chickasaw Freedmen: A People Without a Country* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 3-4; Wyatt Jeltz in “The Relations of Negroes”, *The Journal of Negro History* 33 (January 1948), 25-26; William S. Willis, “Divide and Rule: Red, White, and Black in the Southeast”, *The Journal of Negro History* 48 (July 1963).

¹⁸ Littlefield, *The Chickasaw Freedmen*, 8; Bruce Edward Twyman, *The Black Seminole Legacy and North American Politics, 1693-1845* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1999), 17.

for the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians at the federal courts at Paris, Texas, and at Fort Smith, Arkansas.”¹⁹ The dual employment of men like Dick Roebuck as both tribal police officer and arbitrator between the Choctaw and United States government is evidence of the important position African-descended people often held in slaveholding Native societies.

But African Americans did more than just act as intermediaries between Natives and Whites: the use of violence against Black bodies often lined the path to White acculturation for the Chickasaw and Choctaw. The early nineteenth century saw many Choctaws and Chickasaws abandoning their traditions of communal hunting, gathering, and farming in favor of the Euro-American agricultural cash-crop economy. And in the early nineteenth-century American South, this cash-crop economy leaned heavily upon the enslavement of African Americans, which necessitated the use of violence to force Blacks to work without pay. Like their Southern White counterparts, the wealth of many mixed-blood Indians was built on the forced labor of African-descended people – and this labor was frequently coerced with a lash or a whip.²⁰

Slaveholding among wealthy Choctaws and Chickasaws also represented the growing absorption of White Southern ideas about manhood and status. The transition from communal agriculture, hunting, and gathering to private ownership of land and cash crops was not just an economic process. It was also profoundly social. Wealthy slaveowning Choctaws and Chickasaws sought to imitate upper-class Southern society, in which the livelihood of White families rested uneasily on the assumption of Black

¹⁹ Minges, ed., *Black Indian Slave Narratives* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair Publishing, 2004), 186.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

inferiority and the active use of violence in coercing Black slaves. So when wealthy Choctaw and Chickasaw mixed-blood families began buying, selling, and exploiting the bodies of Black people in the early 1800s, they were moving towards upper-class Whiteness in terms of both economic and social organization of their society.²¹ Writing about the influence of slaveholding in the assimilation process of Choctaw Indians, Jeffrey Fortney suggested that “as European/American symbols became associated with masculinity, power, and leadership, ownership of slaves became critical to maintaining or advancing societal status.”²² The ownership of slaves – and the violence required to do so – paved the pathway to manhood and status for a small number of Choctaws and Chickasaws.

Pre-Removal: Cherokee

Like the Choctaw and Chickasaw, the Cherokee had a history of interaction with African-descended people that predated their adoption of chattel Black slavery by several decades. Cherokee-Black contact may have occurred as early as the late sixteenth century, when Spanish explorers and their African slaves ventured through Cherokee territory. In this early stage, those Cherokees who interacted with African-descended people rarely did so as slavemasters of the antebellum American kind. By the early eighteenth century, African-descended people were known to have lived among the Cherokee. Cherokees had either directly captured these Blacks or the

²¹ Littlefield, *The Chickasaw Freedmen* 9-11; Jeltz, “The Relations of Negroes”, 20.

²² Fortney, “Slaves and Slaveholders in the Choctaw Nation: 1830-1866” (Master’s Thesis, University of North Texas, 2009), 18. For more on changes in Choctaw ideas about human bondage, government, and race, see Fortney, “Slaves and Slaveholders in the Choctaw Nation”, 10, 16-20.

Blacks themselves had sought refuge from slave catchers in the hilly Cherokee lands.

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By the end of the eighteenth century, however, Cherokees began absorbing Euro-American concepts of race and the enslavement of Black people. This was partially due to direct intervention by colonial Whites, who took calculated political action to discourage and prevent alliances between escaped slaves and Cherokees. This political action was twofold: colonists enlisted Black soldiers to fight against Cherokees (as did South Carolina in 1715 in the Yamassee War), and simultaneously employed Cherokee men as slave catchers.²⁴ In a calculated political move, Euro-Americans generated an atmosphere of racial violence and tension by pitting Cherokees against Blacks. If the degree of military alliance between escaped slaves and Cherokees can be taken as an indicator of the effectiveness of this political move, then it was generally a successful one. The Cherokee had almost completely given up traditional practices of captive-taking by 1800, in favor of growing involvement with the domestic Black slave trade. In fact, by the end of the eighteenth century, few Cherokees were engaged in any system of human exchange other than the Black slave trade. Having given up traditional Native practices of captive-taking and begun to accept Euro-American racial constructs to some degree, slave ownership – and the violence it often required – was the natural next step in the process of White acculturation.

²³ Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1541-1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), 36-39; Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 29-30. See also Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, 53-55.

²⁴ Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society*, 40-42; Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind*, 31-34; Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, 16-18. See also Willis, "Divide and Rule".

Cherokee acculturation often resulted in the intermingling of White and Cherokee blood lines, a process Whites identified with progress in education, intelligence, and self-government among the Cherokee people. As the practice became more common, intermarriage evidently raised the status of the Cherokee people in the eyes of Whites. Missionaries and government agents like William Armstrong associated intermarriage with Whites with movement towards centralized government and a more “civilized” society in general. In 1843, Armstrong wrote:

“The Cherokees combine more intelligence as a people than any of our tribes. They have intermarried more with the whites; have had advantages of education, and, by their location, have had an opportunity of observing more immediately the customs and manners of a civilized people than any of the Indian tribes...The Cherokees, in their Government, as a people, are in advance of any of their red brethren.”²⁵

According to this Indian agent, the Cherokee were the most acculturated of the Five Tribes, a golden example of the supposed successes of the two primary goals of United States Indian policy of the mid-nineteenth century: removal and assimilation. The Cherokee adoption of Black chattel slavery was intimately connected to these two goals, and it is probably not a coincidence that some U.S. officials spoke so highly of those Cherokees who embraced this violence-based system of human bondage.

Cherokees continued to absorb White ideas about race, government, and freedom even as it became increasingly obvious that the acquisition of Cherokee land – not the cultural assimilation of the Cherokee people – was the primary concern of American policy towards the Cherokee. As would be the case with other southeastern Indian tribes, mixed-blood Cherokees viewed their ownership of African-American

²⁵ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1840-1845* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1843), 442; see also Jeltz, “The Relations of Negroes”, 30.

slaves as a path to Whiteness. Yet the United States government ultimately forced the Cherokee off their ancestral lands, despite the efforts of many wealthy mixed-bloods to appease land-hungry Americans.

This sleight of hand on the part of Euro-Americans is summarized by historian Theda Perdue. Perdue writes, “In entirely dispossessing the native inhabitants of North America, Englishmen attempted to persuade the Indian that his interests coincided with those of the whites and that native Americans were ‘savage’ versions of Europeans who needed only to be ‘civilized’ in order to become equivalent to Europeans.”²⁶ Despite its brutal violence, the adoption of Black chattel slavery was one of many supposedly “civilizing” processes Perdue associates with the Cherokee Nation. For many of these Cherokees, the adoption of commercial agriculture was what they thought best to survive. But ultimately, their drastic adaptations – like the adoption of Christianity, Euro-American agriculture and economics, and the English language – did little to allow the Cherokee to remain living on the lands of their ancestors.

Pre-Removal: Creek

In terms of their transition from traditional Native-American captivity to Black chattel slavery, the timeline of the Creek Indians is remarkably similar to that of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee. But by no means were these transitions uniform or identical. Along the path to acculturation and eventually removal, many southeastern Indian tribes engaged in whatever adaptations they felt necessary to survive, including the adoption of African-American slavery and the violence it necessitated. Many of

²⁶ Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society*, 46.

these adaptations were gradual and localized. Runaway slaves who sought refuge among the Creek, for example, were not guaranteed acceptance or integration into Creek society. Whether or not a fugitive slave would find sanctuary among the Creek or be returned to a Euro-American master was often determined by a highly localized decision-making process among the Creek community. And if the fugitive was accepted into a Creek community, the degree of violence he or she would have experienced in their relationship to those Creeks depended heavily upon local circumstances.²⁷

Like the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee, the Creek became increasingly involved with the Black slave trade – but they became known for engaging in an especially hybridized form of human exchange and bondage. Combining traditional Indian captivity with Black chattel slavery, late eighteenth-century Creeks frustrated American and British backcountry settlers by raiding farms and capturing their slaves. Targeting the Black slaves of White Georgia slave owners dually benefited the Creek, both economically weakening Southern Whites who threatened Creek land and allowing Creek traders to profit from selling Black slaves. Those who purchased these captured slaves from the Creek included the Spanish (at Pensacola), fellow Creeks, and allied Indian tribes like the Shawnee.²⁸

As was the case among Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee, the growing pressure to adopt the social and economic practices of Southern Whites resulted in many early nineteenth-century Creeks involved with the slave trade playing the role of

²⁷ Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estelivste and the Creek Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 8.

²⁸ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country, 182-187*; Sigmund Sameth, "Creek Negroes: A Study of Race Relations" (Master's Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1940) 7, 8-9.

buyer in addition to trader. As with all the Five Tribes with the exception of the Seminole, events during the years immediately following the American Revolution made it increasingly difficult for the Creek to sustain themselves without converting to Euro-American cash-crop agriculture. Some of the mixed-blood families began practicing a form of slavery that was very similar to that of Southern Whites, where a wealthy master and his family resided in a large plantation house surrounded by large fields. These fields were both the workplace and home of generations of Black slaves who lived lives of agricultural toil, compelled by the sting of a whip or the end of a lash.²⁹

Some Creeks developed a form of Black enslavement that blended Euro-American chattel slavery with Indian practices of human captivity. This form of slavery among the Creek was more similar to the kind of slavery that emerged among the Seminole than to any form of slavery among the Choctaw, Chickasaw, or Cherokee. The growing rift between these two parallel systems was a major factor leading to the Red Stick War, which pitted traditionalist “Red Sticks” against Lower Creeks who favored ways of life more strongly influenced by Euro-American culture. The Red Sticks opposed the assimilationist influences of White men like U.S. Indian Agent Benjamin Hawkins, who sought to “civilize” the Creek people with Christianity, commercial agriculture, and the English language. The Red Stick cause found support among the Upper Creek villages and especially among full-bloods. Deepening the political and

²⁹ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 11-15; Sameth, “Creek Negroes”, 11.

cultural divide between traditional and more-aculturated Creeks, the immediate aftermath of this conflict later became the impetus for the Seminole Wars.³⁰

In terms of their relations to African-descended people, the Creek occupy a middle ground along the continuum of the slaveholders of the Five Tribes.³¹ This continuum can also be loosely applied to the degree of racial violence and physical coercion that seemed to characterize the different slaveholding practices of each tribe. Often, Creek systems of Black slavery looked less “White” than that of the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw, but was not as permissive or interdependent as that of the Seminole. A small number of Creeks did engage in the kind of assimilative Black chattel slavery that became common among wealthy southeastern Indians, but some maintained a parallel system that hybridized blood kinship and legal ownership. The Creek War of 1813-1814 is strong evidence of this rift in Creek society, the likes of which did not exist as sharply among any of the other Five Tribes.³² The ensuing experiences of removal, Civil War, and emancipation further cemented differences between the Creek, on one hand, and the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee on the other.

³⁰ Ibid, 15-20; Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 230-237; William H. Simmons, *Notices of East Florida, With An Account of the Seminole Nation of Indians* (Charleston, SC: A.E. Miller, 1822), 74; Andrew K. Frank, “Slave Refuge and Getaway: David B. Mitchell and the Paradox of the Florida Frontier” in *Africa in Florida: Five Hundred Years of African Presence in the Sunshine State* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), ed. Amanda B. Carlson and Robin Poynor, 137.

³¹ For more on the Creek & Seminole place on the continuum of Indian slaveholders, see Jeltz, “The Relations of Negroes”, 30-31.

³² Linda Williams Reese, *Trail Sisters: Freedwomen in Indian Territory, 1850-1890* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2013), 21-22.

Pre-Removal: Seminole

For a variety of reasons, the relationship between the Seminole and African-descended people was vastly different than that of the other Five Tribes. This is true even of the Creek; despite their reputations as cruel masters, they often engaged in more cultural exchanges and existed in closer proximity to their Black slaves than did the Cherokee, and especially the Choctaw and Chickasaw. Seminole were once Creek themselves, having migrated away from the Lower Creeks during the early colonial era and becoming recognizable as a separate tribal confederation by the time of British occupation of Georgia. Thus, the fact that both Creek and Seminole occupy the less-assimilated end of the continuum of Native American slavery is no coincidence. But the Seminole eventually adopted a form of Black slavery that looked even more like traditional Indian captivity and less like Black chattel slavery than that of their Creek cousins.

The Seminole's unique relationship with Black people – largely devoid of racial violence – was partially a result of their occupation of a unique place in the southeastern United States. The very origins of the Seminole as a tribal group, separate from the Creek Confederation, are closely related to their occupation and use of Florida's exceptional landscape. With the vast majority of Florida's indigenous population removed by migration or disease by the late colonial period, groups of Lower Creeks migrated southward and eastward from traditional Creek lands into the empty interior of the Florida peninsula. Here, they established communities based on agriculture, animal

husbandry, and the hunting and fishing of Florida's abundant wildlife.³³ In the Seminole Wars of later years, these former Creeks would prove to be masters in using the swamps, wetlands, and lakes of northern and central Florida for evasion and guerrilla warfare. Combined with the relative permissiveness of Spanish slaveholding practices and the geographic isolation of the Florida peninsula, Seminole prosperity on this remarkable land drew a significant number of escaped slaves from Georgia and even as far north as the Carolinas. These Blacks and their descendants, at variously called "village Negroes", "Black Seminoles", and simply "slaves", would come to occupy a unique space in a society that itself occupied a unique space among the Five Tribes.³⁴

Blacks' relationship to the Seminole Indians contrasted so sharply with other Black-Indian relationships that some scholars devoted to Black Seminole history have hesitated to even use the term "slavery".³⁵ The first African-descended people to come into contact with Seminole Indians likely did so decades before the other four tribes began to embrace the Euro-American concept of chattel slavery – possibly as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Invited by a Spanish promise of freedom with the intent of undermining the English economy, English and American-owned slaves fled to northern and central Florida and sought refuge among the Seminole Indians. Most of these slaves came from Georgia, but some of them may have come from as far north as the Carolinas. The Seminole themselves had broken away from the Creek Confederation

³³ Richard Allen Sattler, "Seminoli Italwa: Socio-Political Change Among the Oklahoma Seminoles between Removal and Allotment, 1836-1905" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1987), 18-21, 21-28.

³⁴ Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, 67-68.

³⁵ These scholars include Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., Kevin Mulroy, and Kenneth Porter. Older works like those of Littlefield use the term "slave" irregularly, but more recent historians like Kevin Mulroy have generally transitioned to using the term "Black Seminole".

about a century earlier.³⁶ In fact, the English word “Seminole” likely comes from *cimmarón*, a Spanish word that translates as “untamed”, “wild”, “broken off”, “runaway”, or “outsetter”.³⁷ Not coincidentally, the Spanish referred to escaped Black slaves as *cimarrónes*. In this way, the histories of runaway Black slaves and the Seminole were connected even before they crossed paths.

Politically, Black people often played roles in Seminole communities that were similar to their roles in Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek communities, but with a greater emphasis on interdependence between “master” and “slave”. This interdependent relationship did not carry with it the kinds of racialized violence and physical coercion woven throughout the slaveholding practices of Southern Whites and some Indians. This difference stemmed from the fact that unlike the other members of the Five Tribes, the Seminole never entered the second stage of relationship to Blacks, in which they were employed by Euro-Americans as slave catchers. But like African-descended people in other southeastern tribal communities, Black Seminoles did play an intermediary role between Whites and their native masters. This role was often that of interpreter, as many Black Seminoles knew Spanish and English in addition to indigenous languages.³⁸ Some of these interpreters also acted as guides, as was the

³⁶ Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, 67-68; Reese, *Trail Sisters*, 22-23; Simmons, *Notices of East Florida*, 54-55; Edwin C. McReynolds, *The Seminoles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 10-11, 15. For more on maroon communities in Florida, see Rosalyn Howard, “Black Towns of the Seminole Indians” in *Africa in Florida*.

³⁷ Twyman, *The Black Seminole Legacy and North American Politics*, 11; McReynolds, *The Seminoles*, 12; Simmons, *Notices of East Florida*, 54.

³⁸ Simmons, *Notices of East Florida*, 76; Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1977), 8-9; Kenneth W. Porter, *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 6; Kevin Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 28; Reese, *Trail Sisters*, 21.

case with the “Indian Negro” who accompanied Dr. William H. Simmons into Seminole country in 1822.³⁹ In later years, Blacks proved themselves valuable allies to the Seminoles, as many of them used their knowledge of the English language and their experience with Whites to anticipate U.S. military actions during the Seminole Wars.⁴⁰

Because so many of them were the descendants of escaped slaves or were escaped slaves themselves, Black Seminoles had a strong fear of capture and re-enslavement at the hands of the American government. When Dr. William H. Simmons traveled through Seminole settlements, he explained the relatively humane and “indulgent” attitude towards slavery that for so long had been the rule in Spanish Florida, noting “a general impression” among the Black Seminoles that their defeat at the hands of General Andrew Jackson and the American army would result in enslavement.⁴¹ This fear was largely responsible for the tenacity with which so many Black Seminoles fought against Jackson’s campaigns during the Seminole Wars, but also for the political arrangement that existed between Black Seminoles and their Indian masters in the first place.

During the long and drawn-out process of removal, the presence of relatively autonomous Blacks among the Seminole caused a great deal of discomfort for the U.S. government. U.S. authorities feared that another violent racial conflict like the Seminole Wars would erupt, with Whites on one side and Blacks and Indians on the other. This

³⁹ Simmons, *Notices of East Florida* (Charleston, SC: A.E. Miller, 1822), 32.

⁴⁰ Porter, *The Black Seminoles*, 27; Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen*, 28; Jeltz, “The Relations of Negroes and Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians”, 30.

⁴¹ Simmons, *Notices of East Florida*, 42-43.

American frustration is evidenced by Indian agent William Armstrong's assessment of the question of how much autonomy to grant the Seminole in dealing with their slaves:

"They have many negroes that have participated in the Florida war, who will endeavor to exercise an improper influence over the Seminoles...To give a gun to a Seminole, who so lately either came or was capture in Florida, appears all wrong; it is, however, a treaty stipulation, and is complied with without apprehension of danger."⁴²

U.S. officials saw armed Native Americans with a history of military alliance with Blacks as a glaring threat to the system of slavery. Allowing the Blacks themselves to be armed represented an even greater threat. Yet the very logic of the slave system prevented the American government from summarily confiscating the human property of Indian slaveholders. If the Seminole Indians were to be allowed to hold Black slaves – which theoretically represented White assimilation – they were also supposed to be given a degree of autonomy in dealing with their slaves. In this case, it was apparently not in the interest of the American government to allow the Seminole leniency in dealing with their Black "slaves" because many of them had just recently participated in armed resistance against the United States.

Further separating Black Seminoles from the Black slaves of other southeastern tribes was their unique relationship to their "masters", in both a political and economic sense. Historians have often labeled the relationship between Black Seminoles and Seminole Indians as a soft variation of the terms "feudalism" or "vassalage", as in Thomas Larose's "benevolent vassalage".⁴³ Blacks who lived among the Seminole usually lived in villages separate from their "masters", with their own leaders and a

⁴² *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the years 1840-1845*, 444.

⁴³ Thomas E. Larose, "African Influences on Seminole Beadwork" in *Africa in Florida*, 89.

means of living that was almost completely distinct from the Indians. Dr. William H. Simmons, a White man, described a living arrangement in which Black Seminoles “dwell in towns apart from the Indians...They dress and live pretty much like the Indians, each having a gun, and hunting a portion of his time. Like the Indians, they plant in common, and form an Indian field apart, which they attend together.”⁴⁴

While most Black Seminoles hunted, fished, and farmed separately from their Seminole Indian masters, many Black Seminole communities were obligated to present their Indian allies with an annual agricultural tribute. Additionally, Black Seminoles owed political allegiance to Seminole Indian chiefs in times of war and strife. Scholars have long observed this kind of tributary system among peoples across the world, but Seminole “vassalage” may have been specifically drawn from both Creek roots and indigenous Florida Indians who were agricultural subjects of Spain.⁴⁵ It is not likely that this annual tribute was especially oppressive or burdensome for the Black Seminoles, as there is little evidence of physical coercion and the Black Seminoles generally seemed to have prospered greatly in their living arrangement with Seminole Indians.

Also making the Seminole-Black relationship unique among the Five Tribes was the infrequency with which Seminole Indians used Blacks for sale and bartering. According to accounts written by White travelers and government officials (which may exaggerate the degree of Black-Seminole equality) Seminole Indians almost never sold their Black “slaves”.⁴⁶ One White observer, J.L. Williams, claimed that the Seminole

⁴⁴ Simmons, *Notices of East Florida*, 76.

⁴⁵ Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen*, 6-7.

⁴⁶ Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen*, 28-29

were especially unlikely to sell Blacks to Whites: “There exists a law among the Seminoles, forbidding individuals from selling their negroes to white people; and any attempt to evade that law, has always raised great commotion among them.”⁴⁷ While there were likely a few Seminoles who sold and traded Blacks, the rarity of the practice is evidence of several things. First, it demonstrates that above all else, Seminole Indians desired independence from Euro-American society. To begin selling Black slaves to Whites could have encouraged more economic encroachment on the part of Americans. Seminole hesitancy to sell slaves to Whites also demonstrates the unique Seminole interdependence with African-descended peoples. Finally, this stands as evidence of the Black Seminole determination to remain in their state of relative freedom and independence among the Seminole Indians.

