

The “Mob Fairly Howled:” Lynching in Frederick County, Maryland
1879-1895

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© March 2020

This report was prepared under the auspices of African American Resources,
Cultural and Heritage Society (AARCH) of Frederick County, Maryland

The history of lynching in America – the illegal killing of mostly African American men and women – is one of the darkest chapters in the history of the country. Between 1877, when the United States removed federal troops from the South at the end of Reconstruction, and 1950, there were over 4,300 lynchings of African Americans in the United States, the vast majority in twelve Southern states.¹ In that same time period, 34 of those extrajudicial killings occurred in the state of Maryland.² These murders were widespread in Maryland, taking place in 18 of the state's 24 counties. In Frederick County, there were three lynchings, one in Point of Rocks in 1879, and two in Frederick, in 1887 and 1895.³

The purpose of this study is not to examine the history and causes of lynching in the United States. There are numerous books, articles, dissertations, websites and other sources that provide an overall context of lynching. Instead, this research documents the history of lynching in Frederick County, Maryland, relying for the most part on contemporary coverage of the event by newspapers. Many newspapers covered these murders extensively. Not all of the accounts in the newspapers, of course, are reliable, and the different versions of the same event published by various newspapers are a research minefield for the historian. The author has chosen to rely more times than not on the local Frederick newspapers (their reporters and editors knew local details and had access to participants and witnesses not available to other newspapers), and on reporters who were actually present at these events, and who interviewed participants and quoted them in the articles. These sources are not without problems either, and other sources – county histories, genealogical information, diaries, maps, and other items – were also checked to try and confirm different aspects of this history.

This research has had to be pieced together precisely because those who wrote the traditional histories of Frederick County ignored the brutal story of lynching within the county's

¹ These numbers come from the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), an organization founded by Bryan Stevenson in 1989 to combat the unequal treatment of African American prisoners in jails and prisons across the United States. Recently EJI has also launched a project to study slavery in the United States, as well as the history of lynching in this country. See "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror" on the EJI website, <https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/>.

² Ten other lynchings had occurred in Maryland before 1877. See "Lynchings in Maryland," a compilation of lynchings that occurred in Maryland between 1854 to 1933, on the website created by the Baltimore *Sun*, <https://news.baltimoresun.com/maryland-lynchings/>. The Baltimore *Sun*'s list includes the lynching of Page Wallace in 1880, but I do not include him in the total number of lynchings in Maryland because he was actually lynched in Virginia.

³ There were reported lynchings in Frederick County prior to the Civil War, but they are not covered in this report.

borders. Perhaps this was out of shame or because African American history in general was ignored for so long and not deemed worthy of study. For whatever reasons, generations of Frederick County citizens never learned that mobs of white people in the county, on only partial or scant evidence, hunted down, tortured, and murdered three African American men, and not a single person was ever charged with a crime. Law enforcement, newspapers, town and county officials, and mostly every white person in the county either gave the lynchings their active or tacit approval, or did not care enough to bring pressure to bear on town and county authorities to solve these felony crimes. There were some, indeed, who objected strenuously to what transpired, but there were not enough of them to make a difference.

Did the victims of lynching actually commit the crimes for which they were murdered? No one will ever know, and while the critics of lynching did not condone or absolve criminal acts, they insisted that the established legal systems needed to prove or disprove guilt in each case.

So the historical traces of this history were allowed to virtually disappear. But lynchings had a profound effect on both the African American communities in the county as well as the white communities. There were attempts to resist the lynchings by some African Americans or to at least try to hold someone accountable for the murders. But the local judicial, political, and social systems failed them, and many became discouraged and disheartened. Historians, activists, and others have documented how destructive lynchings were to both descendants of the victims as well as to the larger African American community. Much worse, though, is that lynching is not dead. It continues today.⁴

Bryan Stevenson, the founder of Equal Justice Initiative, an organization that, among many other projects, has created a website on the history of lynching, has said:

“Lynching is American history, and for us to recover from that violence and terror, we all have to know that history, and we all have to talk about it. I believe that will compel us to think differently about what we need to do to confront the past, to address the past and to make a better future.”

