

Charles Blackman and the Activation of Lynching in Schley County, Georgia

*“When aroused Ithuriel’s spear could be no more
destructive and fierce than the passion of the people”*

-Weekly Sumter Republican October 9, 1885

I. Introduction

Racialized violence and animosity are deeply ingrained in the history of rural southwest Georgia. Of particular interest are Schley County and its surrounding counties: Macon, Taylor, Marion, and Sumter. Between these five counties, at least ten lynchings are reported in databases, with four of these having occurred in Schley County.¹ The lynchings reported in Schley County are typical of those in former slave states in that every victim was a Black man but atypical in that they occurred after 1910, well past the peak frequency of this type of lynching. Several factors have been recognized to contribute to variation in lynching, including economic factors such as the strength of the cotton industry and political factors such as disenfranchisement and party politics.² Why did lynchings occur later in Schley County than comparable lynchings elsewhere, and why did they occur disproportionately frequently in Schley compared to the surrounding counties? It is difficult to draw a conclusive result from a relatively small number of cases, but I seek to explore the localized nature of racialized mob violence in the American South, looking into factors such as community memory, political ideology, and technology.

¹ Rigby and Seguin, “Lynching in the United States: 1883-1941.”

² Beck, Tolnay, and Bailey, “Contested terrain: The state versus threatened lynch mob violence.”

II. The South and Lynching

March 1865 was part of the closing phase of the American Civil War, which officially ended April 9 with the surrender of the Confederate States of America. A few months before towards the end of 1864, Union General Sherman had carried out his famed March to the Sea in which Atlanta was captured in November and Savannah in December, which was presented as a Christmas gift to President Lincoln.³ Along the way, the Union sought to cripple southern industry and morale, with Sherman describing his aim to “make Georgia howl” with the “utter destruction of its roads, houses, and people.”⁴ The Civil War had ravaged the state and given it an opportunity to reinvent and rebuild itself.

The prospect of societal reorientation was especially consequential for the Black citizens of southern states like Georgia, which had suffered under the weight of the brutality of slavery. Federal troops occupied by the South and enforced the policies of Reconstruction. The immediate aftermath of the war saw the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the US Constitution that outlawed slavery, granted citizenship to recently freed enslaved people, and granted Black Americans the right to vote. Dozens of Black Georgians were elected to the state legislature in the election of 1868, in addition to the state’s first Republican governor.⁵

However, the promise of greater equality and opportunity for Black Americans in the South was shattered with the end of Reconstruction. White southerners began increasingly asserting their dominance with Jim Crow laws that restricted Black freedom and opportunity. Racialized

³ Sherman, Telegram from Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman to President Abraham Lincoln

⁴ Sherman, Telegram of William T. Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant.

⁵ Bragg, “Reconstruction in Georgia.”

violence took hold with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and one of the most overt, brutal expressions of racialized violence: lynching.

Lynching has been recognized to be an “irreducibly local phenomenon” that defies broad characterizations.⁶ One of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Francis Grimké defined lynching as “the summary execution of an offender, or supposed offender, without due process of law, by a self-constituted and irresponsible body of men.”⁷ The elements of extrajudicial action and mob violence form the core of most definitions, with localized factors contributing the culture of fear and intimidation lynchings sought to foster.

While there is a great deal of heterogeneity in lynching, three regimes have been identified: a Wild West regime in frontier states, a slavery regime in former slave states, and a minor regime along the Texas-Mexico border. These regimes differ in the victims targeted, the time period each saw its peak frequency, and the extent to which each was practiced. The regime of lynching in former slave states reached its peak in the 1890’s during the nadir of American race relations and primarily targeted Black Americans, particularly Black men.⁸ In 1909, activist Ida B. Wells described lynching as “color-line murder” as white southerners enforced a “reign of terror,” often under the guise of protecting white women.⁹

III. Charles Blackman and the Accusation

Schley County, Georgia has deep ties to anti-Black racism and slavery. Schley County was established in 1857, named to honor Governor William Schley, who was such an ardent anti-

⁶ Seguin and Rigby, “National Crimes: A New National Data Set of Lynchings in the United States, 1883 to 1941.”