Taken together, all the unique aspects of the relationship between Seminole Indians and Blacks are evidence of the Seminole’s place as the least-aculturated of the Five Tribes, and probably the one tribe that exercised the least amount of racialized violence against African-descended people. According to historian Kevin Mulroy, the Seminole “remained a nation of subsistence farmers and hunters maintaining a southeastern indigenous culture governed by hereditary chiefs” even as the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek increasingly adopted “capitalist economies, democratic elections, constitutional governments, Christianity, school-based education, written laws and law enforcement agencies, institutionalized slavery, and severe black codes”.⁴⁸ The Seminoles never fully absorbed Euro-American ideas about race, freedom,

⁴⁷ Ibid, 29; Simmons, *Notices of East Florida*, 50.

⁴⁸ Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen*, 87.

violence, and citizenship related to African-descended people. This is the strongest piece of evidence of the Seminole's unique place among the Five Tribes.

Because of their unique physical territory, identity as sovereign Creek *cimarrónes*, and exceptional interdependence with people of African descent, the Seminole never came to view Black chattel slavery as either a survival method or a pathway to White acculturation quite the same as Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee. Additionally, they more strongly identified Euro-Americans as political enemies than did other southeastern Indian tribes, and their military resistance against the United States government lasted much longer than did any other member of the Five Tribes. These contrasts are crucial to understanding the differences between the Seminole and other southeastern Indian tribes regarding the role of racial violence in the early adoptions of slavery and later processes of Indian removal.

Racial Violence and Black-Indian Relations in Indian Territory

The area now known as Oklahoma, or “Indian Territory” as designated by the United States government in the early 1800s, was to be the final destination for the southeastern Native American tribes and their Black slaves. Between the Indian Removal of 1830s and the 1890 Organic Act, the United States government maintained nearly all of modern-day Oklahoma as what President Thomas Jefferson had called an “Indian colonization zone”. After the 1889 Land Run and the passage of the 1890 Organic Act, the western portion of modern-day Oklahoma began to be officially opened for White settlement and referred to as “Oklahoma Territory” (for a full map of the Twin Territories as they existed in 1890, see Map 1, “Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory

[1890]).⁴⁹ In this study, “Oklahoma Territory” refers to this western portion opened to White settlement in the late 1880s and early 1890s, and “Indian Territory” refers to the eastern portion of modern-day Oklahoma – the U.S. government’s destination for the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw Nations.

Unlike the thousands of African Americans who migrated to Oklahoma from the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first Blacks to migrate to Oklahoma did not do so by choice. Many of their masters, who were members of the Five Tribes similarly did not journey to Oklahoma voluntarily. At gunpoint, federal troops forced thousands of Native Americans and a small number of Blacks to travel along what became known as The Trail of Tears during the 1830s and 1840s. This trail ended in various locations across modern-day Oklahoma. While the overall number of Blacks who died on the Trail of Tears is unclear, legal expert and historical writer Hannibal Johnson estimated that fifteen percent of those who died on the Trail were of African descent.⁵⁰ Often referred to as Indian Removal, this process was a forced migration unlike any other in American history. Its death and suffering swept up a unique subset of Americans in laying the path for the first African-descended people to set foot in Oklahoma. These first Black Oklahomans were an enslaved, marginalized group of people existing within another group of people that was itself marginalized and victimized by ethnic cleansing at the hands of the United States.

Relationships between the first Black Oklahomans and their Indian masters were varied and complex, as were the relationships between Black slaves and Southern

⁴⁹ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Indian Territory”, “Land Run of 1889”, “Organic Act”.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, 28.

White masters. Native American slaveholders developed a reputation among Whites as being easygoing or relatively permissive in using violence and coercion against their Black slaves. Whether the experiences of Indian-owned slaves were actually better than that of White-owned slaves is difficult to tell.⁵¹ But many Oklahoma slave narratives speak to the relative comfort and close contact that seemed to characterize the Indian style of slaveholding.

Phyllis Petite, once owned by a part-Cherokee man, recalled a daily reminder of her status as a slave: “Master had a big long log kitchen, setting away from the house, and we set a big table for the family first, and when they was gone, we Negroes at the house eat at that table, too, but we don’t use the china dishes.”⁵² And yet, Petite and other former slaves often spoke of their masters as being “good [men], and mighty good to us slaves”. She even offered her own body and health as evidence of her former master’s benevolence: “You can see I am more than six feet high, and they say I weighs over a hundred and sixty, even if my hair is snow white.”⁵³ Indian slave narratives like Petite’s are full of contradictions like these, in which former slaves recalled their denigration and their fortune in the same breath. The term “good master” appears frequently in these narratives, as if former slaves viewed themselves as lucky to have an owner who treated them well – that masters were not good, by default, but that a “good master” was an exception for which to be thankful.

⁵¹ William G. McLoughlin, “Red Indians, Black Slavery, and White Racism: America’s Slaveholding Indians”, *American Quarterly* 26 (October 1974): 368-369; Michael F. Doran, “Negro Slaves of the Five Civilized Tribes”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 68 (September 1978): 342-344.

⁵² Minges, ed., *Black Indian Slave Narratives*, 80.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 83.

These slave narratives offer a romanticized picture of Indian Territory slavery with little racial violence or physical coercion, but accounts of the 1842 Cherokee slave revolt suggest otherwise. Dozens of slaves belonging to Joseph Vann of Webbers Falls in the Cherokee Nation stole horses, supplies, and weapons and attempted to make their way southwest to freedom in Mexico. Along the way, a small group of Creek slaves joined the party, bringing their total number to thirty-five. After an exchange of gunfire with a posse of Creek pursuers, a group of Choctaw runaways also joined the group. The slaves did not make it far, as they were caught and captured by a deputized force of Cherokee men formed by an order of the Cherokee National Council.⁵⁴ For those Cherokee slaves who struck out against their bondage, the experience of slavery was evidently not as positive as remembered by Phyllis Petite and other slaves of southeastern Indians. There was likely a significant variety in the brutality and permissiveness with which Cherokee masters used violence to deal with their Black slaves, and this variety partially explains the varying degrees to which slaves remembered their bondage.⁵⁵

Whether it was in the form of organized slave rebellions like the Cherokee slave revolt in 1842 or in a more isolated form like the Choctaw slave Prince murdering his owner Richard Harkins in 1858, racial violence was relatively rare during the days of slavery in Indian Territory. But it was constantly on the minds of many Native American

⁵⁴ Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, 32-33; Daniel Littlefield, Jr. and Lonnie E. Underhill, "Slave 'Revolt' in the Cherokee Nation, 1842", *American Indian Quarterly* 3 (Summer 1977), 121-123; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Slave Revolt of 1842".

⁵⁵ Slave narratives, and especially the WPA narratives, should be analyzed critically. Interviewers were almost always White and sometimes took creative liberty to interpret or adjust language used by interviewees. It is unlikely that during the 1930s, former slaves would have been willing or able to fully communicate to a White interviewer personal details about their experiences with racial violence and physical coercion.

slaveowners. This is especially true of the Cherokee and Choctaw – and the Chickasaw after they officially broke away from the Choctaw Nation in 1855.⁵⁶

The Choctaw, especially, modeled their new tribal government after the Euro-American government that legally exploited and restricted African-American life and influence. Again following the precedent set by White American society, the Choctaw Nation used its foundational government document to limit the movement and political power of African-descended people within its borders. Early versions of the Choctaw Constitution forbade “free Negro[es]” or any Blacks “unconnected with Choctaw and Chickasaw blood” from settling in the Choctaw Nation, excluded any person with African ancestry from participation in Choctaw government, and allowed any individual with Indian ancestry to be naturalized and adopted as long as that individual had no Black ancestry.⁵⁷

The United States government viewed these changes as clear signs of progress and treated more acculturated and more assimilated tribes with favor – at least in theory. This was especially true following removal, although acculturation did not ultimately protect Indian sovereignty. The paternalistic, approving tone of U.S. Indian agents like William Armstrong praised the Choctaw for the increasing Whiteness of their society:

“The richer class, in addition to stock, own, many of them, a number of slaves; these are engaged, generally, in cultivating cotton...A church has also been erected, in which there is reaching usually once or twice every Sabbath, by the missionaries who reside in the neighborhood. A temperance society is also organized, which numbers a large portion of the most respectable Choctaws and Chickasaws, as well as our own population. I have

⁵⁶ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Chickasaw”.

⁵⁷ *1842 Choctaw Constitution*, art. 6, sec. 6, 12-13; see also Jeltz, “The Relations of Negroes”, 31-32.

been at this village a week at a time, without seeing any thing like ardent spirits or a drunken Indian...They are fast approximating to our own laws and institutions; they feel a deep interest in the prosperity and success of our people, as well as the perpetuity of our Government.”⁵⁸

So Choctaw and Chickasaw were not simply misleading themselves as they transitioned to commercial agriculture, Christianity, and centralized government along their path to Whiteness. They perceived very real material and political advantages in making these transitions, despite their ultimate failure to preserve long-term sovereignty.

As they established new tribal governments based on Southern White governments, the leaders of these tribes encoded the Southern tradition of racial hierarchy into their laws and enforced these laws with racialized violence. For example, there would be no place in the new Cherokee government for any man with any trace of African descent.⁵⁹ And the Choctaw Nation explicitly forbade the settlement of any free Blacks within their territory.⁶⁰ Perhaps most disturbing was a Cherokee law passed in 1839 regarding rape that called for the death penalty only when the offender was Black and the victim was non-Black and did not call for the death penalty in any circumstance when the victim was any part Black. Like the White societies it sought to emulate, the Cherokee Nation considered Black male sexuality more dangerous than Cherokee or

⁵⁸ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 438-440.

⁵⁹ *The Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation: Passed at Tahlequah, Cherokee Nation, 1839-1851* (Tahlequah, Cherokee Nation, 1852), 19, 55-56, 17-18; *Constitution of the Cherokee Nation 1827*, sec. 3-4; see also Yarborough, *Race and the Cherokee Nation*, 41-42, 49; *Trail Sisters*, 24.

⁶⁰ 1842 Choctaw Constitution, art. 6, sec. 6, 12-13; see also Wyatt F. Jeltz, “The Relations of Negroes”, *The Journal of Negro History* 33 (January 1948): 31-32.

White male sexuality; it considered Black women less worthy of protection than Cherokee or White women.⁶¹

While many Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw masters sought to emulate Southern Whites in their expressions of violence and slave control, some Creeks had developed an alternate form of slaveholding. This hybridized form of slavery blended kinship with ownership, placing Creeks and “African Creeks” side-by-side working in fields and eating at dinner tables.⁶² This Creek adaptation combined Euro-American commercial agriculture with traditional Indian captive-holding, and was characterized by the skilled labor of Black slaves. In his narrative, former Creek slave John Harrison remembered spinning, hunting, weaving, and shoemaking among the diverse kinds of labor performed by Creek slaves of the Mose Perryman plantation.⁶³ Harrison and his kinfolk were anything but simple farmhands, and the skilled nature of their labor likely allowed them more freedom and ability to negotiate with their masters than slaves who could offer nothing but agricultural labor. That Harrison, a Black slave, was tasked with hunting – and therefore given a gun – was extremely rare among American slaves. This kind of slave was likely not the frequent recipient of the kinds of whippings and racial violence often associated with slaveholding, as his skill with a weapon may have made a slaveowner think twice before brandishing a whip. For this reason, slaves’ access to guns was often extremely limited by masters.

⁶¹ *The Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation*, 19, 55-56, 17-18; *Constitution of the Cherokee Nation 1827*, sec. 3-4; see also Yarborough, *Race and the Cherokee Nation*, 41-42, 49; *Trail Sisters*, 24.

⁶² Gary Zellar, *African Creeks*, 15-16.

⁶³ Mingos, ed., *Black Indian Slave Narratives*, 85-86.

Lucinda Davis, another Creek slave who gave an account of her life to a WPA interviewer during the 1930s, gave a similar testimony which speaks to the relative permissiveness of the Creek style of slaveholding. She remembered her Creek-enslaved parents working a field and being allowed to keep some of the produce:

“My mammy and pappy belong to two masters, but dey live together on a place. Dat de way de Creek slaves do lots of times. Dey work patches and give de masters most all dey make, but dey have some for demselves. Dey didn’t have to stay on de master’s place and work like I hear de slaves of de white people, and de Cherokee, and Choctaw people say dey had to do.”⁶⁴

By the mid-nineteenth century, this limited amount of economic agency among slaves was rare among White-owned slaves in the South and slaves owned by Choctaw and Chickasaw masters. Its existence in the Creek Nation is further evidence of the often hybridized form of bondage practiced by many Creeks.

Creeks and their slaves frequently engaged in a significant amount of cultural exchange, with Blacks learning traditional Creek medicine and even the Creek language. Lucinda Davis claimed not to “know nothing but Creek talk until long after de Civil War”.⁶⁵ After removal to Indian Territory, Creeks held on to some of their older practices even as they merged them with Euro-American ones. This was true even of agricultural practices that did not directly engage forced Black labor. In 1842, U.S. Indian agent William Armstrong reported that “many of the Creeks have separate fields, but their ancient custom of working a town field is still to a great extend observed.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Minges, ed., *Black Indian Slave Narratives*, 119; Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, 58-59.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 84, 116.

⁶⁶ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 442.

While Creek slaves certainly experienced a life of bondage enforced by physical violence or the threat thereof, those Creek masters who practiced more hybridized forms of slavery likely exercised a lesser degree of racial violence against their slaves than did Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and especially Southern White masters. While a high degree of intimacy is by no means a deterrent to abuse (to which countless slave women who were sexually abused by their masters can attest), cultural exchange and intermarriage between Creeks and Blacks seems to have dampened the violent nature of the slave system – at least when it is compared to masters with different ethnic backgrounds.

And yet there was another group whose experience of slavery under Native American tribes included an even lesser degree of racial violence and physical coercion: the Black Seminoles. The relationship between Black Seminoles and Seminole Indians was startlingly devoid of racial violence and physical coercion when compared to other Black-Indian relationships. Black Seminoles usually lived separately from their Seminole Indian “masters”, to which the Blacks were required to present an annual tribute of crop or game. Aside from this tribute, they were economically independent from the Seminole Indians – hunting, farming, and fishing with little to no oversight or forced labor.⁶⁷

Along with the relative lack of physical coercion and racial violence, a degree of physical separation between Black Seminole and Seminole Indians carried itself over to Indian Territory during Seminole removal. Mrs. John B. Lilley, the wife of a Presbyterian

⁶⁷ Simmons, *Notices of East Florida*, 76; Littlefield, *Africans and Seminoles*, 8-9; Porter, *The Black Seminoles*, 6; Kevin Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen*, 28; Reese, *Trail Sisters*, 21.

missionary to the Seminole Nation named John B. Lilley, wrote in her diary of “a place called Rocky Mountain”, where “they [Black Seminoles] lived and cultivated the river bottom. The colored people lived there and Uncle Warren was the Patriarch of the clan. Their masters were scattered all around there.”⁶⁸ Even the turmoil of the Seminole Wars and removal was not enough to change the fundamental physical relationship between Black Seminole and Seminole Indian “master”.

Black Seminoles can be thought of as outlaws, a completely unique group of people in American History. They were escaped slaves seeking refuge in a foreign nation, guilty only of the crime of being simultaneously Black and free – a state of existence that threatened the institution of slavery. Black Seminoles knew this and so did the Seminole Indians. Thus their relationship was mutually beneficial, with Seminole Indians providing refuge for escaped slaves and Black Seminoles living as Seminole subjects and highly-motivated military allies against the United States.

Emancipation, Racial Violence, Freedperson Citizenship, and Allotment

If racial violence in antebellum Indian Territory was relatively rare – or if the historical record is too thin to make an assessment either way – then the same is largely true of the era of emancipation and Reconstruction. The social fallout of the Civil War was not felt as strongly in Indian Territory as in the Confederate South, and thus the outbreaks of mass racial violence that took the lives of thousands of African Americans during and immediately after Reconstruction were practically nonexistent in Indian Territory. Instead, the years of Reconstruction in what became Oklahoma were

⁶⁸ Mrs. John B. Lilley, “The Diary of Mrs. John B. Lilley”, 35.

characterized by the slow, gradual redefinition of citizenship and land ownership. These changes made possible the transformation of Oklahoma from a safe haven for Native Americans to a chunk of land that was up for grabs to virtually anyone in the United States. It was not until this later period – when thousands of Americans from all over the country entered Oklahoma – that lynching emerged as a phenomenon in Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory. But even then, race had yet to become the central factor in lynching like it was during the early years of statehood.

The chief concern of Indian Freedpeople (often referred to as “freedmen”, the former slaves of Native Americans) during Reconstruction was defining what emancipation meant in a practical sense. There was a wide variety of solutions between tribes and within tribes for the question of when and how to go about freeing slaves and then how to legally categorize them. The degree to which – and the rapidity with which – tribes freed, educated, and granted land to their former slaves was largely connected to how closely each tribe imitated White Southerners in their slaveholding.

The Seminole were the first of the Five Tribes to finish their negotiations with the United States government on this issue. They agreed to emancipate the Black Seminoles and grant them full citizenship in March of 1866. The Creek followed soon after, freeing their slaves from bondage and granting citizenship to freedpeople in a similar fashion. The children of Seminole and Creek freedpeople soon began attending segregated schools, funded by the Seminole and Creek nations, respectively. This

support for education reflected the hybridized and less coercive nature with which the Creek and Seminole held Black slaves.⁶⁹

At the opposite end of the spectrum were the Choctaw and the Chickasaw. The Choctaw Nation did not agree to free its slaves until April of 1866, and did not grant citizenship to its freedpeople until 1883. The Choctaw built just one school for freedpeople – and even then, not until 1887. In a deal arranged with the Chickasaw, the United States government promised to pay for the removal and relocation of freedpeople from the Choctaw Nation if the Chickasaw agreed to granting tribal citizenship to some of their freedmen. In the words of Hannibal Johnson, the Chickasaw “called the [U.S.] government’s bluff”: they never officially granted citizenship to freedmen, refused to provide education for freedpeople and their children, and did not grant any voting rights or civic equality to any man with any trace of African descent.⁷⁰ And the United States never fulfilled its promise to remove and relocate the Chickasaw freedpeople. The refusal on the part of the Choctaw and especially Chickasaw Nation to adopt their freedpeople is connected to how the two tribes had practiced slavery in relation to Southern Whites. Because Choctaw and Chickasaw masters were more likely to practice slavery like Southern Whites and carried maintained more racial barriers against their freedpeople, they were more hesitant than the Cherokee, Creek, and especially Seminole to free their Black slaves and grant them tribal citizenship.⁷¹

⁶⁹ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Freedmen”, “Freedmen Schools”;

⁷⁰ Johnson, 38.

⁷¹ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Freedmen”, “Freedmen Schools”; Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, 38. See also Littlefield, *The Chickasaw Freedmen*.

The Cherokee occupied a middle ground on the issues of emancipation and freedperson citizenship. They had officially freed their slaves in 1863 but delayed their granting of tribal citizenship to freedpeople until November of 1866. Of all the Five Tribes, the Cherokee provided the best education for their freedpeople: by 1870 they had opened seven freedpeople schools and even opened a high school in 1890.⁷²

The process of granting land to freedpeople was even more complicated, various, and drawn-out than the process of emancipation. The 1887 General Allotment Act began the processes of dissolving tribal governments and divvying up tribal land to individual members, although it was not until 1898 that the Curtis Act officially gave the U.S. government the authority to do so. While a small number of incidents of racial violence between Indians and freedpeople did occur, these cases tended to be isolated and usually occurred only within the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations. Again, the tribes whose slaveholding more closely approximated that of Southern Whites were the most resistant to granting land to their former slaves. Choctaw and Chickasaw freedpeople were less likely to receive land and more likely to be victimized by racial violence in the process of obtaining it.⁷³

Black Migrants and All-Black Towns

Despite a small number of incidents of violence, both freedpeople and Black Southern migrants had access to land ownership in the territorial era. Freedpeople

⁷² *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Freedmen", "Freedmen Schools"; Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, 32. See also Daniel Littlefield, *The Cherokee Freedmen: From Emancipation to American Citizenship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 52-58, 251-254.

⁷³ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Freedmen", "Allotment"; Oklahoma Historical Society, "All Black Towns of Oklahoma". See also Littlefield, *The Chickasaw Freedmen*.

were included in the process of divvying up tribal lands to individual families, and many Blacks who immigrated to newly-opened Oklahoma Territory were allowed to purchase land. This resulted in a startlingly equal distribution of land ownership in Oklahoma around 1900, in which the proportion of African Americans in both territories who owned land was actually higher than the proportion of Whites who owned land.⁷⁴ Many of these Blacks, both freedpeople and migrants, wound up settling in communities together. Between the 1890s and statehood, Black Oklahomans lived in these insular settlements without any significant fear of racial violence by Whites.

While freedpeople went through the progression of emancipation, citizenship, and land ownership, the second wave of Black migration to Oklahoma was beginning. This wave was not made up of forced Black migrants, but of Southern African Americans who had been freed from bondage as a result of the Civil War. Drawn by boosters like Edward P. McCabe, African Americans came from places like Arkansas, Texas, Missouri, and Mississippi and settled in what became known as Oklahoma's "All-Black Towns".⁷⁵ These were remote, isolated, agriculturally-oriented communities that remained independent from White society in terms of their economic and political structure. Just a few decades removed from slavery, African Americans built schools, churches, and banks in these small communities. These unique settlements fell under the authority of White-controlled territorial governments and later county governments, but the towns themselves were largely autonomous and had virtually no White

⁷⁴ Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 109-110. See also Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration* and *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Freedmen".