⁴ “A Modern-Day Lynching?: ‘Always in Season’ Looks at 2014 Hanging in NC & Legacy of Racial Terrorism,” *Democracy Now!* website, https://www.democracynow.org/2019/2/1/a_modern_day_lynching_always_in; “Texas Executes Ringleader of Heinous James Byrd Lynching,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 9, 2019.

This research is intended to help people recover the history of lynching in Frederick County, and to constructively “confront the past,” however painful and horrendous.

This report, as a documentary record, will be distributed widely within Frederick County and to such state organizations as the new Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project. Within the county, historical and educational organizations such as AARCH – African American Resources, Cultural and Heritage; the Maryland Room of the Frederick County Public Library; the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area; Heritage Frederick; Frederick County Public Schools; and other institutions will receive copies.⁵

Lynching was a terrible part of the American story. But the centrality of racism and lynching in our country’s history is the reason we need an accurate record of what happened, so that we do not forget, and do not let others forget. I hope I have put together an accurate record, but I may have made mistakes, said something in an awkward or insensitive way, or left out something I should have added. Much of these stories are from the newspaper accounts of the time. These are all biased in one way or another, but most regrettably, few accounts bothered to record the reactions and words and thoughts of the African American community. I have tried to find as much as I could in the African American press of the time and in other sources. Corrections and suggestions for further research are welcome.

Finally, I am particularly mindful that there are very likely family descendants of both those who were murdered by lynching, as well as those who were victims of violent attacks (perpetrated by still-unknown assailants), still living in Frederick County and my intent is not to cause anyone unnecessary anguish.

WARNING!! This report contains descriptions of disturbing and violent acts, both those perpetrated by white mobs and those attributed, without proof, to the mobs’ victims. These are included not to be sensationalist, but to accurately, as much as possible, tell a story of racial terror that has been forgotten, and should be remembered and documented for all to know the true tragedy of lynching.

⁵ My appreciation to Sarah Heald for her assistance in research, editing, and discussing this history.

Note about the number of lynching cases in Frederick County, Maryland:

There were three lynchings in Frederick County in the years following the Civil War: James Carroll in 1879; John Biggus in 1887; and James Bowens in 1895.⁶ A fourth is sometimes counted. Page Wallace was an African American man who allegedly assaulted and raped a woman in Loudoun County, Virginia in January 1880. He was arrested and jailed in Washington County, Maryland. Virginia authorities extradited Wallace, escorted him from Hagerstown to Point of Rocks in Frederick County by train, and then ferried him across the Potomac River to the Loudoun County shore. There masked men forcibly took Wallace from the authorities and lynched him.⁷ Although Point of Rocks had a brief role in this affair, and men from Maryland were probably part of the lynching mob, the alleged crime and the lynching occurred in Loudoun County. Therefore Page Wallace's murder is not included in this report.

One other lynching is occasionally listed as having happened in Frederick County. In a book on lynchings in the United States published in 1901, the author erroneously listed the lynching of Henry Darley in "Liberty, Md." in 1900.⁸ Later the Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) and others included this information in their lists of lynchings, sometimes referring to the victim as Henry Darby. There is a town in Frederick County called Liberty, so this lynching was assumed to have occurred there. Darley's lynching, however, actually occurred in Liberty, Missouri, as several newspaper accounts confirm.⁹

⁶ See footnote #3 above.

⁷ See "Page Wallis," *Frederick Daily Times*, Feb. 19, 1880; "Hunting a Negro Who Outraged a White Virginia Woman," *Washington Post*, Feb. 2, 1880; "Lynch Law in Virginia," *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 18, 1880; "A Colored Scoundrel Lynched," *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1880; "Hanged to a Tree," *Washington Post*, Feb. 18, 1880; "The Virginia Lynching Case," *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 19, 1880

⁸ John Edward Bruce, *The Blood Red Record* (Albany: The Argus Company, Printers, 1901), p.8.