⁷ Grimké, *The Lynching of Negroes in the South: Its Causes and Remedies*, 5–6.

⁸ Seguin and Rigby, “National Crimes: A New National Data Set of Lynchings in the United States, 1883 to 1941.”

⁹ Wells “Lynching Our National Crime.”

abolitionist that he offered a reward for the arrest of activist publisher William Llyod Garrison.¹⁰ During the Georgia Secession Convention of 1861, Schley County voted in favor of leaving the Union.¹¹ The largest Confederate prisoner-of-war camp during the Civil War, Andersonville, was located not far from Schley County, in Sumter and Macon Counties. Andersonville had the highest mortality rate of any Civil War prison, and nearly 13,000 of the 45,000 men imprisoned there died.¹² The scale of this atrocity was considered so grave that the commandant of the prison, Henry Wirz, became one of only two Confederates executed for war crimes after the conclusion of the war.¹³ As of 1860, 219 slaveowners resided in Schley County out of a population of 4,633.^{14, 15} During the election of 1868, nightriders attacked and intimidated those who would vote for former Union General and Republican candidate Ulysses Grant. Fourteen former slaves were beaten or shot in Schley County, and Black schools were burned.¹⁶

It was during this transition from the promise of the post-war Reconstruction South to the Jim Crow South that Charles Blackman spent his early years as a young Black man in the rural American South. Born in Macon County in southwest Georgia in March of 1865, Charles lived through the closing days of the American Civil War.¹⁷ During his childhood, his family moved from Macon County to Schley County, where they settled down in Ellaville, the largest town in the county. By the time Charles was 15, he lived in a household in Ellaville with only his widowed mother Jane Blackman.¹⁸ He had at least two, evidently older, brothers Richard and

¹⁰ Brown, "William Schley."

¹¹ Gurr, "Schley County."

¹² Davis, "Andersonville Prison."

¹³ "EXECUTION OF WIRZ," *The New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1865.

¹⁴ 1860 Schley County Slave Schedule, US Decennial Census.

¹⁵ 1860 Schley County Census, US Decennial Census.

¹⁶ Ellis, "'Lynching, the law, and local opinion," 174.

¹⁷ "A BIG DAY ON THE GIBBET," *The morning news*, Jan. 26, 1889.

¹⁸ 1880 Schley County Census, US Decennial Census.

Simon, who lived nearby but out of the house.¹⁹ Charles and his mother most likely lived in or near “The Bottom,” the segregated Black part of Ellaville with its own schools, stores, and churches.²⁰ The family survived off of farm work, the only profession accessible to most Black southerners. Beyond this, vanishingly little is known about Charles or his family before the event that would, in the eyes of the historical record, define Charles’s life.

Stonewall Tondee, justice of the peace and son of the Schley County Treasurer, was a young white man in his early twenties who was murdered in the evening of Saturday, September 6, 1885 in Ellaville. He was clerking in a store one night when he was shot through a window, after which 12 buckshot entered his left side.²¹ He lived around eight minutes after the shooting and three minutes after a doctor arrived on scene, during which time he is said to have yelled out, “I am killed” and, “I am a dead man!” Immediately Charles Blackman was singled out as a suspect for the murder of the town’s “universal favorite” on the basis that he was jealous of Tondee about a woman. Several newspapers describing the case, including an initial report from the New York Times entitled “A Candidate for Lynching,” suggested lynching as the remedy.²² Another report proposed letting “Judge Lynch” decide the case, but old men in the community were said to have advised that the law should be able to take its course.²³

Charles Blackman was not lynched in the immediate aftermath of the murder. Sunday morning, the day after the murder, a search party was convened to search for Blackman. Charles Blackman and his brother Simon were arrested on a road in Sumter County Sunday morning and brought back to Ellaville. Later Sunday, a coroner’s jury was convened and found Blackman

¹⁹ “THE HANGING OF BLACKMAN,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Jan 26, 1889.