⁷⁵ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "McCabe, Edward P."; see also Johnson, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, 71-75.

presence. Black migrants established towns like Tullahassee and Arkansas Colored before 1880, but most were incorporated in the 1880s and 1890s. A majority of the all-Black Towns were located in what is now the eastern portion of the state – former Indian Territory – although a small handful were clustered to the north of Oklahoma City (for a full map of Oklahoma’s all-Black towns, see Map 2, “All-Black Towns of Oklahoma”).⁷⁶

Among other factors, the prominence of Oklahoma’s all-Black towns was responsible in large part for the relative lack of racial violence that characterized the territorial period in Oklahoma. These communities were insular, and allowed migrant African Americans to adjust to life in Oklahoma within the safe confines of people who looked like them, spoke like them, and had similar slave ancestry. Whites generally reacted positively to the existence of these towns, because in some ways they justified the growing feeling among territorial Oklahomans that Jim Crow segregation was the ideal social structure.⁷⁷ In the eyes of White Oklahomans, the fact that Whites and African Americans were thriving in separate communities was enough evidence that segregation – despite its inherent inequality – was moral and sustainable.

But conversely, Black success in autonomous towns also carried the threat of unveiling the hypocrisy of segregation. If African Americans were capable of self-governance in all-Black communities, then why were many White Oklahomans seeking to exclude them from political participation in racially-mixed communities? The

⁷⁶ Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 32-35; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “All-Black Towns”.
For an overview of Oklahoma’s All-Black Towns, see Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration*.

⁷⁷ Wickett, 34.

contradiction between the success of all-Black towns and the growing support for Jim Crow segregation would not come to a head until the early 1900s, when Blacks and Whites streamed into the state-to-be and settled in cities and towns together in large numbers. It was in this crowded and chaotic environment that White racial violence against African Americans – in the form of lynching – began to take its most devastating form.

CHAPTER II

WESTERN FRONTIER JUSTICE, SOUTHERN SOCIAL CONTROL, AND THE EVOLUTION OF LYNCHING IN OKLAHOMA

The *Guthrie Daily Leader* reported that on July 16th, 1907, a Black man named Frank Bailey used a stolen gun to shoot and kill a White man named Frank Kelley on a train near Osage, apparently “without any seeming provocation”.⁷⁸ An armed posse of White men who had been on the train or who lived near Osage broke into the jail where Bailey was being held, and the constable handed over his prisoner without any resistance. The mob then strung Bailey up in front of the post office, “fired several shots into his body and then quietly disbanded”.⁷⁹

Frank Bailey’s lynching was not typical of the territorial period. Instead, it was

⁷⁸ *Guthrie Daily Leader*, July 7, 1907.

⁷⁹ Readers should not take the report of the *Guthrie Daily Leader* at face value, as White newspapers in this period frequently portrayed Black lynching victims as vicious, remorseless criminals and portrayed lynching mobs as dutiful, necessary groups of White citizenry. For example, the degree to which the lynching posse “quietly disbanded” is questionable. These kinds of civil disturbances likely would have caused a significant commotion in their communities, especially in small rural places like Osage. It is difficult to imagine a murderous mob having the presence of mind to simply calm down and go home immediately after having hanged and shot a man to death.

representative of a new form of lynching in what was about to become the state of Oklahoma. Osage was not a lawless frontier or some relic of the Wild West. In fact, several signs point to the town having been a relatively modern Oklahoma community for the time, with a train station, a post office, and a jail. As many of the older justifications for lynching – like the supposed lack of effective law enforcement – became no longer viable, White Oklahomans began to come up with new rationalizations for their vigilantism.

They formed these new justifications in response to two significant changes accompanying Oklahoma's development into statehood: exponential population growth and the introduction of Jim Crow segregation. These factors combined to create a very different lynching environment in the new state in which the overall frequency of lynching decreased but the lynching victims became almost exclusively Black. As a tool used by Whites in the process of statemaking, lynching in Oklahoma transformed from Western frontier justice to Southern racial control.

Oklahoma: Western or Southern?

Oklahoma does not lend itself to easy classification as either Western or Southern. The state's history and culture are largely rooted in its former frontier status and ultimate destination for Native American tribes – both of which are concepts associated with the American West. Thinking of the land runs, sprawling ranches, and open prairies of central and western Oklahoma leads many to associate the state with Kansas or West Texas. But in many ways, Oklahoma is also very Southern. The vast majority of the Black migrants who relocated to Oklahoma originated from states often

considered Southern: places like Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi.⁸⁰ Most Native Americans forced to relocate to Indian Territory hailed from Alabama, Georgia, and Florida, from which many of them had already begun to adopt aspects of the Southern American social structure.⁸¹ The Whites who migrated to Oklahoma came from all over the country, but many of them came from the South.⁸²

Identifying Oklahoma's regional and cultural identity as either Western or Southern becomes even more vexing when considering the Sooner State's place within the context of racial violence and lynching in the U.S. Was lynching in Oklahoma similar to the Western frontier-justice variety, in which residents of remote frontier communities executed outlaws and cattle thieves without trial because they believed law enforcement to be thin and ineffective? Or was lynching in Oklahoma more of the Southern racial-control variety, in which mob violence was used primarily as a form of social control and racial terror against African Americans?

When examining chronological and geographical data on African-American lynchings in Oklahoma within the context of the state's history, it is reasonable to conclude that both types of lynching manifested themselves at different points in time. During the territorial years, roughly from 1889 to 1907, lynching and mob violence in Oklahoma was very much Western. Lynchings and collective violence often stemmed

⁸⁰ For the origins of Oklahoma's Black migrants, see Johnson, *Acre of Aspiration, Apartheid in Indian Country?* and Jimmie Lee Franklin, *The Blacks in Oklahoma: Newcomers in a New Land* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

⁸¹ For the processes of Native American migration to Indian Territory and how southeastern tribes absorbed and adapted White ideas about race regarding Blacks, see Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters*; Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*; and Theda Purdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society*.

⁸² For the origins of Oklahoma's White settlers, see Wickett, *Contested Territory* and Chang, *The Color of the Land*.

from cattle or horse theft, claim disputes, or alleged murder involving two Whites. But with the arrival of statehood and thousands of migrants from all over the South and Midwest, lynching in Oklahoma developed into a more Southern form. It became a tool of racial control, as White lynching victims after statehood were rare but the number of Black victims increased significantly. Following statehood, White mobs lynched African Americans not because their communities were remote or because law enforcement was spread too thin, but because of the controversy surrounding an accusation of Black murder or rape against a White Oklahoman. Lynching – which was not typically centered on race during the Territorial Period – became overtly racial during the early decades of statehood.

The Origins of Lynching as Western Frontier Justice

Nearly all regions of the United States – Northeast, South, Midwest, and West – share a history deeply affected by episodes of extralegal collective violence. For example, Richard Maxwell Brown attempted to tell the story of American history through a lens of violence in his groundbreaking 1975 book *Strain of Violence*. He identifies a “strain” of mob vigilantism and collective violence running all the way back to less frequently-discussed American eras and spaces like colonial backcountry South Carolina.⁸³

Brown and others have identified the origins of American lynching, mob violence, and frontier justice as being rooted in a cyclical relationship between reality and

⁸³ Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford Press, 1975).

mythology.⁸⁴ The political, social, and legal realities of the frontier compelled individuals to band together and engage in acts of group violence, which were then supported by later mythologies and histories that served to justify that group violence – setting the stage for more instances of violence in the future. This self-justifying cycle was especially present in the American West, and has been examined in several historical analyses of the region. While it has been informed more by Hollywood films and cultural myths than by historical evidence, the Wild West of the American imagination has often been a dangerous, violent place. Far from the racial terror Whites inflicted on African Americans in the South, mob violence and collective vigilantism in the West was supposedly a response to the ineffectiveness of frontier law enforcement. Dutiful, noble American citizens purportedly had little choice but to band together and take the law into their own hands by hanging and shooting criminals in rural, remote regions like California mining towns, sprawling West Texas ranches, and open Dakota prairies.⁸⁵

Recent historiography, however, has cast doubt on the degree to which places like Oklahoma were actually “Wild”, or if they was as dangerous and lawless as traditional popular imaginations and earlier historians have thought. Roger D. McGrath suggests that while some of the supposedly “wild” and “uncivilized” aspects of frontier life are supported by historical evidence, a great deal of the violence and lawlessness of the American West has been exaggerated.⁸⁶ Michael J. Pfeifer argues that Western

⁸⁴ Most prominently, Michael J. Pfeifer in *Rough Justice, The Roots of Rough Justice, and Lynching Beyond Dixie*.

⁸⁵ Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) takes a long view of American myth as it relates to violence on the Western frontier. See also Roger D. McGrath, *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, & Vigilantes: Violence on the Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*.

⁸⁶ McGrath, *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, & Vigilantes*.

lynching has little to do with the thin distribution of law enforcement, instead reflecting a larger “cultural war” in the United States. This war was between rural and working-class people in frontier regions – who supported the idea of “rough justice” – and middle and upper-class people in older, more established communities like large urban areas and the Northeast – who advocated the due process of law. According to Pfeifer’s theory, lynch mobs all over the country, but especially in Western regions like Oklahoma, carried out vigilante killings not because they perceived an absence of the rule of law but because they considered the “style” in which the law was administered to be too slow and too abstract for their liking. ⁸⁷

Ultimately, many frontier settlers did believe their unique situation called for a unique solution to crime. Many of these settlers also maintained that their rough justice was racially-neutral or racially-blind, and that anyone – be they White, Black, Chinese, Indian, or Mexican – was at risk of being lynched if they threatened the order of a frontier community. Historians Roger McGrath and Richard Slotkin continue to debate whether or not frontier settlers were correct in assessing their law enforcement as thinly spread and ineffective. But Western vigilante groups clearly expressed their belief that rough justice was necessary, moral, and well-ordered.

Frederick Allen’s 2004 book *A Decent, Orderly Lynching: The Montana Vigilantes* agrees with McGrath and Slotkin’s appraisal of Western lynching. Allen explores the moral justifications for Western lynching and quotes Robert Fisk, a Progressive Republican Montana pastor, as approving a “...decent, orderly lynching when there is

⁸⁷ Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, 2-4; Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice*; Pfeifer, ed., *Lynching Beyond Dixie*, 2-4.

particular atrocity in the crime and there can be no mistake as to the criminal". In the same breath, Fisk claimed that "beating, kicking, clubbing, and dragging through the streets, both before and after death, is too brutal to allow excuse, and would better suit cannibal [*sic*] savages than men who pretend to be civilized." ⁸⁸

Like many other Western advocates of rough justice, Fisk employs the language and logic of "civilization" in an effort to set up a dichotomy between the "decent, orderly" administration of rough justice – in which the alleged criminal is swiftly and quietly executed by a posse – and less "civilized" manifestations of vigilantism – in which the alleged criminal is beaten, tortured, and paraded as well as being executed by a mob. Perhaps unknowingly, Fisk's dichotomy also differentiated between the idea of lynching as Western frontier justice and the idea of lynching as the kind of racial control that was developed in the South by 1883. Despite his generalizations and self-righteous attitude, he is at least partially correct in his dichotomy. Lynchings of African Americans in the South did often develop a kind of carnival or parade-like atmosphere that was almost nonexistent on the Western frontier. ⁸⁹

That Western frontier lynching did not represent an attempt on the part of Whites to control African Americans does not mean that Whites never targeted minorities in the West, or that individual lynching incidents in the West were never racially motivated. Ken Gonzales-Day asserts that race acted as a motivating factor when Chinese, Native Americans, Mexicans, and African Americans met their deaths at the hands of White

⁸⁸ Quoted in Frederick Allen, *A Decent, Orderly Lynching: The Montana Vigilantes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), xviii.

⁸⁹ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 19-44, 71-112. See also Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*.

Western lynch mobs. Among Western states, California has an especially diverse lynching record, although it correlates roughly with the state's unique population of Native Americans, Chinese, Mexicans, etc. According to Gonzales-Day, 210 out of the 352 people lynched or "summarily executed" by mobs or posses in the state of California were non-White. This group of 210 included eight African Americans, forty-one American Indians, twenty-nine Chinese, and 132 people identified as either Latin American or Mexican.⁹⁰ It is difficult to imagine the systematic killing of this many ethnic minorities as not having some kind of racial component, at least in a handful of individual cases.

Building on Day's research, William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb argue that mob violence against Mexicans in the United States was more prevalent and more racially-motivated than older historians have assumed. *Forgotten Dead*, as its title implies, asserts that Mexicans experienced mob violence in the West more frequently and more brutally than previously thought. Carrigan and Webb posit that vigilante justice took the lives of 547 persons of Mexican descent between 1848 and 1928 in states like Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. It should be noted, however, that this 547 individuals includes several dozen "unconfirmed" cases, likely due to the scattered and shaky nature of lynching sources.⁹¹ Nonetheless, this a surprising number of victims, given that scholars have typically considered Mexicans among the less frequent victims of mob violence in the United States.

⁹⁰ Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). Day's overall lynching statistics are tabulated on pages 205-235, with a racial/ethnic breakdown of victims on 205-206.

⁹¹ William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Appendix B.

It is important to remember that the mere presence of minority lynching victims in the frontier West does not signify Western lynching as a racially-motivated phenomenon like that of Southern lynching, which was explicitly racial and focused on African Americans. This is especially important when examining states like California, which had relatively high proportions of ethnic minorities during its early years and that still maintains high numbers of people of Asian, Native American, and Latin American or Mexican descent. Roger D. McGrath's aforementioned study highlights this dynamic perfectly. In focusing on the mining towns of Aurora and Bodie in the trans-Sierra region on the border between California and Nevada, McGrath explores how mob violence between Whites and minorities did occur on the Western frontier, but describes mob justice in the West as being made up mostly of Whites lynching other Whites – with interracial lynchings being less common and usually lacking strong racial overtones. He concludes that these incidents of violence were not usually representative of large-scale racial animosity or conflict.⁹²

Lynching as Western Frontier Justice in Oklahoma

Lynching of the Western frontier-justice variety manifested itself most clearly and frequently in Oklahoma during the Territorial Period. During this time, lynching never developed into a strictly racial phenomena. Chronological and geographical data show that throughout the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s, Oklahoma mobs performed lynchings as a form of vigilante justice that – taken together as a trend – does not suggest an overtly racial phenomena. Supposedly necessary because of the scant

⁹² Roger D. McGrath, *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, and Vigilantes*. McGrath discusses vigilantism throughout, but has a specific chapter devoted to “Violence and the Minorities”, 124-148.

distribution of law enforcement, territorial Oklahomans frequently used lethal mob violence against Whites, Blacks, Indians, and Mexicans in response to alleged crimes ranging from murder to cattle theft. Black lynchings before statehood occurred almost exclusively in the central, northern, and western portions of the state – areas with relatively small proportions of Black residents. In fact, virtually no record exists of any African-American lynchings in Indian Territory before statehood (see Map 3, “Geographical Distribution of Oklahoma’s Pre-Statehood African-American Lynchings”).

Of the fifty total African Americans lynched by White mobs in Oklahoma’s combined territorial and state history, just seventeen were lynched previous to Oklahoma’s statehood in November of 1907. This number of individuals should not be wholly disregarded, as any mob killing should be included in a discussion of racism and vigilante justice. But it is important to note that a significant majority of lynching victims during the territorial period were White and/or Indian. Just seventeen of the 110 pre-statehood lynching victims were African-American. Comparatively, thirty-three of the overall forty lynching victims during statehood were African-American (see Chart 1, “African-American Lynching Victims in Oklahoma by Year”).

While it was still divided into two territories, Oklahoma mobs lynched Blacks in a proportion roughly similar to the Black proportion of the territorial population. In the two-decade territorial period, White mobs lynched seventeen African Americans, compared to the thirty-three Blacks who were lynched in the first twenty-three years of statehood – from 1907 to 1930. And of those thirty-five Blacks lynched between 1907 and 1930, thirty-four were killed between 1907 and 1923, making for an even more densely-

packed statistical picture of statehood lynching in which thirty-four African Americans lost their lives to White lynch mobs in just sixteen years.⁹³

Examining the distribution of Black lynching incidents in the Twin Territories places Oklahoma's territorial period squarely within the Western tradition of frontier justice. It is difficult to conclude that racial ideology had any significant impact on Oklahoma's lynching record during the territorial period. By no means is this an assumption that the ideology of White supremacy was not at play when each of the territory's seventeen African Americans were killed by White lynch mobs. It very well may have been. But when the data is graphed chronologically, plotted geographically, and viewed within the context of Oklahoma history, the overall statistical picture that emerges simply does not lend itself to a lynching phenomena motivated strictly by race.

The Origins of Lynching as Southern Racial Control

Unlike lynching as a form of Western frontier justice, lynching as a form of Southern racial control was rooted in slavery. Specifically, it was rooted in the violence and physical coercion that held together the system of slavery. Physical violence, sexual violation, and the limitation of Black movement were relevant to every stage of development and every physical space related to antebellum slavery in the United States. Perhaps more than any other factor, extreme physical violence made possible the transportation of slaves from Africa to the Western Hemisphere (The Middle Passage), the buying and selling of slaves on the market, and the exploitation of slave labor on plantations, small farms, and in urban areas.

⁹³ op. cit.

Flogging, beating, and killing were crucial to a successful slave ship. Physical coercion made the Triangular Trade possible, as it proved to be one of the only forces strong enough to compel millions of captive Africans to endure the horrible conditions of the Middle Passage. Even so, physical violence was not always enough to keep slave ship revolts from happening. More frequently, physical coercion did not prove to be enough to keep slaves from jumping overboard or otherwise taking their own lives.⁹⁴

This European and Anglo-American tradition of using violence to coerce labor continued at the slave market, where the connection between physical violence and economic value was most obvious. At markets in places like New Orleans, Charleston, and Atlanta, White slave-traders and slaveowners used violence against Blacks in order to compel them to act or speak in a way that would maximize their economic value. Prospective buyers violated the bodies of slaves at market in order to measure their worth and to project their long-term usefulness.⁹⁵

Once used to purchase or sell slaves at a market, violence was used extensively to punish slaves for fleeing bondage or for not working hard enough on plantations, small farms, and in cities. It was also used preventatively, to discourage flight or insufficient work. Violence limited slave movement, discouraged social networks between plantations, and kept Black people – slave or free – under the social control of Whites. Relatedly, Southern society developed a unique conception of ideal manhood, represented nowhere more fully than in the White male slaveholder. More than anyone

⁹⁴ For racial violence during the Middle Passage, see Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), throughout, but especially 217-221 and 239-244.

⁹⁵ For racial violence at the slave market, see Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), throughout, but especially 21-22, 193-194, and 208-212.

else in Southern society, he had ultimate authority to use violence and coercion against his slaves and anyone in his household.⁹⁶ To some degree, this idea of Southern manhood came to Oklahoma with the White and Native American settlers of the central, southern, and eastern regions of Oklahoma. As mentioned previously, it was in these regions to which Southern culture was transplanted most strongly in Oklahoma and where Whites lynched African Americans most frequently.

Racial violence remained a powerful force in the South even throughout the post-Civil War period of Reconstruction, despite the massive social changes brought on by Confederate defeat in the Civil War and the ensuing nationwide abolition of slavery. The persistence of this racial violence in Southern law and custom compelled Southern migrants – both Native American migrants to Indian Territory and later Southern White migrants – to carry with them the legacy of Southern racial violence west of the Mississippi to what would become Oklahoma. Reconstruction was stopped as the 1870s went on, partially because former Union leaders in the reunited national government gradually lost the desire to put time and resources towards “reconstructing” the South as a place where Blacks and Whites would be equal before the law.⁹⁷ However, it was White Southerners who were most responsible for putting out the flame

⁹⁶ For racial violence intended to limit slave movement and to target women, see Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), throughout, but especially 41-44 and 77-78. Solomon Northrup’s *12 Years A Slave* (New York: Graymalkin Media, 1853) gives a firsthand account of the racial violence that pervaded the slave system, both at the slave market and on the plantation.

⁹⁷ One of the first scholars to portray Reconstruction as the United States government’s failure to ensure Southern racial equality was pioneering Black intellectual W.E.B. DuBois in *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1935). Previously, scholars had presented Reconstruction as a foolish social experiment doomed from its start or as the result of an overreaching national government seeking to impose its will on Southern states – a continuation of the political conflict that sparked the Civil War.

of Reconstruction – and specifically, White terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the White League. These organizations acted as what Steven Hahn calls the “paramilitary” wing of the resurgent Democratic Party in the South, a group made up mostly of former Confederate leaders and that sought to reinstate much of the Southern social structure destroyed by the Civil War and Reconstruction.⁹⁸

It was during this period, when Whites sought to reinstate aspects of antebellum society in the post-Civil War South, that lynching began to emerge as a form of Southern racial control. In a variety of forms that included lynching, White racial violence against African Americans during Reconstruction was extensive and brutal. Political coups, massacres, rape of Black women and the beginnings of what came to be known as lynchings were all employed by Whites as a response to increased African-American freedom, economic independence, and political representation in Southern government.⁹⁹ Because its population was still small and it was not yet a state, Oklahoma was not as immediately affected by the racial violence of the Reconstruction Era as were Southern states. But Reconstruction sowed the seeds of racial violence that would be carried to Oklahoma in later years, fully developing in the 1910s when lynching reached its peak in the new state.

⁹⁸ Building on DuBois’s work, Reconstruction scholars like Eric Foner and Steven Hahn have identified racial violence as being crucial to the development of Reconstruction. With *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), Foner offered a broad interpretative framework in which he posited that African Americans were primary agents of Reconstruction. Hahn identified the Ku Klux Klan and similar White vigilante organizations as the paramilitary wing of the resurgent Southern Democratic Party in *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 265-316.

⁹⁹ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, throughout, but especially 265-316. See also Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), throughout, but especially 61-86 and 179-221.

Ida B. Wells, Westward Migration, the N.A.A.C.P., and Black Campaigns against Southern Lynching

At first, just one individual publicly opposed lynching as a form of Southern racial control in the post-Reconstruction Era. Previously, no American had so significantly compiled lynching statistics, theorized about lynching, and campaigned against lynching as a form of uniquely Southern racial control. Unsurprisingly, this individual was both Black and Southern. But perhaps most shocking to contemporaries was the fact that she was a woman. Her name was Ida B. Wells.