⁹ "Lynching at Liberty," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 3, 1900; "Hanged from a Balcony," *Topeka State Journal*, May 3, 1900. Demonstrating how misinformation survives, both the Library of Congress and *Smithsonian Magazine* have recently featured content on their respective websites repeating that Darley was lynched in Frederick County, Maryland: Danny Lewis, "This Map Shows Over a Century of Documented Lynchings in the United States," *Smithsonianmag.com* (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/map-shows-over-a-century-of-documented-lynchings-in-united-states-180961877/>); and "To Kill a Mockingbird: A Historical Perspective," Lesson Plans, Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/mockingbird/>)

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The Murder of James Carroll, 1879

The crowd at the Point of Rocks railroad station could barely contain itself. Ever since word had spread earlier that afternoon that police officers from Georgetown were escorting James Carroll, a young African American man, to Frederick to stand trial, men from all over the area had swarmed to the depot. Estimates of the number of people ranged from 70 to as many as 300 according to several eyewitness accounts, and they were all anxiously waiting for the train from Washington, DC, to come into view.¹⁰ A little after 6:15 p.m., the train rounded the bend and came to a stop at the junction just southeast of the station. The mayor of Frederick, Lewis H. Moberly, who had received a telegram that afternoon advising him to come to Point of Rocks, later told a coroner's jury that "the crowd that had been standing around the depot immediately made a great rush in that direction..."¹¹ Men on horseback surrounded the train, and a dozen or more men, "almost falling over each other's shoulders" according to the train conductor, rushed into the car where Carroll and the police officers were now trapped.¹² The crowd had become a mob, and as one of the policemen later recalled, the "mob fairly howled."¹³

The Alleged Attack at Licksville

On the Monday evening following Easter, April 14, 1879, most of the residents of Licksville were attending a holiday ball being held in the neighborhood.¹⁴ Licksville was a small community close to the Potomac River in Frederick County, Maryland, although in the years preceding the Civil War it was considered one of the largest slave markets in the Mid-Atlantic

¹⁰ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879; "The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair," *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879; "The Frederick County, Md., Outrage," *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879. [See Bibliography for complete citations of newspaper sources. All newspaper sources are scans of original newspaper pages.]

¹¹ "The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair," *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "Hanged on Sugar Loaf," *Washington Post*, March 23, 1896.

¹⁴ Information about the events of Monday, April 14, 1879, is found in the following sources: "The Licksville, Md., Outrage," *Washington Evening Star*, April 17, 1879; "Horrible Outrage Near Licksville, Frederick County, Md.," *Baltimore Sun*, April 17, 1879; "The Frederick County, Md., Outrage," *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879; "The Point of Rocks Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879; "The Licksville Outrage," *Frederick Daily Times*, April 17, 1879; "Hemp!," *Frederick Daily Times*, April 18, 1879; "The Hengen Necklace!," *Frederick Daily Times*, April 19, 1879; *Frederick Republican Citizen*, April 18, 1879; "Lynching of James Carroll," *Frederick Examiner*, April 23, 1879

region.¹⁵ On that night in April, Richard Thomas, a grain merchant who operated a boat on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, was not at the dance but was in nearby Point of Rocks on business.¹⁶ Thomas, 31-years old, was often away from home, and according to a later newspaper account, he was “at home only while the boat is loading.”¹⁷ Thomas and his wife, Regina, 28 years old, and their 6 children, lived in a two-story wooden house in Licksville, close to the main road to the Potomac River and to Point of Rocks.¹⁸ Their children ranged in age from 1 to 10. Both Regina and her husband were well-known in the community. She was the oldest and only married daughter of Thomas Trundle, who operated a farm called Three Springs near Licksville. Richard Thomas was named after his father, who was a “well-known sportive and wealthy gentleman of Maryland.”¹⁹ Richard and Regina married when she was 17, and for a time they lived in Baltimore when he worked in the tobacco trade.