²⁰ Gurr, “Ellaville.”

²¹ “STONEWALL TONDEE ASSASSINATED,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Sep. 07, 1885.

²² “A CANDIDATE FOR LYNCHING,” *The New York Times*, Sep. 07, 1885.

²³ “THE MURDER OF TONDEE,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Sep. 09, 1885.

guilty of murder, based on testimony placing Blackman at the scene of the crime. Both the community and reporting had no presumption of innocence, and the town was described as almost to the point of lynching but lacking a leader. Blackman spent Sunday night in the jail in Schley County before being sent to the jail in Sumter County early Monday morning. A report claims that “hundreds of Schley’s best colored citizens who were present wanted the whites to turn over Blackman to them to make ashes of him.”²⁴

Why wasn’t Charles Blackman lynched as he spent Sunday night in the Ellaville jail, as reports suggested or predicted? Why wasn’t there even an attempt by a mob, despite bellicose lynching rhetoric in contemporaneous reporting? Individualized factors, most prominently law enforcement and its willingness to prevent lynching, play a prominent role.²⁵ No lynching had taken place in Ellaville as of 1885, and there was no community infrastructure to facilitate racialized mob violence. What need is there to go through with a lynching when there is confidence that a slanted justice system will deliver the desired verdict in short order? The sheriff’s commitment to keeping Blackman safe and his foresight in sending Blackman away from the scene of the crime to Americus in Sumter County made it much less likely an attempted lynching would be successful. Widespread belief that Blackman would swiftly and easily be found guilty and sentenced, in addition to community desire to let the law take its course, made it less likely an attempted lynching would even occur. Newspapers clearly sought to deracialize the matter of lynching, as they did in claiming that even Black citizens of Schley would have liked to participate in a lynching. In this way, lynching was depicted as a tough but fair process by which the whole community cooperated to weed out unsavory characters. Though no lynching

²⁴ “COLD BLOODED MURDER,” *The Weekly Sumter republican*, Sep. 11, 1885.

²⁵ Hagen, Makovi, and Bearman. “The Influence of Political Dynamics on Southern Lynch Mob Formation and Lethality.”

occurred, the justification and rationalization of racialized mob violence in Schley County predates the story of Charles Blackman.

IV. Letting the Law Take its Course I

The Schley superior court convened in late September 1885 with the case of Charles Blackman on the docket. The Georgia State Constitution gives all defendants the right to counsel, and lawyers Col. B. B. Hinton, J. S. McCorkle, and B.H. Wilkinson were accordingly appointed for Blackman, but only the day before the trial. The counsel thus had little time to confer with the defendant, Blackman, and no time to confer with each other. The judge allowed the trial to proceed regardless, and the grand jury found Blackman guilty of the murder. He was sentenced to hang on the 6th of November 1885.²⁶ However, Blackman's counsel appealed the case to the Georgia Supreme Court, and Blackman was granted a respite. Schley County had already constructed a gallows and coffin for Blackman so the granting of a respite was considered a massive disappointment and reported as "The Gallows Cheated."²⁷ The Georgia Supreme Court ruled in April 1886 that the case should have been postponed and that Blackman's right to counsel was not adequately fulfilled, granting Blackman a new trial.²⁸

The case of Charles Blackman went to trial once again, a year after his first trial, in 1886 in the September Term of the Schley Superior Court. The jury once again found Blackman guilty, and he was sentenced to hang in November 1886 before he gained another respite on the basis of another appeal pending before the Georgia Supreme Court.²⁹ One report opined that the trial of

²⁶ "FOUND GUILTY OF MURDER," *The Weekly Sumter republican*, Oct. 09, 1885.

²⁷ "THE GALLOWS CHEATED," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 07, 1885.