Sparked by the 1892 lynching of her friends Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Wil Stewart in Memphis, Tennessee, Ida B. Wells's campaign against Southern lynching was significant for several reasons. Most importantly, she was the first person – Black or White – to launch a large-scale public campaign against Southern lynching. Over a decade before the N.A.A.C.P. began tabulating lynching statistics and lobbying for an anti-lynching bill, Wells was compiling lists of Black lynching victims from Black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and lecturing publicly in Europe on the “Red Record” of the South. And long before White leaders in places like Oklahoma denounced lynching as an example of civil disorder and a compromise of the rule of law, Wells wrote newspaper editorials, engaged in public debates, and wrote blisteringly critical pamphlets and treatises about how White Southerners used lynching as a tool of racial control.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Royster, ed., *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*; Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*.

Second, Wells was likely the first public figure not just to criticize the long-accepted idea that lynching was primarily the result of Black rape of White women, but to actually dismantle that idea with a cohesive public argument supported by statistics. Going back to slavery and the period of Reconstruction, White racial violence against African Americans often had overtones of sexual control and exploitation. During Reconstruction, White men throughout the South used rape as a terrifying way to make a political statement, attempting to reassert their claim to sexual access to Black women – a supposed right that was threatened by Confederate defeat in the Civil War and Reconstruction’s attempt at creating racial equality in the South. Conversely, Whites developed lynching into a tool of racial control during the same period, exercising extralegal justice on Black men who allegedly assaulted White women. Thus, a White-supremacist mythology surrounding lynching emerged, attempting to justify lethal mob violence against African-American men because of the supposedly frequent nature with which they sought to assault and rape White women.¹⁰¹

Ida B. Wells did not just campaign against lynching – she was part of a growing group of post-Reconstruction Black Southerners who saw westward migration to places like Oklahoma as a potential escape from the terror of lynching itself. Remembering the last words of her martyred friend Thomas Moss, she traveled west to Oklahoma Territory in April of 1892 and visited Langston, Guthrie, and Kingfisher in order to report back to her networks in Memphis on the prospects of the newly-opened land. Black immigration societies in Oklahoma eagerly welcomed her, and she generally praised the

¹⁰¹ op. cit.; Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 61-86 and 179-221.

territory's potential upon her return to Memphis. But Wells warned Black Memphians of Oklahoma's severe weather and of the opportunistic boosters who bent the truth to portray Oklahoma as unrealistically welcoming, and she advised those who were contemplating emigration to Oklahoma to prepare themselves accordingly. ¹⁰²

Following in Wells's footsteps, much of the early twentieth-century activity of the N.A.A.C.P. focused on campaigning against lynching. Early efforts included attempts to tabulate and compile statistics on African-American lynching victims in the South. As the 1910s and the 1920s went on and White mobs continued to lynch Blacks, the N.A.A.C.P. used their statistics to support their proposition that Congress pass federal legislation to increase protections for would-be lynching victims. N.A.A.C.P. leaders lobbied Congress to pass the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, which proposed federal punishment for lynching mobs and law enforcement officials who failed to uphold the due process of law. As federal legislation, the Dyer Bill applied to the entire country, but it specifically targeted Southern lynching where Whites were the perpetrators and African Americans were the victims. However, the Dyer Bill and similar federal anti-lynching legislation never made it through Congress, despite N.A.A.C.P. efforts continuing into the 1950s. ¹⁰³

¹⁰² Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 188-201. Following Reconstruction, some Southern Blacks also saw migration to Kansas as a potential escape from lynching. Those who emigrated to Kansas were sometimes referred to as "Exodusters". Nell Irvin Painter provided a survey of their experiences with *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1976).

¹⁰³ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *30 Years of Lynching in the United States; Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African-American History*, s.v. "Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill (1922)".

Lynching as Southern Racial Control in Oklahoma: Chronology and Geography

As opposed to lynching as Western frontier justice, which manifested itself most clearly during Oklahoma's territorial days, lynching as a form of Southern racial control manifested itself most clearly during the early years of Oklahoma's statehood. More specifically, White Oklahomans attempted to use Southern lynching as a social and political tool to shape the new state of Oklahoma between 1907 and 1921. Once Oklahoma became a state, lynching took a more racially-motivated form even as the overall number of lynching victims decreased.

Chronological data demonstrates this change, as Oklahoma's statehood lynching record carries thirty-three of the fifty total African-American lynching victims. These Black lynching victims represent a significant majority of all Oklahoma's lynching victims after statehood, regardless of race: thirty-three out of the total forty lynching victims following statehood were African-American. More generally, the chronological distribution of Black lynchings in Oklahoma between 1886 and 1930 demonstrates the process by which lynching was becoming a tool of racial intimidation as Oklahoma grew into statehood (see Chart 1).¹⁰⁴

Population change was one major factor involved with bringing the Southern form of lynching to Oklahoma. As the Twin Territories approached statehood, their populations increased and diversified due to the opening of formerly-Indian lands to Black and White settlers and racial violence became more common. Oklahoma's African-American population more than doubled between 1900 and 1910, growing from

¹⁰⁴ These numbers are drawn from a combination of the author's research – compiled in Table 1 – and the chronological list of Oklahoma lynching victims provided by Clark in *Lynchings in Oklahoma*, 137-139.

55,684 to 137,612.¹⁰⁵ This dramatic increase in Black population coincided with a general growth in the state's population, creating unstable social conditions that facilitated mob violence.

In a manner more indirect than population change, Jim Crow laws were also responsible for the growth of Southern lynching during the first two decades of Oklahoma's statehood. While it was not a major force during the territorial days, segregation was present in Oklahoma from its earliest days of statehood. In fact, the very first law passed by the Oklahoma legislature, Senate Bill One, provided for the racial segregation of railroad cars and railroad depot waiting rooms. Laws requiring segregation in schools and other public facilities followed soon after.¹⁰⁶ These degrading and racially-divisive Jim Crow laws contributed to a climate in which Whites felt superior to Blacks. And despite their seeming confirmation of Jim Crow ideals, many White Oklahomans viewed separate and self-sufficient African-American towns and districts with suspicion. In these Black towns and communities, African Americans persistently fought for full civic equality. But, as was the case in other states, White Oklahomans often saw Black self-sufficiency and racial equality as threats to their identity as White Oklahomans. To maintain the status quo, Whites sought to limit Black progress through segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence in the form of lynching.

Playing a more specific role in lynching's transition from Western frontier justice to Southern racial control in Oklahoma was the Ku Klux Klan. While not explicitly

¹⁰⁵ United States Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Census Reports Vol. II* (New York: Norman Ross Publishing, Inc., 1997), 812.

¹⁰⁶ Oklahoma Constitution, Article 13 Section 3; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Senate Bill One"; Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 168-204.

responsible for the lynching of any African Americans, Oklahoma Klansmen bear part of the responsibility for the racially-motivated lynchings in Oklahoma during and immediately after World War I. Nearly all of Oklahoma's early governors struggled either to secretly negotiate with or publicly attack the Klan; Oklahomans accused some of these governors of trying to do both at the same time. In desperate attempts to decrease Klan influence in the early decades of statehood, Oklahoma governors even went as far declaring martial law. But these governors were often ineffective in their attempts to uproot the Klan, which had become deeply entrenched in Oklahoma's local politics, state politics, and court systems by the mid-1920s.¹⁰⁷

The activities of Oklahoma Klansmen were not limited to the victimization of African Americans, although harassing and beating Blacks were some of their most well-known practices. Klansmen sought "moral reform" through other actions like threatening men who associated with "loose women" and using government and business influence to marginalize Oklahoma's relatively small population of Catholics and Jews. The KKK also harassed members of supposedly radical political factions like pacifists and labor organizers. However, the Ku Klux Klan was undoubtedly focused on the practice of threatening, kidnapping, and whipping African Americans who challenged their ideal for Oklahoma's society. Klansmen kidnapped and beat dozens – and perhaps even hundreds – of Blacks in Oklahoma in the 1910s and 1920s. The racism of the Ku Klux Klan emboldened White Oklahomans who held similar beliefs, as

¹⁰⁷ "Constitution Week in Oklahoma", *Literary Digest* 79 (October 13, 1923), 12-13; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Ku Klux Klan". See also David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: A History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: New Viewpoints Publishing, 1965) and Carter Blue Clark, *A History of the Ku Klux Klan In Oklahoma* (dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1976).

White mobs lynched African Americans in the very same market squares, country roads, and pastures where Klansmen had whipped them.¹⁰⁸

Several distinct patterns emerge from a geographical plotting of Black lynching cases, and many of these patterns can be connected to the regional origins of Oklahoma's settlers. For this purpose, imagine a line drawn roughly from Miami to Altus, diagonally bisecting the state from northeast to southwest. According to census data from 1900, there was generally a difference between the origins of White settlers north and west of this Miami-Altus line and settlers to the south and east of it.¹⁰⁹ Most White Oklahomans northwest of the Miami-Altus line would have had relatively little firsthand experience with slavery or extreme racial violence against African Americans, having lived in the Midwest before coming to Oklahoma. And of those Whites to the north and west of the Miami-Altus line, many were first or second-generation immigrants from Europe. On the other hand, most Whites who settled south and east of the Miami-Altus line were from Southern states like Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi and less likely to be recent immigrants. In these states – and even in Missouri, which did not secede from the Union – the legacy of slavery remained strong. Thus, Whites migrating to Oklahoma from Southern states brought with them racial prejudices which were more likely to manifest themselves in rituals of racially-motivated mob violence against African

¹⁰⁸ "The Masked Floggers of Tulsa", *Literary Digest* 79 (September 22, 1923), 17; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 49-55.

¹⁰⁹ United States Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States: Census Reports Volume II* (New York: Norman Ross Publishing, Inc., 1997), xxvi Table VII, 36-37 Table 2, 80-81 Table 2. The "Miami-Altus Line" correlates roughly with the division between Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory.

Americans than were the racial prejudices of Whites who migrated to Oklahoma from Midwestern states.¹¹⁰

With regard to lynching, geography and chronology intersect in a way that associates the region to the northwest of the Miami-Altus line with lynching as Western frontier justice, and associates the region to the southeast of the Miami-Altus line with lynching as Southern racial control. In the tradition of lynching as Western frontier justice, White Oklahomans during the territorial days used lethal mob violence against Blacks almost exclusively in the central and western counties of what would become Oklahoma. (See Map 3, “Geographical Distribution of Oklahoma’s Pre-Statehood African-American Lynchings”). But after statehood, White mobs lynched African Americans most frequently in the central and eastern counties of Oklahoma (see Map 4, “Geographical Distribution of Oklahoma’s Post-Statehood African-American Lynchings”). Post-statehood lynching incidents were highly concentrated along the Miami-Altus line and to the south and east of it (see Map 5, “Post-Statehood African-American Lynchings with ‘Miami-Altus Line’”).

From the beginning of Oklahoma’s statehood, differences in state or regional origin among White Oklahomans also manifested themselves politically, with regard to race. These differences can easily be connected to the tradition of racially-motivated lynching. As mentioned previously, one of the first actions of the Oklahoma legislature was Senate Bill One, which required racial segregation on railroad cars and railroad depot waiting rooms. This bill was supported in large part by Democratic

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

representatives in the southern and eastern counties of Oklahoma, but opposed by most senators in north-central and western counties.¹¹¹ It is probably not a coincidence that senators representing parts of the state where lynching was most common were more supportive of Jim Crow segregation. Republican-controlled counties in the north-central and western regions of Oklahoma had fewer African Americans and their party affiliation likely compelled these senators to be more racially-progressive than their southern and eastern counterparts.

The distribution of Oklahoma's Black population is also responsible for the geographical distribution of Black lynching in Oklahoma. Lynching was more common in counties with higher proportions of Blacks. Wagoner and Okfuskee counties – of whom African Americans made up 40 and 39 percent in 1910, respectively – had frequent lynchings compared to other counties. But Black population proportion alone does not explain Oklahoma's geographical distribution of lynching. The proportion of African Americans in Oklahoma County in 1910, for example, was only slightly higher than the state average. Yet Oklahoma County had three lynchings, tied with McIntosh and Okfuskee Counties for having the second-most lynchings in the state.¹¹²

Part of the reason why the Black population of a town or county is not enough to explain Oklahoma's lynching distribution is because Oklahoma's aforementioned all-Black Towns complicate the state's racial demographics. These unique all-Black communities were often small, remote, and relatively economically independent from

¹¹¹ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Senate Bill One", "Jim Crow".

¹¹² United States Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: Census Reports Volume II* (New York: Norman Ross Publishing, Inc., 1997), 465-483.

White communities. Most African Americans came to Oklahoma from Southern states like Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi, hoping to make a living free from the violence and injustices that plagued the South. Because of this desire for self-sufficiency and independence, Oklahoma Blacks were more sparsely distributed than African Americans in Deep-South States like Mississippi, where the spatial legacy of slavery often resulted in African Americans living in close proximity to Whites. Blacks actually made up the majority of the populace in some Mississippi counties. Some of these counties have dozens of Black lynchings on their record, bordering other counties with just one or two African-American lynching victims. Oklahoma's geographical lynching distribution of is much more spread out, with few counties having more than one or two cases.¹¹³

The remote and self-sufficient nature of Oklahoma's Black towns had an impact on the geographical distribution of Oklahoma's Black lynching victims. African Americans in Oklahoma were not usually clustered together in urban centers, as was the case in northern cities like Chicago and New York. In these places, racial violence occasionally took the form of lynching, but was most often expressed in "race riots" (this term is explored more fully in Chapter Three). Long-term racial tensions between different ethnic groups in urban areas often caused these riots, which then boiled over into violent chaos and extensive destruction of property. With the exception of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, Oklahoma had very few instances of this more urban style of racial

¹¹³ Franklin, *The Blacks in Oklahoma*, 6-16; Mozell C. Hill, "The All-Negro Communities of Oklahoma: The Natural History of a Social Movement, Part I," *Journal of Negro History* 31 (July 1946): 254-268; Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 39-45. See also Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration* and *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "All-Black Towns".

violence. Because Oklahoma's all-Black communities were rural, small, and mostly self-sufficient, many African Americans in Oklahoma did not have a significant amount of day-to-day contact or economic interdependence with Whites, and thus had fewer chances to incite racial hatred and violence.¹¹⁴

The Nelson Lynching, Woody Guthrie, Governor Cruce, and the 1910s

During the nearly half-century in which White Oklahomans used lynching to terrorize African Americans, the 1910s was inarguably the worst decade. An astounding twenty-eight of the fifty total Blacks who lost their lives to White lynching mobs in Oklahoma's combined territorial and statehood eras were killed between 1910 and 1920. During this decade, lynching in Oklahoma shocked Black and White leaders alike, and it was discussed thoroughly in both regional and national conversations about crime, justice, and race relations in the early twentieth-century United States. No Oklahoma lynching shocked the state – or the nation – more than that of a woman named Laura Nelson and her teenage son.

In May of 1911, Nelson and her son sat in a jail cell in Okemah, a small rural town east of Oklahoma City and southwest of Tulsa in the former Creek Nation. They were awaiting trial for the murder of Okfuskee County Deputy Sheriff George H. Loney, who had been recently shot and killed while searching the Nelson home for stolen goods while Mr. Nelson was away from home. It is possible that Mrs. Nelson attempted to take the blame for her son's actions, but whether it was Laura or her son who killed

¹¹⁴ Franklin, *The Blacks in Oklahoma*, 6-16; William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 245-264; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "All-Black Towns", "Tulsa Race Riot".

Sheriff Loney is not clear. What actually happened within the Nelson home to compel either resident to shoot and kill the sheriff is even less clear. ¹¹⁵

After nightfall on Friday, May 26th, a group of masked White men broke into the Okfuskee County Jail where Laura and her son were being held. After binding and gagging the jailer, Lawrence Payne, the mob used stolen keys to open the Nelsons' cell. They then bound both Laura and her son, drove them six miles north of town, and hung them from a bridge over the Canadian River. Some accounts claim that members of the White mob raped Laura before killing her and her son, but this has proven difficult to verify. The bodies were discovered the next morning and White residents of Okemah soon flocked to see them. A group of White men and women posed on the bridge for several photographs, which were then distributed as postcards including the date, location, and name of the photographer. Zoomed in on the corpses of Laura and her son, photographs show that the teenage boy's pants had been pulled down to his ankles, exposing his genitals (see Image Two, "Lawrence ['L.D.'] Nelson). Evidently the photographer had the minimal decency to white out the area around the boy's genitals so they could not be seen in reproduced versions of the picture. ¹¹⁶

With the teenage boy's genitals having been exposed and some accounts claiming the White lynchers raped Laura before killing her, the sexual overtones of the Nelsons' killing were prime indicators that lynching as a form of Southern racial control

¹¹⁵ *Daily Ardmoreite*, May 26, 1911; *New York Times*, May 26, 1911; *Washington Herald*, May 26, 1911; *Tulsa Daily World*, June 3, 1911; *The Crisis* 3 (July 1911), 99-100; *The Crisis* 4 (August 1911), 153-154. Laura's name was sometimes mistakenly reported as "Mary", and her son's name appears as either "Lawrence" or "L.D."

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*; James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Publishers, 2000), 37-38. See Image 2, "Lawrence ('L.D.') Nelson".

had fully arrived in Oklahoma by 1911. Rioting expert Paul Gilje wrote that the “lynching of Blacks, a ritual practiced thousands of times, often included humiliation and physical desecration of the victim that had a variety of psychosexual connotations aimed at publicly asserting White racial dominance”.¹¹⁷ Unlike the Western frontier-justice variety of lynching, Southern lynchings often had implications that were simultaneously racial and sexual. It was not enough for Southern White mobs to merely kill an alleged Black offender; often times torture, sexually-tinged humiliation, and desecration accompanied the act of killing.

Because of these sexual implications, news of the Nelson lynching spread quickly in both Oklahoma newspapers and more widely-circulated publications like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Herald*.¹¹⁸ It was discussed in special detail by Black-owned publications like *The Crisis*, which acted as the mouthpiece of Dr. W.E.B. DuBois’ N.A.A.C.P.¹¹⁹ By 1911, most lynchings that occurred were reported by local newspapers and sometimes even national publications. Reporters and editors either justified lynchings with a straightforward, manner-of-fact description or condemned them as illegal actions carried out by backwards, uncivilized vigilantes. Aside from its sexual nature, the Nelson lynching was especially shocking because it involved the killing of a law officer – a capital crime – and because the mob had not killed a man, as was usually the case, but a woman and her teenage boy.

¹¹⁷ Paul Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996), 7.

¹¹⁸ “Hang Negro Woman and Son”, *New York Times*, May 26, 1911; “Armed Mob Hangs Woman and Son”, *Washington Herald*, May 26, 1911, page 1.

¹¹⁹ “Crime”, *The Crisis* 3 (July 1911), 99-100; “The Oklahoma Lynching”, *The Crisis* 4 (August 1911), 153-154.

Famous Oklahoma folk singer-songwriter Woody Guthrie was born in Okemah the year after the masked White mob lynched the Nelsons just north of town. Woody Guthrie's own father had been a part of that mob, according to testimony from the folk music legend himself. Although the Nelson lynching happened the year before Woody Guthrie was born, it evidently left enough of a mark on him and his community that Guthrie was compelled to write a song about it decades later in 1956.¹²⁰ He wrote, in part:

As I walked down that old dark town
In that town where I was born,
I heard the saddest lonesome moan
I ever heard before.
My hair trembled at the roots
Cold chills run down my spine
As I drew near that old jail house
I heard this deathly cry:
O, don't kill my baby and my son
O, don't kill my baby and my son
You can stretch my neck on that old river bridge
But don't kill my baby and my son.¹²¹

When Guthrie penned the lyrics to "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son", he was inspired by one of the most disturbing phenomena in American history – a phenomena that had manifested itself not just in remote Georgia swamps and Mississippi cotton fields, but in

¹²⁰ Mark Allan Jackson, "Dark Memory: A Look at Lynching in American through the Life, Times, and Songs of Woody Guthrie," *Popular Music and Society* 28 (December 2005): 663-675.

¹²¹ Woody Guthrie, *Don't Kill My Baby and My Son* (http://woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Dont_Kill_My_Baby_and_My_Son), copyrighted 1966.

quiet Oklahoma towns like Okemah. Likely unbeknownst to Guthrie and his father, the Nelson lynching was much more than just an isolated traumatic event in a small rural community. It was representative of a broader change that had occurred in Oklahoma in which mob violence in the new state had evolved from Western frontier justice to Southern racial control. Like the White crowd in Okemah who stood symbolically above the dead Black bodies of Laura Nelson and her son on that Canadian River bridge, White Oklahomans were now attempting to symbolically assert their dominance over African Americans like never before. Whites were now using lynching to mold the new state to fit their racial ideal.

Woody Guthrie was not the only prominent figure to commemorate and discuss the Nelson lynching. It became a centerpiece around which regional and national discussions about lynching in the new state seemed to revolve. Like Ida B. Wells in the previous two decades, Black leaders in Oklahoma sought to campaign against the seemingly-resurgent phenomena of lynching. The N.A.A.C.P. was once again at the center of this struggle, sending a letter to Oklahoma's then-governor Lee Cruce, condemning the killings and petitioning the governor to launch a state investigation in order to identify and punish those responsible. Governor Cruce's response was reprinted in full in the August 1911 issue of *The Crisis*, the official publication of the N.A.A.C.P.¹²² Cruce's response letter provides a fascinating window into the Oklahoma state government's attitude towards lynching in Oklahoma at its peak in the 1910s, and how state leaders employed the language of civilization and race to discuss mob violence. Like Montana pastor Robert Fisk a few decades earlier, Cruce

¹²² "The Oklahoma Lynching", *The Crisis* 4 (August 1911), 153-154.

expressed his understanding of lethal mob violence through a lens of early twentieth-century progressivism and racial segregation. Most importantly, he deflects the N.A.A.C.P.'s accusations throughout his letter in an effort to depict mob violence in his state as being closer to the Western form of lynching, as opposed to the more racially-charged Southern variety.