Regina Thomas was described in newspaper reports as a “small, delicate woman,” whose general health was “one of nervous and physical delicacy.”²⁰ Her mother died when she was 11, and she was mostly raised by her aunt, Emily Trundle. She was educated at the Academy of the Visitation in Frederick, a Catholic school, and she was described by a newspaper in Frederick as a “staunch Catholic.”²¹ She and her husband were still mourning the death of one of their children just a few weeks earlier, who had burned to death when a hot coal ignited the child’s clothing.²²

¹⁵ “Licksville was probably the greatest slave market in Maryland.” William J. Grove, *History of Carrolton Manor, Frederick County, Md.* (n.p., 1922), 63.

¹⁶ Information on the Thomas family in this paragraph is from various sources, primarily U.S. population censuses. Richard’s age (c.1848-1922) is based on census information and from family history data found on Ancestry.com. Regina’s age (1850-1891) is based on census information and also from a photograph of her grave marker in the cemetery of St. Michael’s Catholic Church in Poplar Springs, Howard County, MD. In newspaper accounts of the incident, her first name is given variously as Jennie, Emily, and Regina. In the censuses, she is listed as Emily and Emily R. On her grave marker, her name is Emily Regenia Thomas. The *Daily Times* of Frederick, which interviewed her husband, her brother, and her aunt, called her Regina, as did one other newspaper, and that is the name that will be used in this report. See “The Licksville, Md., Outrage,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 17, 1879; “Horrible Outrage Near Licksville, Frederick County, Md.,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 17, 1879; “Lynched,” *Alexandria Gazette*, April 18, 1879; “Dastardly Outrage!,” *Frederick Republican Citizen*, April 18, 1879; “The Hempen Necklace!,” *Frederick Daily Times*, April 19, 1879; “Mrs. Richard Thomas Recovering,” *Shepherdstown Register*, May 24, 1879

¹⁷ “Lynched,” *Alexandria Gazette*, April 18, 1879

¹⁸ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

¹⁹ “Lynched,” *Alexandria Gazette*, April 18, 1879

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ “The Hempen Necklace!,” *Frederick Daily Times*, April 19, 1879

²² “Lynched,” *Alexandria Gazette*, April 18, 1879

Around 11:00 p.m. on April 14, James Carroll allegedly broke into the Thomas home through a window, forced his way into Regina Thomas's bedroom, held a large knife to her throat and demanded money. In an account of the incident told to a newspaper reporter by her husband, Thomas told Carroll she did not have any money, and then he raped her.²³ There was enough light in the room for her to recognize that her attacker was James Carroll, according to her husband.²⁴

Carroll, 24 years old, had been in the Licksville area for about a year. He had been born enslaved in Smithsburg, in neighboring Washington County, and both of his parents were dead. He had earned a living by working on farms and on the C&O Canal, and during the past year had worked on the farm of Peter N. Leapley, in Licksville. Leapley's farm was not far from the Thomas' house, and apparently both Richard and Regina Thomas knew Carroll by sight. Carroll had spent part of that Monday taking a plow share to the local blacksmith shop of Henry Dronenberg. Before breaking into the Thomas home, he allegedly first robbed the home of his employer, Leapley.²⁵

After the attack, Regina Thomas "lay more dead than alive," according to one newspaper article.²⁶ Her husband, away on business, did not return home until the following morning, when she told him what had happened. The imprint of the attacker's fingers could still be seen on Mrs. Thomas's neck, and she was reported to be "in a prostrate and precarious condition..."²⁷ When Mr. Thomas alerted others to what had happened, "the greatest excitement and indignation was aroused," and men began searching for Carroll. They also sent telegrams to various towns to be on the lookout for him.²⁸