²⁸ Blackman v. State, 76 Ga. 288 (1886)

²⁹ "WILL LIVE LONGER," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 24, 1886.

Blackman had now taken up a major part of two superior court terms and cost the county over \$2,000.³⁰

Though exhaustion and disappointment were already being expressed upon the granting of the first respite in 1885, the second appeal in 1886 marks a turning point in public sentiment. 1886 marks the first time that reporting on the Blackman case references the legal and monetary cost of letting the law take its course. Blackman was undoubtedly not given a fair trial, having been convicted by all-white juries in a small community whose newspapers represented Blackman's guilt as a matter of fact. However, it is unusual that the legal apparatus was as receptive as it was to appeals in Blackman's case. This is likely due to the appointment of unusually capable and devoted counsel, who were willing to go through with the lengthy appeal process. During this legal process, Blackman spent his days in jail for a crime to which he was linked based on circumstantial evidence alone. There is no overstating the magnitude of human suffering that the uncertainty and volatility of Blackman's situation likely caused him, from the fear of lynching to the fear of being found guilty by yet another unfair trial in the Kafkaesque legal system.

V. Letting the Law Take its Course II

While Schley County waited for the Georgia Supreme Court to render its verdict for the second time, the community grew increasingly frustrated and frenzied. An April 1887 report stated that "mob law may be harsh but it cuts a lot of expense."³¹ In May 1887, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that Blackman's second trial had included illegal testimony before the jury

³⁰ "GEORGIA NEWS BRIEFED," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 30, 1886.

³¹ "BLACKMON THE MURDERER," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Apr. 17, 1887.

that might have affected its ruling.³² Thus, Blackman would go to trial for a third time, and the Schley superior court was called for an adjourned term in July 1887.³³ The result of the third trial was the same as the previous two; Blackman was found guilty of murder by the grand jury and sentenced to hang in August. However, for the third time, the case was appealed to the Georgia Supreme Court on a technicality, and Blackman would gain a third respite.³⁴

When the Supreme Court of Georgia went into session for the June 1887, it came to a decidedly different outcome than before. The court ruled that the challenges relating to the validity of the jury and legality of the evidence presented did not substantially affect the outcome of the trial. Blackman was thus granted no new trial, and his death sentence was upheld.³⁵ Not long after this decision was handed down, Charles Blackman escaped from the Sumter County jail and attempted to make his way westward, towards Mississippi. However, he was captured on the Chattahoochee River that separates Georgia and Alabama, and he was put back in jail, increasing excitement for his execution.³⁶ Blackman was sentenced to hang for a fourth time in September 1888, with October 19th set as the date.³⁷ After the courts refused to intervene in Blackman's case, he was granted a respite from Georgia Governor John Gordon.³⁸

1887 marks a turning point in how the residents of Schley County conceptualized justice and punishment. Despite ever-present violent and pro-lynching rhetoric, earlier reports glorified the restraint of the citizens of Schley County, who supposedly had grounds upon which to lynch Blackman but allowed the legal system to decide anyways. However, reports from 1887

³² Blackman v. State, 78 Ga. 592 (1887)

³³ "A Special Term called," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Jun. 04, 1887.

³⁴ "THREE TIMES SENTENCED," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Jul. 17, 1887.

³⁵ Blackman v. State, 80 Ga. 785 (1888)

³⁶ "BOUND IN CHAINS," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Jun. 16, 1888.

³⁷ "BLACKMAN TO HANG," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Sep. 28, 1888.

³⁸ "THE HANGING OF BLACKMAN," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Jan 26, 1889.

explicitly suggested that mob violence is a solution to legal difficulties, consistent with increasingly hostile and frustrated rhetoric. This shift suggests that lynching and mob violence were being incorporated into a broader political ideology of administrative efficiency and limited government. Although statewide elected officials and courts did not uniformly oppose lynching, in this case, they served as a bulwark against hastily conducted and unfair trials run by Schley County. Though white citizens had expected and hoped for a speedy execution, circumstance thwarted that desire. Never before had the white residents of Schley County had a reason to doubt that they could reach their desired outcome sans complications through the courts, but this case shattered the perception that there could never be a drawn-out, lengthy legal process even in a justice system stacked against Black defendants.