Early in the letter, Governor Cruce is defensive. First, he mentions that a state district judge has “called a Grand Jury investigation” into the Nelson lynching.¹²³ Compared to the governmental response to other lynching incidents, a state investigation and the formation of a grand jury was a huge step forward. More often than not, local and state government made virtually no effort to identify or prosecute White lynch mobs who killed Black Oklahomans. But in this case, the nature of a grand jury may have actually served the purpose of the lynchers. If Whites in Okemah were willing to have themselves photographed standing over the bodies of Laura Nelson and her son, then they may not have had a problem with looking the other way when a state judge ordered them to seek out those responsible for the killing. There is no evidence that the Okemah grand jury ever identified the Nelsons’ killers or brought charges against them. Indeed, White lynchers in Oklahoma and all over the South frequently went unpunished. This was largely because the neighbors who made up grand juries and the local judges who heard the allegations – if there were any – often had little to no desire to punish Whites who lynched Blacks, and often agreed with the premise of the lynchings themselves. Newspapers rarely followed up lynching stories with reports of

¹²³ Ibid.

Whites being identified, arrested, or charged with murder. Despite the supposed efforts of the state governor, the Nelson lynching was no different. ¹²⁴

Governor Cruce continues his letter in a defensive tone, refuting the N.A.A.C.P.'s claim that lynching stemmed from a lack of "civilization" among White Oklahomans. Instead, he asserts that "our people" (whether he means White Oklahomans or Oklahomans in general is somewhat ambiguous) are "just as civilized as the people of New York". "In fact", he continues, "[our people are] more civilized than the masses of your people". It is unclear who Cruce is referring to in saying "our people" and "your people". Whether he is contrasting Whites and Blacks, rural Oklahoma and urban New York City, or the state government and the national N.A.A.C.P. office is ambiguous. ¹²⁵ But these dichotomies are reminiscent of Michael J. Pfeifer's aforementioned theory of mob justice, where middle and upper-class Americans in more established regions blamed the supposedly uncivilized nature of poor and working-class Southerners and Westerners for lynching – to which these Southerners and Westerners responded by claiming their style of justice was indeed justifiable, moral, and necessary. ¹²⁶

Governor Cruce's tone changes as his letter progresses, and he goes on the offensive. He places blame for the Nelsons' killing on "passion and race prejudice" on the part of White lynchers, but is quick to remind the N.A.A.C.P. and *Crisis* readers that

¹²⁴ "The Oklahoma Lynching", *The Crisis* 4 (August 1911), 153-154. See also "Crime", *The Crisis* 2 (July 1911), 99-100; "Mother and Son Lynched by Mob", *Daily Ardmoreite*, May 26, 1911, page 7; "Hang Negro Woman and Son", *New York Times*, May 26, 1911; "Armed Mob Hangs Woman and Son", *Washington Herald*, May 26, 1911; "Want Lynching Probed", *Tulsa Daily World*, June 3, 1911, page 5.

¹²⁵ "The Oklahoma Lynching", *The Crisis* 4 (August 1911), 154.

¹²⁶ "The Oklahoma Lynching", *The Crisis* 2 (August 1911), 153-154; Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, 2-4; Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice*; Pfeifer, ed., *Lynching Beyond Dixie*, 2-4. For more on Pfeifer's lynching theory, see pages 6-7.

“an officer in the discharge of his sworn duty” had been “wantonly shot to death”.¹²⁷

Echoing the older arguments of post-Reconstruction Whites, Cruce implies that Whites lynched Blacks in direct correlation to Black criminality. Later, Cruce claimed that if the N.A.A.C.P. would “interest itself to the extent of seeing that such outrages as this are not perpetrated against our people”, “there would be fewer lynchings in the South than at this time”.¹²⁸ So, despite his repeated statements that he was opposed to lynching, Oklahoma’s governor was still swayed by the old idea that Whites lynched Blacks because Blacks were criminally inclined, and not – as Ida B. Wells had asserted – because Whites sought to maintain their ideal racial order.

Governor Cruce closes his letter cordially, continuing his efforts to deflect the accusations of the N.A.A.C.P. and attempting to reframe lynching in Oklahoma as something other than Southern racial control. He even argues that “Oklahoma is especially favored as being practically free from any attempt to take the law in its own hands”, claiming that “there have been since Statehood six hangings in this State by mob, and four of these were white men”.¹²⁹ This statement is patently untrue, as Laura Nelson and her son had been the sixth and seventh Black Oklahomans killed by White lynch mobs since Oklahoma had become a state in November of 1907. The degree to which the governor was aware of these lynchings is difficult to tell. Cruce may have been unaware of the number of mob killings that had taken place in his state during the preceding four years, although it is just as likely that he sought to downplay their

¹²⁷ “The Oklahoma Lynching”, *The Crisis* 2 (August 1911), 153.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 154. One White Southerner who theorized that lynching stemmed primarily from Black criminality was Rebecca Latimore Felton, who became the first woman to serve in the United States Senate. Her arguments are discussed throughout Crystal N. Feimster’s *Southern Horrors*.

¹²⁹ “The Oklahoma Lynching”, *The Crisis* 4 (August 1911), 154.

frequency in his nationally-published letter to the N.A.A.C.P. Either way, Cruce's attitude and tone when discussing lynching demonstrate the kind of hands-off governmental approach that allowed Black lynchings not only to continue in Oklahoma throughout the 1910s, but actually to worsen. Governor Cruce seems to have thought that Oklahoma was still in the Western frontier-justice stage of vigilantism, or at least this was the perception he wanted to uphold. In reality, his state was quickly moving towards the use of lynching as Southern racial control.

Lynching as a Tool of Statemaking

The Nelson lynching, along with regional and national leaders' responses to it, demonstrated that lynching had become a tool of statemaking in Oklahoma by the early 1910s. With its massive population increases, infrastructural improvements, and tightening of law enforcement, the path to statehood had resulted in significant decreases in lynching rates of all of Oklahoma's racial groups, with the grave exception of Black people. With the coming of statehood, they found themselves victimized by lethal mob violence at a higher rate than in the previous territorial and Reconstruction eras. Like Jim Crow legislation, White Oklahomans sought to use lynching to mold Oklahoma into their ideal state. As African Americans fled the violence and oppression of the South and streamed into the new state, attempting to assert their right to civic equality, White lawmakers embedded the degrading and divisive policies of segregation into the framework of Oklahoma's public policy. And when African Americans defended their homes, asserted their citizenship, and closed ranks in the face of White supremacy, White Oklahomans hung them from bridges, shot them dead, and even

burned them alive – almost always with the implicit approval of local and state government.¹³⁰

Despite the harrowing violence of the 1910s, African Americans continued to migrate to Oklahoma and continued to protest their lynching upon arrival. As Black World War I veterans returned home to Oklahoma from service in Europe and as lynching became an increasingly embarrassing stain on the young state's national reputation, lynchings declined significantly in the late 1910s. But the story of White racial violence in Oklahoma did not end in 1920. There was to be one more outburst of racially-motivated violence in Oklahoma that would capture the nation's attention, leaving Black Oklahomans violated and destitute – and leaving Oklahoma's White establishment scrambling to explain their inability to control the state's White populace.

¹³⁰ White Oklahomans burned alive just one African-American lynching victim, coincidentally during the same month Governor Cruce's letter ran in *The Crisis*. The victim's name was John Lee. His burning accompanied a broader racial disturbance in the town of Durant, from which angry Whites forced some Blacks to flee. Image 3, "The Burning of John Lee"; Allen, *Without Sanctuary*, 18.

CHAPTER III

LYNCHING AND THE TULSA RACE RIOT

By 1921, lynching in Oklahoma had evolved from Western frontier justice to Southern racial control. Despite this change, lynchings of African Americans throughout the state decreased significantly in the late 1910s as Black veterans returned home from World War I and Oklahoma state officials and law enforcement began to crack down on White lynchers. But in Tulsa – unique among Oklahoma towns in its history and demographics – White mobs had never lynched an African American. At a time when race riots were frequent and race relations were tense, the relatively wealthy and modern city of Tulsa maintained a climate of increasingly unsteady racial peace.

On May 30th and June 1st of 1921, Tulsa experienced its own outburst of racial animosity in what has become known as the Tulsa Race Riot.¹³¹ There were a

¹³¹ The phrase “Race Riot” is probably not the most accurate descriptor of what happened in Tulsa during the early summer of 1921. In today’s language, the word “riot” often implies a civil disturbance in which citizens of a community burn and loot property, with law enforcement and national guardsmen being deployed to keep the peace. The image that comes to mind is often one of urban African Americans destroying their own community. As I will try to show, what happened in Tulsa in 1921 was much different from this. Throughout, I have tried to use other terms to describe what happened: “racial violence”, “invasion”, “massacre”, “pogrom”, “racial warfare”, etc. At times, I revert to using the phrases “riot” or “rioters”. I have done this not because I believe that it was a riot, in its modern sense, but because the phrase “Tulsa Race Riot” is the most recognizable phrase related to this event and because I have attempted break up the monotony of the repetition of other phrases.

variety of factors involved with this disturbance. But lynching stood at the center of the conflict that sparked the violence. When open racial warfare broke out in the streets, White participants in the chaos acted very much like the lynching mobs that killed dozens of Black Oklahomans during the 1910s. White men and boys committed crimes against African Americans in broad daylight, knowing full well that law enforcement would not only look the other way but in fact endorse their actions and sometimes even take part in them. Having been denied the opportunity to lynch an alleged Black criminal, White Tulsans broadened their rage and directed it towards the general Black population in the area. What began as an attempt to lynch one African American became an attempt to destroy an entire African-American community.

Vigilante Justice, Population Growth, and Segregation in Tulsa

In a broad sense, the Tulsa Race Riot was a product of a city struggling to adapt to the rapid social and economic changes of the early twentieth century – a city imploding upon its own racial ideology, greed, and unprecedented growth. It can also be understood as a culmination of the lynchings and racial violence that was so common across Oklahoma during the first two decades of statehood. Other towns and cities in Oklahoma experienced developments similar to Tulsa, but many of the aforementioned changes were especially magnified by Tulsa's circumstances. Throughout the late nineteenth century, Tulsa's population was made up mostly of Native Americans and the descendants of Black slaves who belonged to Indian masters – usually Cherokees or Creeks. Because of the scant nature of law enforcement during this time, many territorial Oklahomans – Tulsans included – practiced lynching and

related forms of vigilante justice supposedly necessary to maintain law and order.

The first two decades of the twentieth century brought a series of changes in Tulsa that resulted in the city struggling with new outbursts of lynching, mob violence, and vigilante justice. Chief among these changes was the population growth linked to statehood and the oil industry, which dramatically changed the nature of mob violence in and around Tulsa. The racial nature of these outbursts became more pronounced, and citizens of northeast Oklahoma began enacting forms of mob violence that were less reflective of older ideas about lynching and more reflective of the new state's racially-charged Jim Crow atmosphere.

The booming oil industry and Oklahoma's 1907 entry into statehood brought exponential population growth to Tulsa in the 1910s and 1920s. This population growth diversified the already-unique demographics of the city. Whites from all over the South and Midwest, along with African Americans from places like Missouri, Mississippi, and Arkansas poured into Tulsa between statehood and the beginning of the 1920s. Hailing from Southern states, many of these Whites brought with them to Tulsa a tradition of lynching. Combined with the astounding economic potential of an explosive oil industry, this sudden growth and diversification in population had a straining and sometimes corrupting effect on Tulsa's law enforcement and criminal justice system. Along with Tulsa's massive population growth came the establishment of Jim Crow laws, which were sweeping across the nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Statehood meant segregation of schools, businesses, and public facilities in newly-

urban Tulsa, and segregation often meant racial unrest in urban areas across the nation during and immediately after World War I. ¹³²

Despite Jim Crow conditions and dozens of Black lynching victims across Oklahoma, African Americans streamed into Tulsa during the 1900s and 1910s. They came from places like Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas – places where lynchings were common. Compared to these places, racial relations and economic opportunities for African Americans were often much more promising in Oklahoma. Many of these Black migrants who came to Oklahoma were drawn by boosters like Edward P. McCabe, who viewed Oklahoma as a potential escape from the violence, racism, and economic oppression of former Confederate states like Arkansas and Mississippi. Men like McCabe used newspapers, lectures, and pulpits to portray the new state of Oklahoma as a place where Blacks could have “equal chances with the white man, free and independent.” ¹³³

In the minds of many Oklahomans, Tulsa was indeed a place of equal chances for people of both races. In the 1910s, the oil boom had the appearance of a rising tide lifting all boats. After all, Tulsa’s all-Black Greenwood District had emerged almost overnight as one of the most affluent and well-known African-American urban sectors in the middle of the country. Less than sixty years after emancipation, former slaves and

¹³² Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 12-14; United States Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 812; R. Halliburton, Jr., *The Tulsa Race War of 1921* (San Francisco: R&E Research Associates, 1975), 2.

¹³³ Hannibal Johnson, *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa’s Historic Greenwood District* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1998), 5; George O. Carney, “Historic Resources of Oklahoma’s All-Black Towns”, *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 69, no. 2 (Summer 1991) 117-118; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Edward P. McCabe”, “All-Black Towns”. For more on Edward P. McCabe, see Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 55-58.

their children had built successful schools, churches, and businesses in Tulsa – despite the humiliating and limiting effects of Jim Crow segregation. In Kansas and especially Oklahoma, all-Black towns and Black communities in the early twentieth century stood as remarkable examples of African-American self-sufficiency and prosperity. Tulsa’s Greenwood District, which legal expert Hannibal Johnson called an all-Black “town-within-a-town”, stood as a similar example of early-twentieth century African-American self-sufficiency and prosperity. In the town-within-a-town of Greenwood, outbursts of racial violence were relatively rare and no Black person had ever been the victim of a White lynch mob.¹³⁴

Portrayals of Tulsa as a “Promised Land” of equal opportunity between the races glossed over the more racially-disparate economic and social realities of the city. Greenwood was the result of the hard work of Black Tulsans, no doubt. But it was also the product of a handful of economic and social conditions, few of which had their roots in any kind of racially-progressive ideology. In fact, many of these conditions were rooted in older racial ideologies – the same ideologies that encouraged and enabled lynching. White Tulsans owned portions of the Greenwood District itself, and Whites in other parts of the city employed significant numbers of the African Americans living in Greenwood. And nearly all of those Tulsa Blacks not residing in Greenwood were live-in domestic workers in other parts of town. So regardless of their residence, most Black Tulsans were wage-earners – economically dependent upon White Tulsans in a direct

¹³⁴ Hannibal Johnson, *Tulsa’s Historic Greenwood District* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014), 9; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “All-Black Towns”; Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration*, 169. Firsthand accounts of Greenwood’s wealth and prosperity are found throughout Eddie Halliburton Gates, *They Came Searching: How Blacks Sought the Promised Land in Tulsa* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1997).

way. And the small proportion of Blacks who were economically independent from Whites (the wealthier business owners, doctors, and lawyers) often lived side-by-side with poor and working-class Blacks in Greenwood. While it may have maintained the appearance of racial harmony or racial peace, the combination of economic dependence and stark physical separation between Blacks and Whites in Tulsa may have merely delayed the kinds of racial violence that broke out earlier in St. Louis and Chicago. ¹³⁵

But despite their class differences, all of Greenwood's Black residents were united by their inability to spend their money anywhere but in Greenwood itself. Tulsa's Jim Crow laws separated schools and bathrooms but they also segregated restaurants, shops, and night clubs. Black Tulsans old enough to remember segregation often do so with pride and fondness, recalling the days when money stayed within the Black community and when Black businesses thrived. The reality was that segregation left Greenwood residents with little choice but to spend their money close to home, because their business was rarely welcome anywhere else. The great irony of Jim Crow segregation – as it relates to the Greenwood District and lynching – was that the very laws that played a role in the buildup of wealth in Greenwood actually set the stage for Greenwood's destruction. ¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 14-16; Johnson, *Black Wall Street*, 9-11; Johnson, *Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District*, 9; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Greenwood District".

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Race Relations in Tulsa after World War I

Following World War I, muted racial tensions in the United States became more and more apparent. Black men returned home from service in the war, dramatically affected by their experiences. Many arrived with a renewed sense of commitment to holding America accountable to its supposed ideals of freedom and opportunity. These men had been a part of an American military that fought in the name of democracy and liberty in Europe. They were now less patient with a nation that sought to deny them the very rights and freedoms they supposedly fought to preserve in France. But the America to which Black veterans returned was anything but free and everything but democratic. They came home to urban areas like St. Louis and Chicago, which had large race riots in 1917 and 1919, respectively. Riots, lynchings, and oppressive Jim Crow laws seemed to grip the entire country, showing little favor to men who had fought overseas. It was not uncommon for Black veterans to read stories in newspapers or overhear hushed conversations about a White mob lynching a Black World War I veteran – even while he still wore his uniform.¹³⁷

Despite the tragic symbolism of the image of a uniformed Black veteran hanging from a tree, White mobs in Oklahoma lynched far fewer African Americans once veterans began returning home from World War I in 1918. Oklahoma's lynching record shows just one Black victim in 1917, one in 1918, and none in 1919 (see Table 1).¹³⁸ It

¹³⁷ Scott Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921*, 45; Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, ix-x. For more on race riots and racial tension in the post-WWI era, see Jan Voogd, *Race Riots & Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008).

¹³⁸ For more on imagery and symbolism associated with lynching, see Amy Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle* and Allen, *Without Sanctuary*.

is probable that the presence of Black veterans, now equipped with both military experience and a stronger sense of entitlement to their rights as citizens, played a part in significantly decreasing the frequency of lynching in the immediate postwar era in Oklahoma. Like never before in the relatively young state, Black citizens – specifically Black men – took practical steps to prevent White mobs from lynching African Americans. Often times these efforts involved petitions, demonstrations, and campaigns, but sometimes African Americans took up arms in 1917 and 1918 to oppose lynch mobs. Black men taking up of arms in self-defense would prove to be a crucial moment in the development of the Tulsa Race Riot.¹³⁹

Due to a combination of vigilance on the part of its Black community, the integrity of its law enforcement, and good fortune, Tulsa had mostly avoided instances of racial violence throughout the first thirteen years of statehood. Despite the increasingly racial nature of lynchings in Oklahoma during the 1900s and 1910s, Greenwood had experienced neither an individual lynching nor the kind of large-scale White violence that displaced African Americans in nearby Henryetta (1907) and Dewey (1917).¹⁴⁰ In 1904, a White mob in Tulsa attempted to lynch an African-American man at the jail, but was turned away by a handful of armed city officials. And throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, White mob violence targeted Tulsa's political radicals, pacifists, and union organizers, but not African Americans.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Smitherman, Andrew J.", "Lynching"; Larry O'Dell, "Protecting His Race: A.J. Smitherman and the Tulsa Star," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 80 (Spring 2002), 305-306; *Tulsa Star*, August 24, 1918.

¹⁴⁰ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 46; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Lynching".

¹⁴¹ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 25-33; Clark, "A History of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma", 22-26; Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 50.

Outside of Tulsa, Whites increasingly targeted Blacks with racially-motivated mob killings during the 1900s and 1910s. Tulsa's African-American community was the exception to the rule in Oklahoma. Other towns and cities had Black communities, but rarely did these communities have the wealth, size, or social standing of Greenwood's Black population. Wealth – along with the social connectedness with Whites that often accompanied it – proved to be enough to prevent most lynchings. Thus, mob killings of African Americans were most common in Oklahoma's more remote areas, where Black populations tended to be poorer and more isolated. But while many lynchings occurred in the rural counties outside of Tulsa (Wagoner, Okfuskee, McIntosh, etc.), White mobs had lynched African Americans in Oklahoma City on several occasions by 1921 (see Maps 3-5, Chart 2).

Most notable among these Oklahoma City lynchings was that of a Black man named Claude Chandler. Believed by law enforcement to have been guilty of shooting and killing multiple police officers during a raid on a moonshining operation, several dozen White men took Chandler from jail and hung him from a tree about eight miles from downtown Oklahoma City. Immediately, members of Oklahoma City's Black community began petitioning Oklahoma officials to find and punish the White men who killed Chandler. Chief among these petitioners was Roscoe Dunjee, primary leader of Oklahoma's various NAACP branches and editor of the *Black Dispatch*, a prominent Oklahoma City Black newspaper. In public statements and private meetings, Oklahoma Governor J.A. Robertson advised Dunjee and Oklahoma City's other Black citizens "to remain quietly at home and trust officers of the law to preserve order and protect them

from harm.” Despite his assurances, Governor Robertson mobilized National Guard units in the event of what the *Tulsa Daily World* called a “Black uprising”.¹⁴²

Much of the response to Claude Chandler’s lynching would be echoed less than a year later during the Tulsa Race Riot. It is likely that Chandler’s 1920 lynching played a role in Greenwood’s decision-making in response to the 1921 lynching threat against Dick Rowland which spurred the violence of the Tulsa Race Riot. Decaying trust in Oklahoma’s local government among Tulsa’s Black community compelled their refusal to “remain quietly at home”. Instead, Blacks armed and organized themselves to protect one of their own when faced with a White lynch mob.