As people searched for Carroll, Thomas wrote a letter on Tuesday to the State's Attorney for Frederick County, John C. Motter, claiming that James Carroll had "committed an outrage on

²³ See sources in note 1

²⁴ "The Point of Rocks Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

²⁵ "Horrible Outrage Near Licksville, Frederick County, Md," *Baltimore Sun*, April 17, 1879; "The Frederick County, Md., Outrage," *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879; "The Point of Rocks Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879; "Summary Vengeance," *Washington National Republican*, April 18, 1879; "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879; "A Bad Record," *Frederick Examiner*, April 30, 1879; "Coroner's Verdict," *Hagerstown Herald and Torch Light*, April 30, 1879; "Hemp!," *Frederick Daily Times*, April 18, 1879; "The Hempen Necklace!," *Frederick Daily Times*, April 19, 1879

²⁶ "The Point of Rocks Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

²⁷ "The Frederick County, Md., Outrage," *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879

²⁸ "Horrible Outrage Near Licksville, Frederick County, Md," *Baltimore Sun*, April 17, 1879; "Lynching of James Carroll," *Frederick Examiner*, April 23, 1879

the person of my wife,” and that he had been advised to write Motter as the right person to prosecute the case.²⁹ He described Carroll’s appearance, and what he had been wearing the previous evening, and urged Motter to “use every effort in your power to have him arrested, for, besides the outrage, he has left my wife in a very precarious condition from severe choking and fright.”³⁰

The Arrest in Georgetown

That Tuesday evening, April 15, Ben F. Harper, a police officer in Georgetown, District of Columbia, arrested a man there who matched Carroll’s description.³¹ The following day, Wednesday, Richard Thomas and his brother F.C. went to Georgetown to identify the suspect. Harper had arrested the wrong man however, a man by the name of Adam Austin, who was then released.³² On Thursday morning, April 17, Thomas decided to look for Carroll around the C&O Canal area in Georgetown. He “was confident that Carroll would turn up in Georgetown, where he was well known,” presumably because of Carroll’s previous work as a boatman on the canal.³³ Around 11:00 that morning, Thomas spotted Carroll by the canal on Fayette Street (today’s 35th Street). Carroll walked right by Thomas, and tipped his cap to him as a greeting. Thomas immediately sought a policeman and found officer Henry C. Volkman of the Georgetown police force. Volkman, on horseback, approached Carroll, who started running when he saw the policeman. After a long chase, Volkman, joined by others, captured Carroll and took him to the Georgetown jail. There, Richard Thomas identified him as the man who had attacked his wife.³⁴

At the station, police searched Carroll and found a “common, brass-handled clasp knife, which according to the newspaper report, was like the knife described by Mrs. Thomas as the one held to her throat by Carroll...” (although the knife used in the attack had earlier been

²⁹ “Horrible Outrage Near Licksville, Frederick County, Md,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 17, 1879

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ “The Licksville, Md., Outrage,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 17, 1879

³² *Ibid.*; “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

³³ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

³⁴ “The Licksville, Md., Outrage,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 17, 1879; “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879; “The Frederick County, Md., Outrage,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879; “Summary Vengeance,” *Washington National Republican*, April 18, 1879; “Dastardly Outrage!,” *Frederick Republican Citizen*, April 18, 1879

described as “a huge knife”).³⁵ A few pieces of cloth that had been torn from his clothing by Mrs. Thomas during the attack, which Mr. Thomas had brought with him, matched tears in Carroll’s clothing.³⁶

Newspaper accounts differ as to whether Carroll confessed to the crime in the Georgetown police station. The Washington *Evening Star*, which had a correspondent at the station, reported that Carroll “asserted his innocence” and that he “expressed a readiness” to go to Frederick for trial.³⁷ According to the Washington *National Republican*, “Carroll was very boastful and did not seem at all frightened. He made no attempt to conceal his identity.”³⁸ In an interview, Carroll told the *Evening Star* reporter he had left Licksville because he was dissatisfied with the low wages he received as a farm hand, and that he was going to work on the canal hereafter. He therefore had “engaged on a boat” and had arrived in Georgetown on Wednesday.³⁹ According to the Georgetown police officers Volkman and Harper in a later interview with the Frederick *Republican Citizen*, Carroll claimed that Mrs. Thomas “could not swear he had raped her.”⁴⁰