VI. Execution

In January 1889, Blackman's lawyer applied for a further respite and argued before the governor that there are grounds for a new trial.³⁹ However, the governor refused to intervene, and the date of Blackman's execution was set for January 25th. A special excursion train left Americus that morning to carry spectators for the public hanging in Ellaville.⁴⁰ Before Charles Blackman was hanged, unknown parties cut the telegraph wires connecting Ellaville to the world, ensuring that Governor Gordon could not intervene at the last second. As Blackman was taken to the scaffold, a prayer was said, and the crowd of five thousand spectators joined in the singing of the hymn "And Am I Born to Die?" Blackman gave his final words to the crowd, "Well fellow-men, this is my last opportunity that you will ever hear my voice again in this lowland of sin and sorrow. I tell you all I die today an innocent man. I soon make my departure

³⁹ "CAPITAL OF THE STATE," *The morning news*, Jan. 24, 1889.

⁴⁰ "GEORGIA AND FLORIDA," *The morning news*, Jan. 25, 1889.

to a land where no sorrow can reach me. My lawyers have done all they could, and, if it is according to the will of God, I am willing to go. Farewell to you all."⁴¹ After his execution, he was buried in the old cemetery, and a rumor began spreading that Blackman's body would be stolen. Charles's brother Richard went to guard the grave with his gun and had to drive off some "mischievous boys."⁴²

After over three years of imprisonment and legal jockeying, Blackman was publicly executed in a quasi-religious spectacle before a crowd of thousands of people who had been anxiously awaiting the moment of Blackman's execution for years. What changed from the earliest days of this saga in 1885 when, despite pre-existing inclinations towards and glorification of lynching, no extrajudicial action occurred to 1889, when a mob cut telegraph wires to ensure no outside intervention occurred? Though the story of Charles Blackman does not represent a typical lynching, extrajudicial action was carried out to ensure that Blackman would be executed. The hanging of Charles Blackman can thus be understood through the paradigm of lynchings and racialized mob violence. A great deal of scholarship focuses on the spectacle of lynchings and how they are "deliberately performative and ritualized" to be noticed and to intimidate Black residents.⁴³ Lynchings were most often not hidden from public view and done before large audiences, as a community ritual to perform the execution of righteous punishment with all the trappings of religiosity. Regardless of whether Charles Blackman's execution was a lynching, it represents the activation of lynching in Schley County and even the surrounding counties.

VII. Activation of Lynching

⁴¹ "THE HANGING OF BLACKMAN," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Jan 26, 1889.

⁴² "GUARDING THE GRAVE," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Jan 29, 1889.

⁴³ Wood, *Lynching and spectacle*, 2.

The saga of Charles Blackman represents a fluke of the legal system; it was not common for Black defendants to be represented by such ardent lawyers who were willing to appeal ad infinitum, up to the highest levels of state authority in the Georgia Supreme Court and Governor. These audiences were certainly not sympathetic to Blackman's cause, as Governor Gordon was a former Confederate General who is generally thought to have been the head of the Georgia Ku Klux Klan.⁴⁴ However, because Blackman's guilt was treated as a foregone conclusion, the trials conducted by the Superior Court were sloppy, which laid the groundwork for promising appeals. The second appeal to the Georgia Supreme Court was based on around thirty technical objections Blackman's counsel had regarding the preceding trial. Of these objections, the court overturned the verdict based on just one.⁴⁵ The late 1880's were a paradigm shift in Schley County, as the white residents lost a tacit trust that the legal system works solely for them. However, this perceived problem for the white residents came not from the local courts but from the state government. Not long after federal troops had occupied the South and forcefully implemented greater racial equality, state actors were now interfering in Schley's affairs. The case of Charles Blackman thus contributed to the collective consciousness and shared memory of Schley County, with the message that occasionally, leaving a case in the hands of the law can go "wrong." This sentiment primed the community for further racialized violence even though the desired outcome was achieved in the end.