While Claude Chandler’s lynching in Oklahoma City was probably in the forefront of Greenwood’s collective mind during the spring of 1921, it was the lynching of a White man that opened the door for increased racial violence in Tulsa. In August of 1920, a cab driver named Homer Nida was taking a young couple to a dance in Sapulpa when the young man shot him in the stomach and drove off with the taxi. Acting on a tip, police arrested a man named Roy Belton and brought him to Nida’s hospital room. Nida identified Belton as the man who shot him and rumors of lynching began to spread almost immediately. When Nida died several days later, a mob took Belton from the Tulsa County Courthouse – evidently with little resistance from law enforcement – and drove him several miles south of town before hanging him. Despite editorial condemnations of the lynchings of both Roy Belton and Claude Chandler in newspapers

¹⁴² *Daily Ardmoreite*, August 31, 1920; Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 52-53; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Dunjee, Roscoe”; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Robertson, James Ayers Brooks”; *Tulsa Daily World*, August 31, 1920.

across the state, not all assessments of the mob's actions were disapproving. Not only did Tulsa law enforcement allow the mob to take Belton from the jail, but Tulsa Police Chief John Gustafson and Tulsa County Sherriff Jim Woolley effectively endorsed the lynching with statements in both the *Tulsa World* and the *Tulsa Tribune* during the ensuing days.¹⁴³

The mob who killed Roy Belton may have had the symbolic support of Tulsa's law enforcement leadership and major newspapers, but the community of Greenwood was in no way supportive of Belton's lynching. Rather, Tulsa's African-American residents were deeply disturbed by the lynching of a White man. If White Tulsans were willing to take the law into their own hands and lynch one of their own, then surely they would be even quicker to lynch a Black man. A White mob had never lynched an African American in Tulsa, but the residents of Greenwood feared that it was now more likely than ever. Mary E. Jones Parrish, a Black resident of Greenwood and one of a few individuals who penned a full-length work on the Tulsa Race Riot during its immediate aftermath, commented on how Roy Belton's 1920 lynching affected Tulsa's African-American community. In her 1922 book *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, she explained that "since the lynching of a White boy in Tulsa, the confidence [on the part of Greenwood residents] in the ability of the city official to protect its prisoner has decreased." According to Parrish, Black Tulsans carried with them the memory of

¹⁴³ *Tulsa Daily World*, September 9, 1920; Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 38-44; O'Dell, "Protecting His Race", 307; *Durant Weekly News*, September 10, 1920; Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 51-52.

Belton's lynching as they reacted to the growing lynching threat that sparked the Tulsa Race Riot.¹⁴⁴

Newspapers, Urban Vice, and Black Criminality

Perhaps the most outspoken and influential Black critic of Roy Belton's lynching was A.J. Smitherman, editor of Tulsa's most well-respected and established African-American newspaper, the *Tulsa Star*. Smitherman had developed a reputation as a man who fought for racial justice, as it was his investigation into the 1917 racial violence in Dewey that resulted in the governor's order to arrest dozens of White men – including the town's mayor. Under Smitherman's leadership, the *Tulsa Star* openly praised Black citizens in Shawnee and Muskogee who organized and armed themselves to protect fellow African Americans from White lynch mobs. Smitherman once personally acted to save a young Black man from being lynched in Bristow and he would later play an important role in the Tulsa Race Riot, ultimately fleeing Tulsa because of White antagonism towards his outspokenness and editorial leadership.¹⁴⁵

On the other hand, Tulsa's two major White newspapers played a role not only in inciting Tulsans to racial violence during the late 1910s and early 1920s, but in shaping how incidents of racial violence actually played out. This was especially true of the more inflammatory *Tulsa Tribune*. At the time of Belton's lynching, the *Tribune* was in the early stages of an anti-crime campaign that took the form of frequent editorials highlighting prostitution, murder, and even police corruption as pressing issues that

¹⁴⁴ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 45; Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 52; Mary E. Jones Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, 7-8.

¹⁴⁵ O'Dell, "Protecting His Race", 305; Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, 19; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Smitherman, Andrew J."; *The Tulsa Star*, August 24, 1918.

Tulsans needed to address. Crime was likely a problem in a Prohibition-era city like Tulsa that had popped up practically overnight. But it is also likely that the *Tribune* exaggerated circumstances and embellished details in order to compete with its more cautious and established morning-press rival, the *Tulsa Daily World*.¹⁴⁶

The perceived relationship between African Americans and urban crime goes back at least as far as the Reconstruction Era. In Atlanta, for example, racial animosity compelled Whites to blame African Americans for crime and vice in the city during the late 1860s and early 1870s. Thousands of escaped and freed slaves had flocked to Atlanta during this period, and this large influx of freedpeople caused a great deal of anger and discomfort for the city's White population. These feelings were exacerbated by fresh memories of General Sherman's burning of the city and the prolonged presence of occupying Union troops, some of which were Black. Combined with the conscious disruption of the Southern racial hierarchy on the part of the Union Army and the Freedmen's Bureau, Confederate defeat in the Civil War led many White Atlantans to blame Black domestic workers for the spread of disease and to associate nightlife hubs like Decatur Street with crime, immorality, and interracial sex. Most of the connections White Atlantans tried to draw between crime and the presence of African Americans were shaky at best, and completely fabricated at worst. A broader, more plausible explanation for the supposed increase of urban disorder or crime in Reconstructed Atlanta is that it was the result of the social upheaval and economic

¹⁴⁶ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 54-55. Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 2-3.

devastation brought to the city by the Civil War, and not simply because of the increased presence of free Blacks.¹⁴⁷

However, the tendency for Whites to conjure associations between African-American migrants and urban crime was not limited to the South, and the associations certainly did not end with Reconstruction in 1877. In Northern cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York – which did not receive their largest waves of Black migrants until the early twentieth century – both public policy and individual prejudices reflected the idea that African Americans were often the root cause of crime and social disorder. In fact, large swaths of American law and custom stem from a grave mismeasurement of the relationship between African Americans and criminality. In what Khalil Girban Muhammad has deemed the condemnation of Blackness, the rise of Jim Crow segregation as a guiding principle in American life was strongly associated with faulty connections between African Americans and crime.¹⁴⁸

Compared to those in older, more established urban areas, White Tulsans were slow to act on any conclusion that the presence of African Americans was the root cause of urban crime and disorder. Perhaps because of its overall wealth, its quick population growth, or of the relative wealth and status of its African-American

¹⁴⁷ See Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) throughout, but especially 168-218. Similar circumstances played out in New Orleans with its Storyville District, although the racial dynamics of New Orleans were admittedly more complex than those in Atlanta.

¹⁴⁸ See Khalil Girban Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), throughout, but especially 1-15. See also Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) and George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890- 1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994).

community, Tulsa never seriously scapegoated Greenwood for the city's perceived crime problem during the 1910s. In a city like Tulsa, with virtually no history of Blacks and Whites living closely in master-slave or master-servant relationships, blaming African Americans for the majority of the city's criminal activity would have been illogical, because African Americans made up such a small minority of the city's population. Furthermore, accusing Blacks of being the source of the city's crime might have implied interracial contact forbidden by Jim Crow segregation.¹⁴⁹

But in the spring of 1921, public opinion about Tulsa's crime problem began to change. And once again, the *Tulsa Tribune* was at the center of the controversy. In May, at the height of the *Tribune's* anti-crime editorials and investigations, a group of White pastors, judges, and detectives carried out an undercover investigation of Tulsa's night life. They reportedly found large quantities of alcohol, illegal at the time because of Prohibition. But more importantly, they discovered clubs and dance halls where young Black men and young White women were singing, dancing, and possibly even having interracial sex. The *Tulsa Tribune* covered the story as if it were an organized crime ring of interracial prostitution and alcohol sale. The degree to which interracial sex and drinking was actually taking place in Tulsa at the time is debatable, but the *Tribune* reveled in the story's details – likely outraging and revolting its White readership. Then, only a week before the Tulsa Race Riot, two separate incidents of prisoners breaking out of the Tulsa jail added to the growing hysteria in the city. White Tulsans in favor of vigilante justice likely saw these escapes as further justification for

¹⁴⁹ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 49-50, 54-56; Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 5.

mob violence. If the jail could not keep murderers and robbers from escaping, then it seemed more acceptable for everyday citizens to take justice into their own hands.¹⁵⁰

As May 1921 wore on, Tulsa's White community increasingly blamed Tulsa's crime problem on African Americans. Most importantly, this shifting of blame occurred at the same time that Black Oklahomans in the Tulsa area were repeatedly arming and organizing themselves in efforts to stop White lynch mobs. This determination on the part of African Americans flew in the face of Tulsa's judges, sheriff, and police chief – all of whom seemed increasingly permissive of lynch mobs as a solution to what the influential *Tulsa Tribune* identified as a pressing issue. Amidst an environment of shootings, lynch mobs, and daring jailbreaks, an encounter between a young Black man named Dick Rowland and a young White woman named Sarah Page sparked what has become known as the Tulsa Race Riot.

Interracial Sex, Lynching, the *Tulsa Tribune*, and the Outbreak of Violence

In the rush to assess the massive amounts of property loss and destruction that made the Tulsa Race Riot one of the worst breakdowns of civil order in American history, many historians and scholars overlook the degree to which the early stages of the Riot were actually quite commonplace throughout the United States. The events of the first few hours of the disturbance – in which a Black man was taken into custody for an alleged crime against a White person – are remarkably similar to thousands of other lynching cases. Where Tulsa's narrative departs from others, obviously, is the point at which the White lynch mob transformed into a deputized militia, burning and looting

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

almost all of the African-American district. Despite all the destruction, property loss, and murder that occurred long after the White mob had forgotten about Dick Rowland, the initial spark of the Tulsa Race Riot came from a mob of White men being denied the opportunity to lynch a Black man.

After some kind of encounter between Dick Rowland and Sarah Page on May 30, 1921 in a downtown Tulsa elevator, a clerk rushed to the source of the young woman's screams. Evidently he arrived at the conclusion that a Black man had attempted to sexually assault her, although there is no official record of what Page actually told the clerk or later police about what happened between her and Rowland. Word spread quickly that a Black man had attempted to sexually assault a White woman in downtown Tulsa. This news was controversial because the city of Tulsa had been primed for an outburst of racial violence in the preceding weeks and months, stemming from the sensationalistic reporting of the *Tulsa Tribune* and the resulting racialization of White Tulsans' public opinion on crime in the city.¹⁵¹

More so, the allegations against Rowland were controversial because of the explosive nature of the subject of interracial sex and rape in the early twentieth century. And by no means was Tulsa, or Oklahoma more generally, the only place where interracial sex and Black rape were tense subjects. In 1915, one of the most divisive films in American history began screening in theaters: *The Birth of A Nation*. Based on Thomas Dixon's book *The Clansman*, the movie is one of a small number of film adaptations of what has become known as Lost Cause literature, which was a

¹⁵¹ Loren Gill, "The Tulsa Race Riot" (Master's Thesis, University of Tulsa, 1946), 21-22; Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 56-57.

movement of Southern White writers, poets, and playwrights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who sought to romanticize the antebellum South and mourn the decline of their supposedly ideal society. *Birth of A Nation*, however, depicted African Americans in an extremely dichotomous fashion: either dumb, loyal slaves or violent, sexually aggressive beasts who sought to take advantage of Reconstruction policy and their new positions in the Union military in order to gain sexual access to young White women.¹⁵²

The film polarized audiences all over the nation. African Americans, of course, were appalled by its racial politics. Some of the first large-scale campaigns of the N.A.A.C.P. were aimed at protesting the film and opposing its message. Some Whites were also disgusted by the film's brazen portrayal of interracial sex and rape, although many across the nation – but especially in the South – praised the film for its heroic depiction of the Ku Klux Klan's role in ending Reconstruction.¹⁵³

It is extremely likely that Tulsans had the opportunity to view *The Birth of a Nation* at some point during the mid-1910s in any of Tulsa's several movie theaters. The direct impact of *The Birth of a Nation* on the Tulsa Race Riot is impossible to measure, but the film and its reception it act as thermometers for America's race relations in the late 1910s and early 1920s. The film's release preceded – and likely

¹⁵² For more on the impact of *The Birth of A Nation* on American race relations during the WWI/post-WWI era, see Michele Faith Wallace, "The Good Lynching and 'The Birth of a Nation': Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow", *Cinema Journal* 43 (Autumn 2003), 85-104; Stephen Weinberger, "'The Birth of a Nation' and the Making of the NAACP", *Journal of American Studies* 45 (February 2011), 77-93; Paul Polgar, "Fighting Lightning with Fire: Black Boston's Battle Against 'The Birth of a Nation'", *Massachusetts Historical Review* 10 (2008), 84-113; and Ron Briley, "Hollywood's Reconstruction and the Persistence of Historical Mythmaking", *The History Teacher* 41 (August 2008), 453-468.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

helped to create – an era of urban race riots and Black militancy, two developments which collided in Tulsa during the summer of 1921.

Because of the national and local climate regarding race and sex in the early 1920s, news of the allegation against Dick Rowland spread quickly throughout Tulsa. Prominent Black attorney Buck Franklin, father of groundbreaking African-American historian John Hope Franklin, was in a courtroom on recess when he first heard the news of the allegation against Rowland. Franklin remembered hearing other lawyers in the room utter phrases like “I don’t believe a damn word of it” and “Why, I know that boy and have known him a good while. That’s not in him.”¹⁵⁴ Franklin seems to have generally agreed with them, as he went on about his day’s business assuming the controversy would die down and the case would be handled properly. It was later, when the chaos began to break out, that Franklin realized the allegations he had heard earlier in the day were as serious as they turned out to be.

Unsurprisingly, the editors of the *Tulsa Tribune* quickly caught wind of what supposedly happened in the elevator. Because the *Tribune* came out in the afternoon and the *Tulsa Daily World* came out in the morning, the *Tribune* was the first Tulsa paper to break the news. In at least one of its May 30th editions, the *Tribune* ran an article titled “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator”.¹⁵⁵ This article is often remembered as playing a role in the growing racial hysteria in the city, because of the provocative and sensationalistic manner with which it reported the allegation. The editor of the *Tribune*, for example, later admitted that some of the article’s specific details were

¹⁵⁴ Buck Colbert Franklin, *My Life and an Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 195- 196.

¹⁵⁵ Gill, “The Tulsa Race Riot”, 21-23.

completely false – like Sarah Page’s face having been scratched and her clothes having been torn.¹⁵⁶ But given Tulsa’s atmosphere of mob violence and racial tension in May 1921 and the *Tribune*’s reputation as a sensational anti-crime newspaper, it is difficult to imagine the immediate effects of this story as being anything but inflammatory.

There is no question about the incendiary effects of another article that apparently ran in that same issue. Many contemporary Tulsans, Black and White, remember this editorial with feelings of anger and shock. Mary E. Jones Parrish summarized the text of the article as “the usual ‘Lynching is feared if the victim is caught’”.¹⁵⁷ As was often the case with editorials on the subject, other contemporary Tulsans remembered the “To Lynch Negro To-Night” article as blurring the line between reporting an alleged crime and actually advocating vigilante justice.¹⁵⁸ An original copy of the infamous editorial titled “To Lynch Negro To-Night” has yet to surface, and it is likely that a deliberate attempt was made to destroy or remove it because of its call for White Tulsans to lynch Dick Rowland. The fact that someone tried to wipe the editorial from the record stands as damning evidence of the article’s influence. But it is not difficult to imagine the kinds of implications a newspaper editorial – titled as such – would have had at that exact moment. Once again, the *Tulsa Tribune* had found itself as a major player in a local controversy involving crime and vigilante justice.¹⁵⁹

On May 31st, the day after the encounter between Rowland and Page, Tulsans acted on their feelings of fear and anger, stirred up in large part by the reporting and

¹⁵⁶ Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 4-5.

¹⁵⁷ Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 59.

¹⁵⁹ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 58-59; Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 3-5.

advocacy of the *Tulsa Tribune*. Knowing the severity of the allegations that would be leveled against him, Dick Rowland had been in hiding at the home of his adopted mother since fleeing the Drexel Building the day before.¹⁶⁰ At this time, there were very few accusations that that could generate more rage against an African-American man than an accusation of sexual assault on a White woman. And Tulsa seemed especially primed for an outburst of racial violence, given the racial climate of the city and the fact that it had mostly avoided the lynchings that afflicted the South and the race riots that struck urban areas in the North and Midwest.

But despite the controversial nature of the allegation and the generally tense nature of the city's race relations at the time, Tulsa law enforcement seemed to handle the situation well, at least initially. First, the police department decided to send both Black and White officers to arrest Rowland.¹⁶¹ This move was likely intended to calm fears of both Whites and Blacks. Whites might have feared lenient treatment or foul play had it been only the Black officer who took Rowland into custody, and African Americans might have been distrustful of a lone White officer venturing into Greenwood to arrest a Black man on a sketchy charge. Second, relatively new Tulsa County Sheriff Willard M. McCullough demonstrated significant determination to keep another lynching from occurring in the city. He positioned heavily-armed guards around Rowland, who was detained on the very top floor of the Tulsa County Courthouse. He then attempted to talk down the White lynch mob that had been growing throughout the evening, although his success was limited. Most important of all, McCullough turned away

¹⁶⁰ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 57.

¹⁶¹ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 57; Gill, "The Tulsa Race Riot", 21-22. In the "The Tulsa Race Riot", Loren Gill claimed that both officers sent to arrest Rowland were Black.

several groups of White men who demanded he turn over Rowland to be lynched.¹⁶²

McCullough's integrity in this early instance should not be overlooked, despite the chaos and injustice that was to come throughout the night and on the next day.

While McCullough was successful in keeping the White mob from lynching Rowland, Tulsa's law enforcement was not ultimately successful in defusing the situation outside the courthouse. Two events seemed to have angered the White mob more than anything else. First was the refusal on the part of Sheriff McCullough and other law enforcement officials to allow them to lynch Rowland. Second – and more important – was that Tulsa's Black men made an armed show of force in order to send a message to the White mob that they would not lynch Rowland easily.

As rumors spread and the lynch mob outside the courthouse grew larger throughout the evening, not all of Greenwood's residents agreed on what to do. It is unlikely that all the men in Greenwood were in favor of arming themselves and going downtown to face the lynch mob. More cautious, well-connected Greenwood residents attempted to get in touch with Tulsa officials and Black Tulsa police officers in order to better understand the situation. But a significant number of Black men – probably at least two dozen – armed themselves and walked straight up to the courthouse to offer their services in protecting Rowland. Their offer was turned down, of course, but the men refused to leave until they received verbal confirmation from law enforcement leadership that Rowland would be protected. Then they returned to their cars and drove back to Greenwood.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 60. Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 5.

¹⁶³ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 60-61; Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 5-6.

This armed show of force by the men of Greenwood is what drove the White mob to begin clearly moving towards activities defined as criminal and riotous. Members of the mob were evidently surprised at Greenwood's strong display of armed solidarity with Dick Rowland. Because of the strength of White supremacy and Jim Crow's tight grip on Oklahoma at this time, the White mob likely assumed Tulsa's African-American population would passively accept whatever fate awaited the alleged criminal. They may have anticipated some resistance, but surely they did not foresee carloads of armed Black men defiantly marching past them to offer protection for Rowland.

The display of force and solidarity on the part of some of Greenwood's Black men was a turning point in the developments of that day because it compelled many members of the White mob to go home and get their guns. While it is likely that some of the White men in the courthouse mob were already armed, the vast majority of them did not attempt to obtain firearms until after the armed Black men had arrived and left.¹⁶⁴ It was at this point that many members of the White mob went home to get their guns and then came back to the courthouse. The situation escalated more quickly once these men returned with weapons. A smaller contingent of White men made for the downtown National Guard Armory and attempted to break in and steal guns and ammunition. A shouting match between guardsmen and members of the mob resulted in most of the men giving up and leaving, but Whites later looted guns and ammunitions from White-owned pawn shops and sporting goods stores throughout downtown Tulsa.

¹⁶⁴ Gill, "The Tulsa Race Riot", 23. Gill claims that the crowd of Whites was unarmed at this point, and that most people in the crowd were merely onlookers and not attempting to lynch Rowland.

In ensuing weeks, the *Tulsa Tribune* ran special notices requesting that those who had stolen weapons from businesses to “please be kind enough to return them”.¹⁶⁵

White Deputization and the Invasion of Greenwood

Later in the evening of May 31st, once shots were fired outside the courthouse, White men became temporary officers of the law. As a group of Black men made their way back to Greenwood after a second trip downtown to ensure Rowland’s safety, exchanges of gunfire between Whites and Blacks resulted in the almost immediate deputizing of several hundred White men and boys, some apparently as young as fifteen or even ten years old. Tulsa police provided hundreds of White males – many of whom only minutes earlier had been members of a would-be lynch mob – with guns, ribbons, and badges. There appears to have been no cohesive goal or logic in swearing in so many Whites, other than the infamous instruction a police officer gave White bricklayer Laurel G. Buck: “Get a gun and get a nigger”.¹⁶⁶

Here lies the most direct connection between lynching and the Tulsa Race Riot. In both instances, White men received the endorsement of law enforcement in taking violent, illegal action against African Americans without any kind of trial by jury. White Oklahomans took the law into their own hands in lynching Black Oklahomans, but Tulsa’s law enforcement literally handed the law over to White Tulsans during the Race Riot.

¹⁶⁵ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 61-62; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Tulsa Race Riot”; Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, 34; *Tulsa Tribune*, June 4, 1921.

¹⁶⁶ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 64, 76; Gill, “The Tulsa Race Riot”, 28; Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 9-10; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. “Tulsa Race Riot”; Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 54; Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, 39-40.

The prevailing justification among Whites for such an unorthodox, large-scale outbreak of racially-motivated destruction and killing seems to have been the idea of putting down a “negro uprising” or defending White Tulsa from an “invasion” by Blacks.¹⁶⁷ But the reality of what happened during the Tulsa Race Riot was exactly the opposite. In the same twisted White-supremacist logic that compelled White lynchers to act as jury, judge, and executioner against African Americans, White participants in the Riot evidently perceived any form of organized Black self-defense as an attack on the social standing and integrity of themselves as White citizens. Mary E. Jones Parrish wrote that the Riot occurred “because the men of Color rose up in defense of the law and to protect a fellow man from the hands of the lawless horde that had gathered around the jail.”¹⁶⁸ In the eyes of the White men and boys who waged open racial warfare against African Americans in the streets of Tulsa, reactionary Black self-defense was an affront to Whiteness – and especially White manhood. Thus, White Tulsans burned nearly all of Greenwood to the ground because African-Americans denied them the opportunity to illegally kill an alleged Black criminal.