Other newspaper accounts, however, stated that Carroll confessed to the attack on Mrs. Thomas. A reporter for the Baltimore *Sun* wrote that Carroll “fully confessed his crime, telling the officers that he did not expect to reach the Frederick jail alive,” while the *National Republican* reported that Carroll said he had left Licksville because “he knew he would be hung if he remained there.”⁴¹ Although Carroll told the Georgetown police officers that Mrs. Thomas could not swear that he was the one who had attacked her, the officers also claimed that Carroll said “he could only die once anyhow, and he didn’t care a d__ if they did kill him, that he knew whilst he was doing it, he would be killed if he was caught.”⁴²

Someone with the police in Georgetown (or more probably, their superiors in Washington, DC) made the decision to return James Carroll to Frederick County. Officers Volkman and Harper were assigned to escort Carroll by train to the jail in Frederick. The State of

³⁵ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” Washington *Evening Star*, April 18, 1879; “Horrible Outrage Near Licksville, Frederick County, Md.,” Baltimore *Sun*, April 17, 1879

³⁶ “Summary Vengeance,” Washington *National Republican*, April 18, 1879

³⁷ “The Licksville, Md., Outrage,” Washington *Evening Star*, April 17, 1879

³⁸ “Summary Vengeance,” Washington *National Republican*, April 18, 1879

³⁹ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” Washington *Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁴⁰ “Dastardly Outrage!,” Frederick *Republican Citizen*, April 18, 1879

⁴¹ “The Frederick County, Md., Outrage,” Baltimore *Sun*, April 18, 1879; “Summary Vengeance,” Washington *National Republican*, April 18, 1879

⁴² “Dastardly Outrage!,” Frederick *Republican Citizen*, April 18, 1879

Maryland later complained about this, saying that Georgetown officers had no jurisdiction in Maryland, and that Carroll actually had the legal right to leave the train after it had crossed the state line. State authorities claimed that they would have taken Carroll back to Frederick via Baltimore, implying that what later happened in Point of Rocks would not have occurred under their watch.⁴³

Carroll was taken out of his cell in the Georgetown police station on Thursday afternoon to be transported to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad station in Washington to board the train for Frederick. Word had apparently spread in Georgetown about the arrest of Carroll, however, and the officers had to steer their charge through an angry crowd outside the police station. Newspapers reported that some in the crowd wanted to take Carroll then and there, and kill him, but the policemen were able to push through and get Carroll to the railroad station. A little after 4:30 on Thursday afternoon, Carroll, Officers Volkman and Harper, Richard Thomas and his brother F.C., and at least two reporters (with the *Evening Star*), boarded the train and left Washington.⁴⁴ It is not clear whether the officers were aware that the previous evening, a number of men had gathered at the Point of Rocks railroad station anticipating the arrival of the suspect, only to be disappointed when they found out the wrong man had been arrested.⁴⁵ The officers certainly did not know that F. C. Thomas, before leaving Washington, had sent a telegram to Point of Rocks to “Messrs. Jarboe and Offut” reading: “Prisoner caught, will leave on 4:30 train. Send notice to Licksville. Meet Dick at depot,” apparently referring to his brother, Richard Thomas.⁴⁶

The Train to Point of Rocks

The Point of Rocks depot was exactly where the train from Washington was headed. To travel from Washington to Frederick by rail, the train first had to go to Point of Rocks. This line from Washington to Point of Rocks, called the Metropolitan Branch, had been completed by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad just six years earlier in 1873. At Point of Rocks, the line connected

⁴³ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879; “An Investigation on Foot,” *Washington Post*, April 21, 1879