From 1885 to 1889, reports show a noticeable shift in rhetoric, with incredulity and exhaustion rising throughout this period. Outrage and racism permeate the reporting throughout, but there was increasingly a focus on the amount of time and money invested in Charles

⁴⁴ Groce, "John B. Gordon."

⁴⁵ Blackman v. State, 78 Ga. 592 (1887)

Blackman and his case. The frustration with perceived bureaucracy and wasted resources on an obviously guilty defendant increased over time and frustrated the white residents of Schley. Coupled with the perception that outside intervention delayed the execution of justice, lynching was incorporated into a pre-existing ideology of limited and streamlined government. Thus, greater sympathy for racialized mob violence grew through the case of Charles Blackman and became a component of pre-existing political thought.

Charles Blackman's case coincided with several technological and infrastructure developments in Schley County. During the 1880's, Schley County was more connected to the outside world with communications and transportation infrastructure, such as the telegraph line and railroad that reached Ellaville in 1884.⁴⁶ These innovations represent not only greater connectivity but enhanced state penetration. In 1889 after all, the fear was that the telegraph line would allow the governor to stop Blackman's death at the last minute. Whereas in the Wild West regime of lynching, greater state presence decreased the frequency of mob violence, the state places a more complex role in lynchings in the American South. Greater state penetration brought out the anxieties and frustrations of white southerners and occasionally denied them the legitimacy of swift executions of Black defendants via the judicial system. Additionally, these technologies helped lynchings achieve their desired goals of intimidation and performance of justice. The rail connection allowed thousands of spectators to commute to Ellaville to witness the lynching, a feat that would not have been possible before the 1880's. While telecommunications infrastructure was occasionally harnessed to enhance lynchings, such as the case of Jesse Washington in which the telephone was used to spread news of the lynching, this

⁴⁶ Ellis, "'Lynching, the law, and local opinion,'" 173.

infrastructure also represented an obstacle for lynchers.⁴⁷ Several lynchings, such as those of Paul Reed and Will Cato in Statesboro, Georgia in 1904, featured the cutting of telephone lines to prevent communication.⁴⁸ Greater presence of physical infrastructure represented a tangible symbol of the outside world and outside authority that mobs sought to take and use for their own ends.

VIII. Conclusion

Charles Blackman spent the last three years of his life in anxious agony, hoping for an exoneration that would never come and fair treatment that would never materialize. To the last moment, he maintained his innocence. To the white residents of Schley County, it was a failure of the utmost importance that Blackman lived for more than three years after the murder of which he was accused. Charles Blackman's story became the story that created a community infrastructure of greater sympathy for and justification of racialized mob violence. Charles Blackman partially explains why the four widely recognized lynchings of Schley County happened past 1910, well past the peak of lynching in former slave states. The localized nature of lynching suggests that each community has an individual story of how racialized violence became deemed necessary or glorified.

In 1887, Atlanta adopted a city seal featuring the mythical Phoenix.⁴⁹ The Phoenix was intended to represent the rebirth of Atlanta after it had been razed during the Civil War and the rebirth of the American South more broadly. However, the end of Reconstruction, entrenchment of the Jim Crow South, and proliferation of racialized mob violence challenge this narrative of

⁴⁷ Hale, *Making whiteness*, 216.

⁴⁸ Moseley and Brogdon, "A Lynching at Statesboro: The Story of Paul Reed and Will Cato," 113.

⁴⁹ Phoenix Rising, Atlanta History Center.

change and growth after the war. Scholar and founder of the NAACP W. E. B. Du Bois described Reconstruction by saying, "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery." Charles Blackman is a part of the broken promise of Reconstruction and how lynching and racialized violence pervaded the American South to the extent that they became incorporated in the banality of evil.

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