As was often the case when White mobs lynched African Americans in Oklahoma, White men became de facto law officers during the Tulsa Race Riot. The inability or unwillingness of local law enforcement to prevent lynchings, along with the reluctance of the Oklahoma courts to charge lynchers with any crime, signaled the implicit support of lynching on the part of Oklahoma’s early-twentieth century White

¹⁶⁷ Gill, “The Tulsa Race Riot”, 28; Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 9; *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 69. The *Tulsa Daily World* also used the term “Black uprising” in its coverage of the August 1920 lynching of Claude Chandler in Oklahoma City; see *Tulsa Daily World*, August 31, 1920.

¹⁶⁸ Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, 6.

establishment. This was a passive endorsement of illegal activity, more of a conspiracy of silence and inaction than a proactive attempt to harm African Americans. But the deputizing of White men and boys during the 1921 Riot was an active attempt to do harm unto Greenwood and its citizens. Many of these White men and boys wore special deputy badges on their chests as they looted and burned Black homes and businesses. Some used guns that were property of the Tulsa police and National Guard to shoot, maim, and kill African Americans. On the morning of June 1st, when the invasion of Greenwood occurred in its most organized form, members of the Tulsa National Guard abandoned whatever thin degree of impartiality they had maintained the night before and actually aided the White invasion of the Greenwood District. ¹⁶⁹

These actions represent a staggering degree of culpability on the part of Tulsa's local government and National Guard units. Summarizing responsibility for the Riot, John Hope Franklin and Scott Ellsworth put it this way: "In some government participated in the deed. In some government performed the deed. In none did government prevent the deed. In none did government punish the deed." ¹⁷⁰ In the Tulsa Race Riot, the law sided with and supported the White mob.

Perhaps because of the degree to which the law sided with White Tulsans during the violence, scholars who wrote pioneering studies of the Riot have not devoted enough attention to how quickly the lynch mob transformed itself into an impromptu militia. ¹⁷¹ The show of force on the part of Tulsa's African-American men seemed to

¹⁶⁹ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 64, 76, 78-79; Gill, "The Tulsa Race Riot", 28; Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*, 9-10; Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, 39-40.

¹⁷⁰ John Hope Franklin and Scott Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 19.

¹⁷¹ Namely, Scott Ellsworth in *Death in a Promised Land*.

dramatically escalate the anger and resolve of the White lynch mob, which armed itself and broadened its intentions in response. In fact, there was never any serious effort to lynch Dick Rowland once gunfire broke out in front of the courthouse and the fighting began. A group of White men did gather around the courthouse close to midnight, shouting for Rowland to be lynched. But they never tried to break into the courthouse.¹⁷² By the final hours of May 31st, the vast majority of White participants in the pogrom had expanded their intentions from merely lynching one Black man to waging open warfare against African Americans in the streets. Gradual White victory in this open warfare resulted in the near-total destruction of the Greenwood District, lending credence to the theory that White participants in the Riot either genuinely believed or fooled themselves into thinking they were putting down a “Negro uprising”.

This rapid increase in the scale of violence of the Tulsa Race Riot is evidence of the power of lynching as a social ritual in early-twentieth century America, and especially in rapidly-growing early-twentieth century Tulsa. In many ways, lynching was thought of as an act of catharsis for White Americans. When racial animosity built up, law enforcement and criminal justice systems often looked the other way, granting White citizens – usually men – temporary freedom to commit assault and murder in order to send a message of racial superiority. One way to understand the Tulsa Race Riot, then, is as the result of White men being denied what Carter Blue Clark called the “community catharsis” of lynching – in Tulsa’s spring 1921 environment that seemed to be increasingly accepting of it.¹⁷³ On one side, many of Tulsa’s police chiefs, city

¹⁷² Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 65.

¹⁷³ Carter Blue Clark, “A History of The Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma”, 16.

officials, and newspapers (especially the *Tulsa Tribune*) either implied or voiced direct support for mob justice. Standing symbolically and literally between Dick Rowland's would-be lynchers and Rowland himself were armed men of Greenwood and dutiful law enforcement officers like Sherriff McCullough.

Like the Black men of Claude McKay's iconic 1919 poem "If We Must Die", many in Greenwood chose to take up arms against the White lynch mob and later against White men in the streets, knowing full well that they were outnumbered and outgunned. Some of the men of Greenwood chose to "face the murderous, cowardly pack, pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back".¹⁷⁴ Given Tulsa's racial history and racial climate at the time, few symbolic actions other than such a firm Black denial of the White "right" to lynch an African-American man could have prompted the racially-motivated violence and near-total destruction for which the Tulsa Race Riot is remembered.

Lynching in the Aftermath of the Tulsa Race Riot

The late 1990s and early 2000s brought a renewed interest in the Tulsa Race Riot from scholars and legal experts. Around the same time, historians began devoting special attention to lynching and other forms of racially-motivated mob violence. A small number of scholars have attempted to connect the phenomenon of lynching to the events of the Tulsa Race Riot, and those who have done so have often focused on lynching's relevance to the early stage of the Riot.¹⁷⁵ Lynching, or at least the threat of lynching, had a significant impact on the way the Tulsa Riot played out. But what is

¹⁷⁴ Claude McKay, "If We Must Die", in *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton & Company, 2004), 1007.

¹⁷⁵ Specifically, those scholars who contributed to the *Tulsa Race Riot Report* of 2001: John Hope Franklin, Scott Ellsworth, Alfred Brophy, etc.

truly remarkable is how the Riot seems to have impacted lynching in Oklahoma in the ensuing years. For a variety of reasons, lynchings of African Americans in Oklahoma decreased dramatically following 1921. While the causes for this drop-off are various, many of the causes can be directly linked back to the Riot itself. The years following the Riot saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma, the state government's crackdown on mob violence, and a general hesitance on the part of Black Oklahomans to assert themselves like they had during the late 1910s. All three of these factors can be linked with the Tulsa Race Riot and the massive impact it had on the state's racial climate.

From 1910 to 1920, White mobs lynched twenty-eight African Americans in Oklahoma. With twenty-eight out of the overall fifty, this decade alone took a significant majority of all the Black lynching victims in Oklahoma's combined territorial and state histories. The years of 1913-1916 were especially violent, followed by the years of 1917 and 1918, which had just one African American lynching victim each. But before the 1920 flare-up, which produced two Black lynching victims, 1919 had seen no African-Americans lynched. And despite all the controversy and tumult of what happened in Tulsa during the summer of 1921, White mobs did not lynch a single Black Oklahoman in that year. The lynchings of Jacob Brooks in Oklahoma City and Dallas Sowell in Eufaula took place in 1922 and 1923, respectively. Oklahoma then went seven years before its very last Black lynching – that of Henry Argo in Chickasha in 1930 (see Table 1).

While Oklahoma's lynching record seems to have already been trailing off by the time of the Tulsa Race Riot, the psychological effects of the Riot likely had an impact on the state's racial climate – which in turn affected the frequency of lynching. The Riot

may have had a muting effect on race relations in Oklahoma. As years went by, Black Tulsans learned not to speak openly about what happened in the summer of 1921, for fear that it would happen again. In the years following the Riot, African Americans may have been understandably hesitant to assert themselves the way they had in the late 1910s, and Whites may have been less inclined to send a message of racial superiority because of the message the Riot had already sent so strongly.

Related to lynching in Oklahoma, another direct result of the Tulsa Race Riot was the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. While the Klan had a limited presence in Tulsa before 1921, KKK leaders used the Riot – or at least their impression of the Riot – as a springboard, a recruiting tool, and moral justification for the Klan itself. One Klan speaker, visiting Tulsa from Atlanta in August of 1921, claimed it “was the best thing that ever happened to Tulsa.”¹⁷⁶ By the mid-1920s, the Ku Klux Klan had reached its peak influence in Tulsa, with significant numbers of Klansmen embedded in city and county government. And those officials who were not actual Klan members were often sympathetic to Klan philosophy and goals. While the KKK was not directly responsible for the Tulsa Race Riot or individual lynchings in any way, its members were known for kidnappings, whippings, and other forms of physical abuse and harassment. The Klan targeted not just African Americans, but also Jews, Catholics, labor organizers, and anyone considered to be engaged in immoral activities.¹⁷⁷ Having such an openly racist and violent organization in power in Tulsa would have made White Tulsans feel less of

¹⁷⁶ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 48; Clark, “A History of Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma, 46-47.

¹⁷⁷ Ellsworth, *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 46-48; Johnson, *Black Wall Street*, 20-24; “The Masked Floggers of Tulsa”, 17; “Constitution Week in Oklahoma”, 12-13; “From the Oklahoma Front”, *The New Republic* (October 17, 1923), 202-205.

a need to carry out mob violence, and might have made African Americans less confrontational about racial issues. The Klan's resurgence in Tulsa took place around the same time that KKK membership grew throughout the country, and especially in regions outside the South.¹⁷⁸

By the mid-1920s, the KKK had become so deeply entrenched in Tulsa's government and law enforcement that only a crackdown on the part of Oklahoma's state government had the power to decrease Ku Klux Klan influence. Trying to combat the violence, corruption, and generally embarrassing reputation that the KKK brought upon their state, Governors J.A. Robertson (1919-1923), Jack Walton (1923), and Martin E. Trapp (1923-1927) all made serious efforts to investigate and prosecute Klan members. Their success was often limited, evidenced most extremely by Walton's impeachment at the hands of Klan-backed congressmen in 1923. But along with the severe economic downturns of the late 1920s, Oklahoma governors' usage of martial law and condemnatory public statements, were ultimately enough to remove the Klan from significant power and influence in Oklahoma.¹⁷⁹ While the goal was to cut down on secret societies and vigilantism in general and not necessarily to eliminate lynchings, this crackdown also had a limiting effect on mob violence in the state that did not directly involve the Klan. Any masked nighttime attempt at vigilante justice – like some lynchings – now brought the danger of being associated with the Klan. Thus, mob

¹⁷⁸ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Ku Klux Klan"; Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*. For more on the Oklahoma Klan within the context of national Klan resurgence, see Clark, *A History of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma*.

¹⁷⁹ *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Robertson, James Brooks Ayers", "Walton, John Calloway", "Trapp, Martin Edwin"; Johnson, *Black Wall Street*, 20-24.

violence against African Americans decreased as state government sought to eradicate the Oklahoma Klan.

Finally, it is important to note another connection between lynching and the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Riot. For Tulsa, specifically, the Riot had traumatic effects similar to those of a high-profile lynching. As mentioned previously, the invasion and destruction of Greenwood had the effect of muting or silencing many of the racial tensions that brought it forth in the first place. And like in Henryretta in 1907 and Dewey in 1917, armed Black resistance against White mobs often resulted in those mobs uprooting or displacing all or significant portions of Black populations by way of intimidation or outright violence. Such was the case in Tulsa, from which an unknown but likely significant number of Greenwood residents were either forced to relocate in the aftermath of the destruction, or fled the city during the chaos and never returned.¹⁸⁰

Unlike the 1910s, the 1920s was not a decade in which Tulsa's Black community had a great deal of optimism about its economic stability or its relations with Whites. Greenwood's vigilance against the threat of White lynching mobs had made Black Tulsans successful in deterring mob violence aimed at individuals in their community. But ultimately, their vigilance and assertiveness only allowed the racial animosity of White Tulsans to build up and explode all at once. In the wake of that explosion of racial animosity, many African Americans living in the district formerly known as Greenwood were understandably fearful that the events of 1921 would repeat themselves. Generally speaking, there was not the kind of statewide racial solidarity

¹⁸⁰ Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 89-94; Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, 93-95; *Tulsa Race Riot Report*, 68, 73.

that compelled Black citizens to take up arms in defense of each other. Many of these fears and struggles were rooted, at least partially, in the Tulsa Race Riot and the threat of lynching that had figured so prominently in its spark.

CONCLUSION

My father is Black. He and both my paternal aunts were raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Before they were born, many of my ancestors on my father's side lived in the Greenwood area of the Mississippi Delta. As Black folks do, we have a big family reunion every other summer. Because my distant relatives are spread all over the country, we rotate the locations for our biennial reunions. Most recently, the Mitchell-Buchanan family got together in Greenwood, Mississippi in July of 2013, right before I started graduate school. About once per decade, we hold our reunion in Greenwood, where we spend time catching up with one another and eating good food – as usual – but also spend time exploring our family history.

At the beginning of that summer, I heard word that family members would be doing research on specific ancestors and putting together family history presentations. I chose my great-great-grandfather, Cornelius Mitchell, and began emailing relatives and searching for census records to piece together the story of who he was. But all along, I was most excited about conducting a family history interview with a cousin of mine. Her name is Edna Earl Morris, and she was 99 years old that summer. She is now 101. Like many women on my father's side of the family, she has aged remarkably well and shows virtually no signs of passing away anytime soon. When I sat down to interview her in Greenwood, I was a bit unsure of what I wanted her to talk about. I set up the

camera and began asking Ms. Morris a few basic questions about my great-great-grandfather Cornelius (her grandfather) and what it was like growing up in Greenwood.

After recounting several of the major events of her life – including becoming a schoolteacher, moving to California during World War II to work as a Rosie the Riveter, and “getting kicked out the Baptist Church” for her love of dancing – Edna Earl’s tone and excitement began to slow. “We had a tragedy in our family”, she said, as she began to talk about my great-great-uncle Harvey Mitchell, who in 1929 was living near Greenwood and working as an automobile painter. Harvey was the only Black man working at that particular automobile plant. “There was some jealousy” of Harvey among the White workers at the plant, according to Edna Earl. They resented the fact that the only Black man at the factory got to work as a painter. After some time, the jealousy caused these White co-workers to decide that Harvey “had to go”, in the words of Ms. Morris. Edna Earl went on to explain how White workers kidnapped my uncle Harvey and took him out to Teoc, a small unincorporated community about seven miles away from Greenwood. They originally plotted to kill him there, but decided to abandon that plan because “he was so well-known out there that they couldn’t do what they intended to do”.¹⁸¹

Fearing the response of the Black residents of Teoc, Harvey’s co-workers kidnapped him again about a month later, this time taking him out near Charleston, Mississippi, a little under fifty miles away from Greenwood. The kidnappers were certain they could accomplish their task because Harvey would not be recognized there.

¹⁸¹ Author interview with Edna Earl Morris, July 20, 2013.

Rubbing her hand across her forehead, my elderly cousin explained that Harvey's body was not found until several days after he had been murdered, when a group of children came across his corpse while they were out hunting for huckleberries. Not knowing who he was or how had been killed, the residents of Charleston buried my great-great-uncle. But my family members saw the newspaper story about a body having been found and they knew Harvey had been missing, so they made a trip up to Charleston to identify the body after it had been exhumed.

At this point, I asked Edna Earl if my family members knew who it was that lynched my uncle. "Yeah", she said, flatly. Not knowing what I now know about lynching in the South, I made the mistake of assuming justice would have been served. "And?" I prodded her, "Was there ever a trial?" Edna Earl gave me sharp look, shook her head, and said "No, no, no" repeatedly for about five seconds. She went on to explain how Harvey's lynching compelled many of my family members, including my great-great-grandfather, to leave Greenwood and move to St. Louis.¹⁸² Ever since I was a child, I had known that members of my father's side of the family lived in Mississippi before migrating to St. Louis, but until I conducted this interview I had no knowledge of my uncle Harvey's lynching or how my ancestors' experience with racial violence factored into their migration out of the South.

As my 99-year-old cousin sat across from me and told this tragic story, I began to imagine my own family history within the context of the Great Migration and African-American history, more generally. Like millions of other Black families, mine had left the

¹⁸² Ibid.

racial violence and economic oppression of the South for better opportunities in northern cities like St. Louis, Chicago, and New York. And like thousands of other Blacks, my great-great-uncle Harvey Mitchell lost his life at the hands of a murderous group of White lynchers who never saw their day in court.

A little over a month after my trip to Greenwood, I began studying African-American history as a graduate student at Oklahoma State. My historical methods course required a research project, and I was immediately drawn to the concept of lynching as I began to brainstorm. While my family connection to lynching does not explicitly include Oklahoma, I was nonetheless compelled to include my home state in a historical exploration of one of the darkest aspects of America's racial past. Beginning with the moment I sat down with my cousin Edna Earl for that interview, I began personally confronting the legacy of racial violence and lynching, trying to make broad historical sense of it even as I attempted to process how it impacted my family history.

My great-great-uncle was lynched by jealous White co-workers in 1929. Eighty-six years later, Oklahomans are still struggling to confront the legacy of racial identity, racial violence, and lynching in our shared history. In recent decades, several Oklahoma tribes have generated controversy by voting to formally exclude descendants of freedpeople from tribal membership, harkening back to Reconstruction-era questions of racial identity, freedom, and citizenship for Oklahomans with both Black and Native American heritage. In 1996, the Oklahoma legislature formed the Tulsa Race Riot Commission to study the causes and consequences of Greenwood's invasion. The result was the Tulsa Race Riot Report, completed in 2001, which condemned Tulsa's White populace and Tulsa law enforcement and National Guard for their role in the

murder and destruction which took place in the summer of 1921. The Race Riot Commission recommended reparations be paid to survivors of the violence, but no action was taken. In hopes of encouraging healing and racial reconciliation in Tulsa, the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park was built in 2009, along with the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation.

Elsewhere in the United States, broader questions about racial violence and the value of Black life have continued to divide Americans. The racial implications of Trayvon Martin's 2012 killing polarized virtually the entire nation, and recent movements against police killings of unarmed African Americans in places like Ferguson, Missouri and Cleveland, Ohio have continued to spur conversations about race, law, and justice in the United States. For the moment, Oklahoma is once again at the center of conversations about racial violence, as Tulsa County Sherriff's Office reserve deputy Robert Bates awaits the consequences of his lethal shooting of an unarmed Black man, Eric Harris.

Few of these conversations are new or unique in in any way. In different forms, they have occurred at nearly every stage of African-American history: in slavery, through Reconstruction, and during Jim Crow. Even now, as Americans of all races protest and debate police violence, old buzzwords and points of argument related to lynching have crept back into the discussion. Just as White Oklahomans blamed John Lee, Laura Nelson, and Dennis Simmons for their own deaths at the hands of White lynch mobs in the 1910s, Americans have blamed Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Eric Harris for their own deaths at the hands of White police officers in the 2010s.

As I have shown, the undercurrent running beneath all these conversations has been the question of the value of Black life. Are African Americans worthy of freedom? Are Blacks worthy of citizenship? Of protection? More simply, do our lives matter? To this final question, millions of modern protestors of various races have answered with a bold and succinct affirmative: “Black lives matter.” As a complement to modern activists and intellectuals who have given this answer, I offer this study as a historical testament to the degree to which Black people in the United States – specifically Oklahoma – have migrated, taken up arms, raised children, worshipped, and petitioned government in defiant declaration of the value of their lives and the dignity of their humanity.