⁴⁴ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879; “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁴⁵ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁴⁶ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

with the B&O's main line that stretched westward to St. Louis and eastward to Baltimore. To continue on to Frederick, railroad engineers created a rail junction at Point of Rocks that enabled trains to get on the main line heading back towards Baltimore and then split off on a short extension towards Frederick at Monocacy Junction, a few miles southeast of the city.⁴⁷

Once the train was underway, the *Evening Star* reporters interviewed Carroll. He told them he was 24 years old, and that he had been born enslaved in Washington County, Maryland. His parents were no longer living, and he said he had so far always worked on either a farm or on canal boats. For the past year he had worked on a farm near Licksville. He was not a church member although he told the reporters "he used to pray when he was small." Richard Thomas told the reporters, however, that Carroll "was the leader of a colored prayer meeting and quite an exhorter, but not lately."⁴⁸

Only a few other details are known about Carroll's life. The Hagerstown *Herald and Torch Light* reported that Carroll had been born in Hagerstown, and that he had been "brought up" by the late Dr. Bishop of Smithsburg. Dr. Elijah Bishop, a native of Connecticut, moved to Smithsburg in the 1820s, started a medical practice, and married Anne Hoyer, a young woman from the area. He and Anne had a large family, and in addition to being the local doctor, Bishop also became a very successful farmer.⁴⁹ Further research is needed to understand the relationship between Carroll and Bishop.

Reporters also later uncovered one other fact about James Carroll: he had spent a term in the state penitentiary. Carroll was convicted in 1874 of larceny in Allegany County in western Maryland. He had been living for a time in Frostburg with a Mr. C. H. Hamill, and the theft was committed in Cumberland. Carroll was sentenced to 1 year and 6 months in prison, and was released in October of 1875. Apparently, his father was in prison at the same time.⁵⁰

On the train to Frederick, a reporter "[k]nowing something of the excitable character of the people in a case of this kind," encouraged Carroll to say a prayer, and told him that if he had

⁴⁷ John F. Stover, *History of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad* (Purdue University Press, 1995), 143.

⁴⁸ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁴⁹ "Coroner's Verdict," *Hagerstown Herald and Torch Light*, April 30, 1879; Thomas J. C. Williams, *A History of Washington County, Maryland*, Volume 2, Part 2 (Hagerstown, 1906), 1306-7; "Death of an Old Physician," *Hagerstown Herald and Torch Light*, April 6, 1870; "Smithsburg Items," *Hagerstown Herald and Torch Light*, April 30, 1879

⁵⁰ "A Bad Record," *Frederick Examiner*, April 30, 1879; "On Wednesday....," *Frostburg Mining Journal*, May 2, 1874.

a statement to make about the charge against him, this was the time to make it. “The only answer was a sullen look.”⁵¹

Unbeknownst to all of the people on the train except the Thomas brothers, groups of men had been gathering at the Point of Rocks railroad station all afternoon. Before word of Carroll’s arrest had been sent, excitement was first stirred when a telegram was received that someone matching Carroll’s description had been seen near the caves by the Potomac at Sandy Hook, a few miles west of Point of Rocks.⁵² Soon after, F.C. Thomas’s telegram arrived, telling of Carroll’s capture, and alerting them to the train heading towards them. Amongst the men at the station, a “consultation” was held and “a mounted messenger” – “Brick” Pomeroy – was sent to spread the word to others in the neighborhood. Within the hour “from 125 to 150 men, some on foot, others on horseback, and about 25 of them colored, had gathered near the depot.”⁵³

The first sign for the Georgetown police officers that trouble was brewing was at the Dickerson station, about eight miles from Point of Rocks. When the train stopped at the station, four or five men got on the train, “took a look at the prisoner, gave three cheers for his capture, and then got off.”⁵⁴