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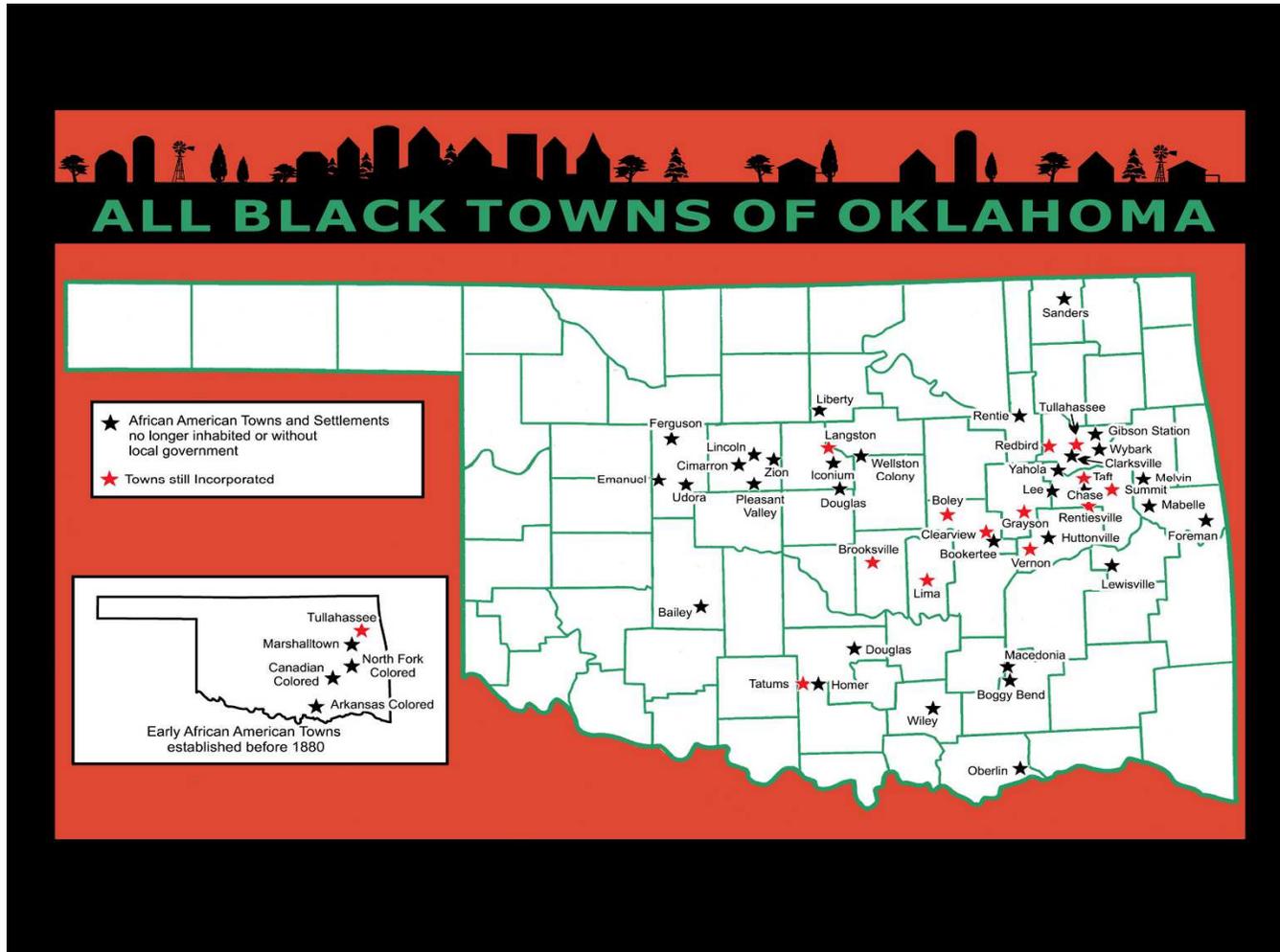
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Map 2: All-Black Towns of Oklahoma



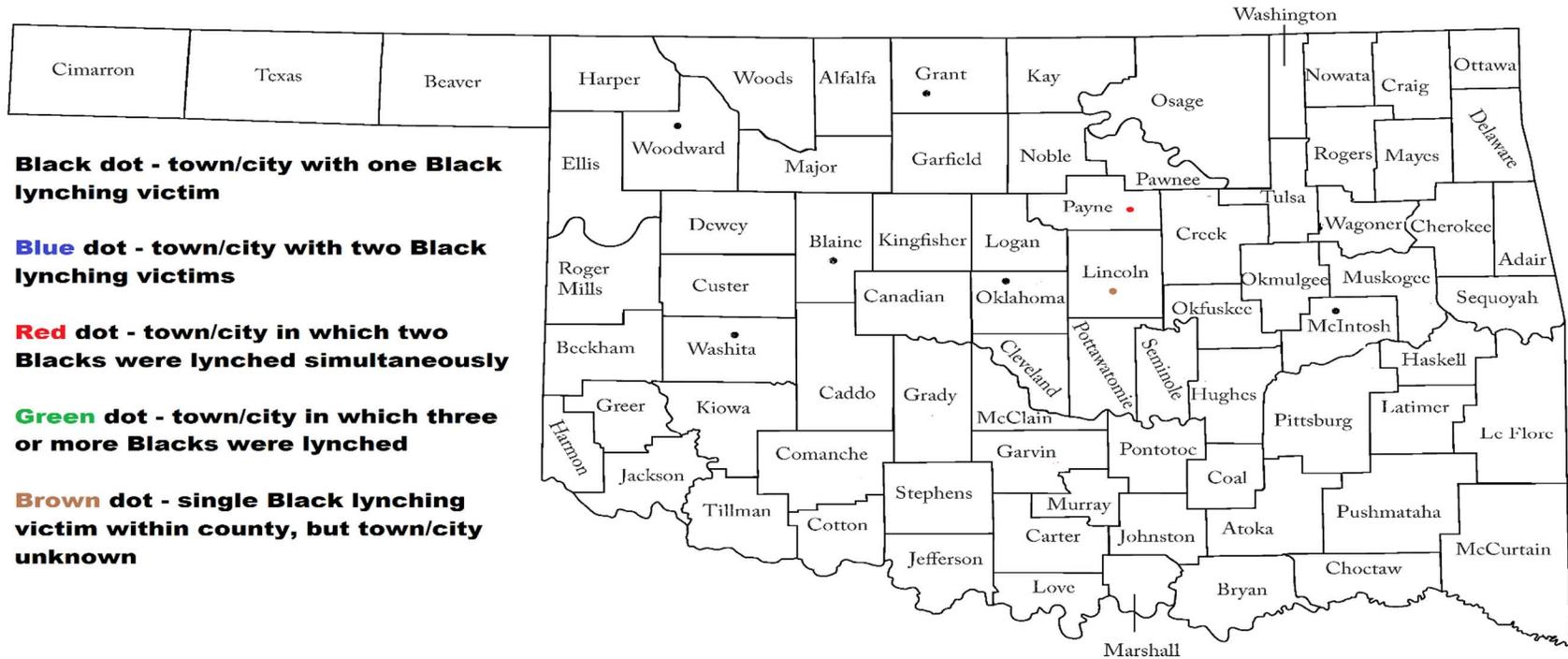
Source: Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division

Image 1: Freedpeople Camped at Fort Gibson to Enroll before Dawes Commission



Image Credit: Oklahoma Historical Society

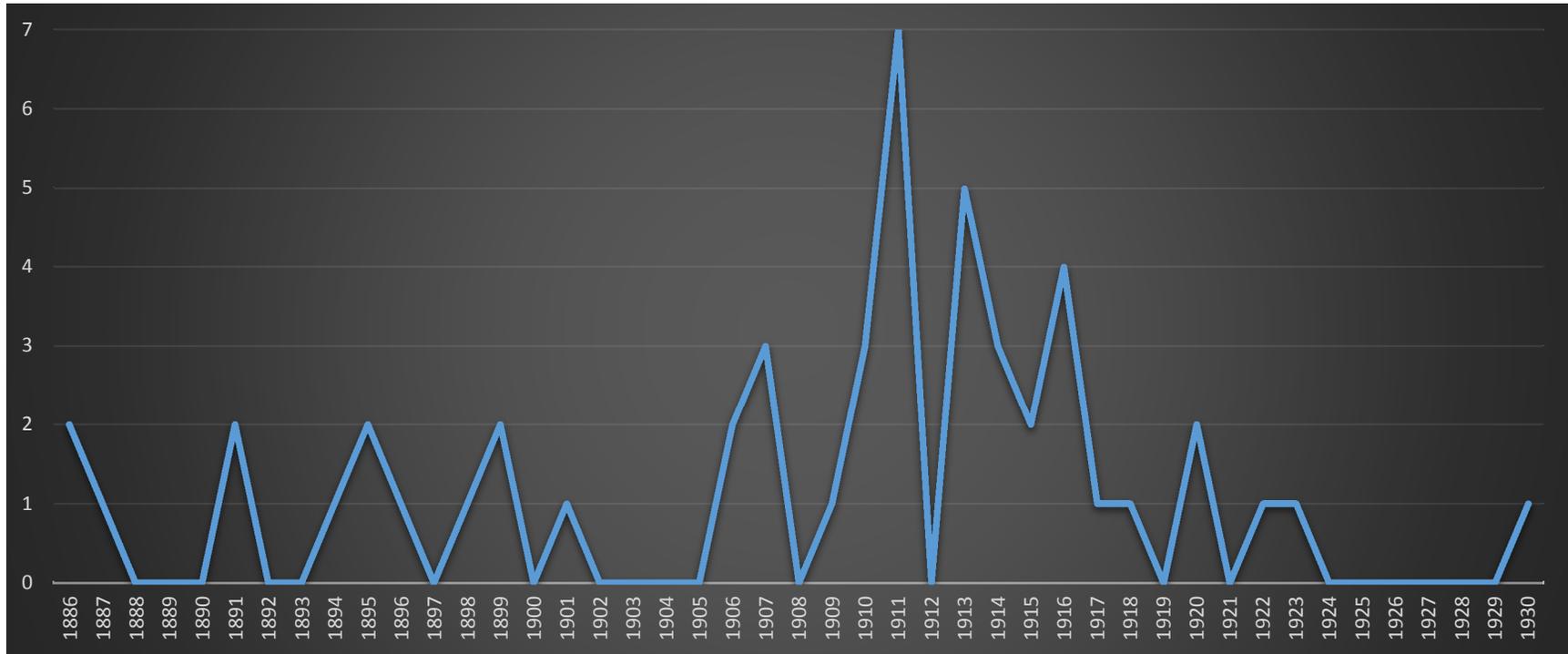
Map 3: Geographical Distribution of Oklahoma's Pre-Statehood African-American Lynchings



Source: Oklahoma Historical Society (edited with plotted points and legend)

Data compiled from the following sources: N.A.A.C.P., *30 Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (n.p.: n.p., 1919), 85-88; N.A.A.C.P. *Administrative File, Sub File – Lynching – Oklahoma, 1914-1936* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986); Mary Elizabeth Estes, “A Historical Survey of Lynchings in Oklahoma and Texas” (Master’s thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1942), 125-134; Monroe Work, “Lynching, Whites & Negroes, 1882-1968”, Tuskegee University Archives Online Repository; Charles N. Clark, *Lynchings in Oklahoma: Vigilantism and Racism in the Twin Territories and Oklahoma, 1830-1930* (n.p.: n.p., 2008), 137-142; various newspapers (see Bibliography for full listing).

Chart 1: African-American Lynching Victims in Oklahoma by Year, 1886-1930



Data compiled from the following sources: N.A.A.C.P., *30 Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (n.p.: n.p., 1919), 85-88; N.A.A.C.P. *Administrative File, Sub File – Lynching – Oklahoma, 1914-1936* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986); Mary Elizabeth Estes, “A Historical Survey of Lynchings in Oklahoma and Texas” (Master’s thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1942), 125-134; Monroe Work, “Lynching, Whites & Negroes, 1882-1968”, Tuskegee University Archives Online Repository; Charles N. Clark, *Lynchings in Oklahoma: Vigilantism and Racism in the Twin Territories and Oklahoma, 1830-1930* (n.p.: n.p., 2008), 137-142; various newspapers (see Bibliography for full listing).

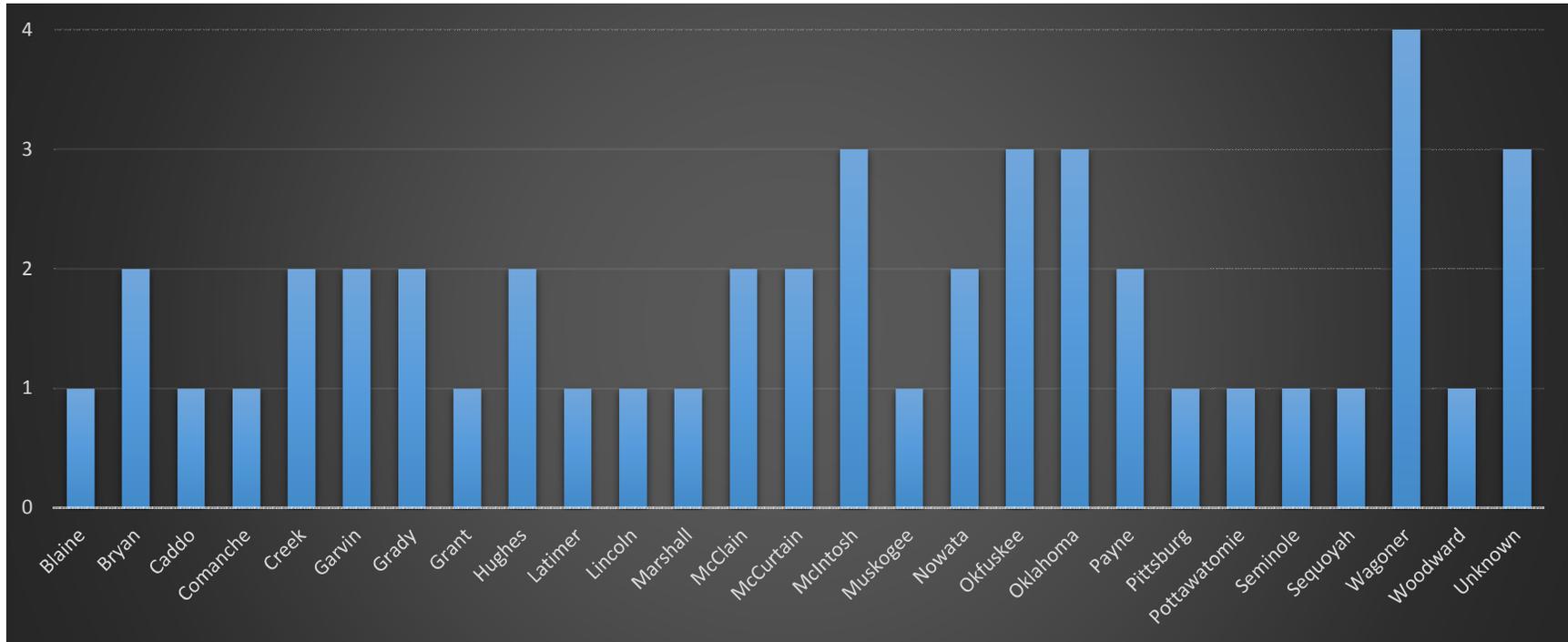
Map 4: Geographical Distribution of Oklahoma's Post-Statehood African-American Lynchings



Source: Oklahoma Historical Society (edited with plotted points and legend)

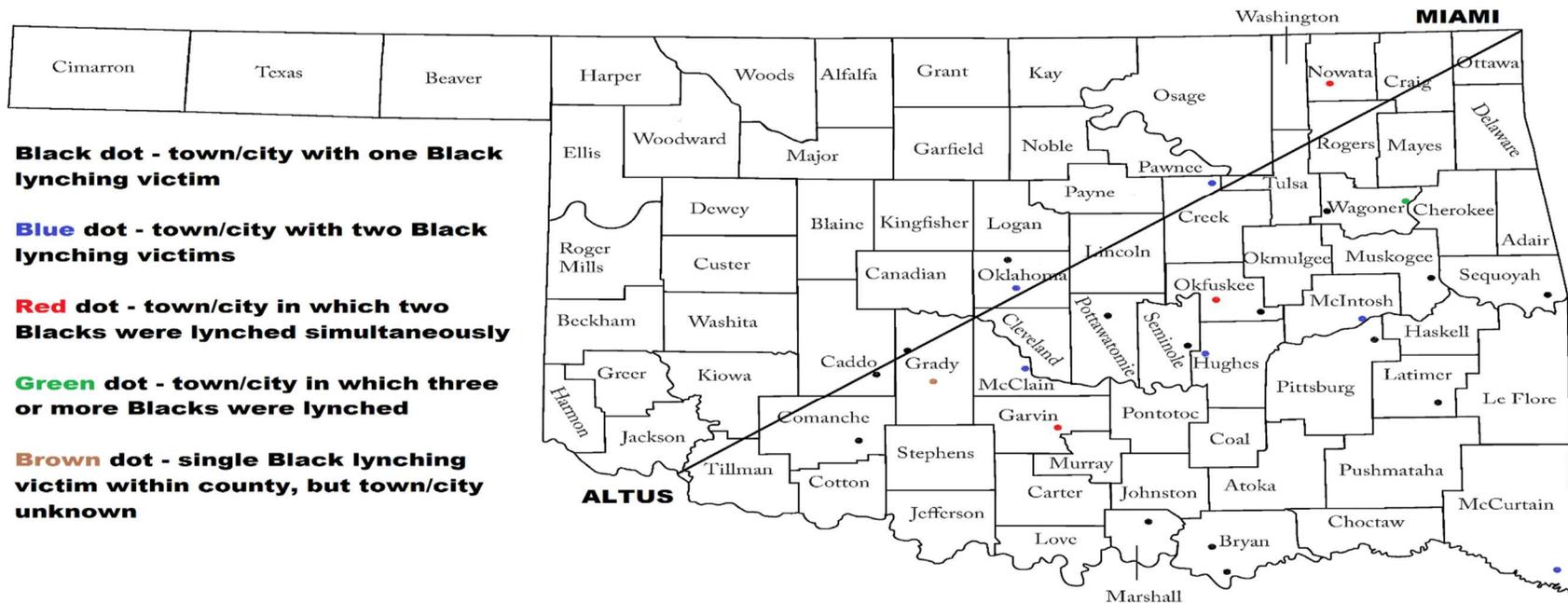
Data compiled from the following sources: N.A.A.C.P., *30 Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (n.p.: n.p., 1919), 85-88; N.A.A.C.P. *Administrative File, Sub File – Lynching – Oklahoma, 1914-1936* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986); Mary Elizabeth Estes, “A Historical Survey of Lynchings in Oklahoma and Texas” (Master’s thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1942), 125-134; Monroe Work, “Lynching, Whites & Negroes, 1882-1968”, Tuskegee University Archives Online Repository; Charles N. Clark, *Lynchings in Oklahoma: Vigilantism and Racism in the Twin Territories and Oklahoma, 1830-1930* (n.p.: n.p., 2008), 137-142; various newspapers (see Bibliography for full listing).

Chart 2: African-American Lynching Victims in Oklahoma by County, 1886-1930



Data compiled from the following sources: N.A.A.C.P., *30 Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (n.p.: n.p., 1919), 85-88; N.A.A.C.P. *Administrative File, Sub File – Lynching – Oklahoma, 1914-1936* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986); Mary Elizabeth Estes, “A Historical Survey of Lynchings in Oklahoma and Texas” (Master’s thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1942), 125-134; Monroe Work, “Lynching, Whites & Negroes, 1882-1968”, Tuskegee University Archives Online Repository; Charles N. Clark, *Lynchings in Oklahoma: Vigilantism and Racism in the Twin Territories and Oklahoma, 1830-1930* (n.p.: n.p., 2008), 137-142; various newspapers (see Bibliography for full listing).

Map 5: Post-Statehood African-American Lynchings with “Miami-Altus Line”



Source: Oklahoma Historical Society (edited with plotted points, a legend, and the Miami-Altus line)

Data compiled from the following sources: N.A.A.C.P., *30 Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (n.p.: n.p., 1919), 85-88; N.A.A.C.P. *Administrative File, Sub File – Lynching – Oklahoma, 1914-1936* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986); Mary Elizabeth Estes, “A Historical Survey of Lynchings in Oklahoma and Texas” (Master’s thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1942), 125-134; Monroe Work, “Lynching, Whites & Negroes, 1882-1968”, Tuskegee University Archives Online Repository; Charles N. Clark, *Lynchings in Oklahoma: Vigilantism and Racism in the Twin Territories and Oklahoma, 1830-1930* (n.p.: n.p., 2008), 137-142; various newspapers (see Bibliography for full listing).

Image 2: Lawrence ("L.D.") Nelson



Image credit: *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*

Image 3: The Burning of John Lee



Image credit: *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*

Table 1: African-American Lynching Victims in Oklahoma, 1886-1930

Year	Victim's Name	Date	Town/City	County	Allegation
1886	Richard Bullock	Dec 16	Unknown	Unknown	Cattle Theft
	Factor Jones	Dec 16	Unknown	Unknown	Cattle Theft
1887	Unknown	Jul 7	Lake Nest	Unknown	Horse Theft
1888					
1889					
1890					
1891	Unnamed	Mar 3	Woodward	Woodward	Rape
	Elrod Hudson	Mar 28	Russellville	Pittsburg	Incendiarium
1892					
1893					
1894	Unknown	Sep 26	Unknown	Lincoln	Horse Theft
1895	John Calvin	May 15	Ingalls	Payne	Informing
	William Dunn	May 15	Ingalls	Payne	Informing
1896	Ben Morris	Sep 15	Watonga	Blaine	Murder
1897					
1898	Peter Johnson	Oct 1	Edmond	Oklahoma	Larceny
1899	Gene Goodly	Apr 18	Pierce	McIntosh	Murder
	Taylor Kirk	Aug 2	Cloud Chief	Washita	Murder
1900					

1901	William Campbell	May 25	Pond Creek	Grant	Murder
1902					
1903					
1904					
1905					
1906	Unknown	May 23	Choctaw Nation	Grady	Rape
	Will Davis/John Brightworth	Jul 2	Womack	Unknown (I.T.)	Murder
1907	James Williams	Mar 31	Sterrett	Bryan	Attempted Rape
	Frank Bailey	Jul 16	Osage	Osage	Murder
	James Garden	Dec 24	Muskogee	Muskogee	Murder
1908					
1909	Sylvester Shennien	Jun 26	Wilburton	Latimer	Murder
1910	Thad Brown	Feb 2	Idabel	McCurtain	Murder
	Joseph Buckley	Aug 15	Weleetka	Okfuskee	Murder
	Unnamed	Nov 15	Mannford	Creek	Murder
1911	Laura Nelson	May 25	Okemah	Okfuskee	Murder
	Lawrence Nelson	May 25	Okemah	Okfuskee	Murder
	John Lee	Aug 13	Durant	Bryan	Murder

	Peter Carter	Aug 24	Purcell	McClain	Rape
	Edward Suddeth	Oct 22	Coweta	Wagoner	Murder
	Bud Walker	Dec 6	Mannford	Creek	Murder
	Sam Turner	Dec 31	Muldrow	Sequoyah	Murder
1912					
1913	Unnamed	Jan 2	Wagoner	Wagoner	Rape
	Dennis Simmons	Jun 13	Anadarko	Caddo	Murder
	Franklin Sanders	Aug 14	Pauls Valley	Garvin	Murder
	Henry Ralston	Aug 14	Pauls Valley	Garvin	Murder
	John Cudjo	Nov 4	Wewoka	Seminole	Murder
1914	Benjamin Dickerson	Jan 27	Purcell	McClain	Murder
	Marie Scott	Mar 31	Wagoner	Wagoner	Murder
	Crocket Williams	Aug 1	Eufaula	McIntosh	Murder
1915	Edward Berry	Aug 6	Shawnee	Pottawatomie	Rape
	George Washington	Sep 4	Wagoner	Wagoner	Attempted Rape
1916	Haskell Martin	Apr 3	Idabel	McCurta n	Rape
	Carl Dudley	Apr 9	Lawton	Comanch e	Murder
	Mark Foreman	Sep 29	Nowata	Nowata	Accessory to Murder

	Sunny Powell	Sep 29	Nowata	Nowata	Accessory to Murder
1917	Henry Conly	Jun 16	Holdenville	Hughes	Rape
1918	Loucius McGill	Jun 29	Madill	Marshall	Attempted Rape
1919					
1920	Unnamed	Dec 5	Holdenville	Hughes	Rape
	Claude Chandler	Aug 29	Oklahoma City	Oklahoma	Murder
1921					
1922	Jacob Brooks	Jan 17	Oklahoma City	Oklahoma	Strikebreaking
1923	Dallas Sowell	Nov 3	Eufaula	McIntosh	Rape
1924					
1925					
1926					
1927					
1928					
1929					
1930	Henry Argo	May 31	Chickasha	Grady	Attempted Rape

VITA

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