At the next stop, Tuscarora, the last before Point of Rocks, the *Evening Star* reporters said six armed and “stalwart” men entered the car where they, Carroll, the police officers, and the Thomas brothers sat. Another passenger in the car, Joseph Payne, later told the coroner’s jury that one of the men who had boarded announced that there were a hundred more men gathered at Point of Rocks, and told the officers “the jig was up.” Hearing this, Payne said the officers got very excited and spoke of using pistols, but Payne told them not to as “it might imperil all their lives.”⁵⁵

According to the *Evening Star* reporters accompanying James Carroll, he seemed unconcerned or oblivious to the evident danger ahead. He seemed to barely notice the men getting on the train to look at him. After the Tuscarora stop, one of the reporters suggested again that Carroll might want to pray, but he ignored them.⁵⁶

⁵¹ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁵² “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ “The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879

⁵⁵ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879; “The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879

⁵⁶ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

At the junction at Point of Rocks (called the Washington Junction), a little southeast of the railroad station, the rail line split, and one set of tracks formed a wide curve to the north to connect with the B&O main line going to Frederick and to Baltimore. The normal procedure was for the train from Washington to take the wide curve to get onto the main line, and then back the train into the Point of Rocks station to pick up passengers before heading towards Frederick. Around 6:20 p.m., the Washington train approached the junction, and according to the train's conductor, he "took the side track at a point called Sugar Loaf, pulled through siding and up to the switch," which was about 200 yards from the train station.⁵⁷

The Lynching

The mayor of Frederick, Lewis H. Moberly, was on the station platform when the train from Washington arrived. He had received a telegram that afternoon advising him to go to Point of Rocks. As the train came to a stop, Moberly later said "the crowd that had been standing around the depot immediately made a great rush in that direction..."⁵⁸ The *Evening Star* reporters said that about 75 men stormed and "besieged" the train. According to the train's baggage master, 100 people were present. The *Baltimore Sun* reported that around 300 people surrounded the train, with about 100 of them on horseback.⁵⁹

Several men rushed into the car in which Carroll was sitting. Estimates ranged from 12 to 30 men. The conductor just said "crowds" of people boarded the train "almost falling over each other's shoulders."⁶⁰ The other passenger in the car, Joseph Payne, was knocked over a seat and someone pointed a pistol at him. The Georgetown police officers tried to hold back the mob, but they were quickly overpowered. Revolvers were pointed at the officers, and they were forced to the other end of the car. Someone called out, "Don't harm the officers!" Carroll was bodily picked up and carried towards the door. The *Evening Star* reporters, in the car, said that Carroll struggled and tried to grab onto parts of the train to keep from being pulled out. At the bottom of

⁵⁷ "The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair," *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879

⁵⁸ "Hemp!," *Frederick Daily Times*, April 18, 1879; "Dastardly Outrage!," *Frederick Republican Citizen*, April 18, 1879; "The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair," *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879

⁵⁹ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879; "The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair," *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879; "The Frederick County, Md., Outrage," *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879

⁶⁰ "The Frederick County, Md., Outrage," *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879; "The Point of Rocks Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879; "The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair," *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879; "Summary Vengeance," *Washington National Republican*, April 18, 1879; "Lynch Law In Maryland," *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

the train steps, as Carroll was being held upside down, everyone had to halt because another train from the west was coming through. After it had passed, someone put a noose over Carroll's head.⁶¹

When Carroll was taken off the train, he still had handcuffs on and his feet were tied together.⁶² The *Evening Star* reporters said that "Carroll was half-carried, half-dragged across the now free track to the embankment on the east side of the road. This embankment was six or more feet high..."⁶³ Rain had been falling and the area was muddy so it was hard to get up the embankment. At the top of the embankment there was a six-rail fence. Carroll was thrown over the fence, and dragged by the rope around his neck into a plowed field. One reporter wrote that he was "pulled along by the neck gasping, and his body scoured an oozy track in the soft soil."⁶⁴ At some point the rope broke and the procession stopped while it was fixed.⁶⁵

They had gone about 50 yards from the train when the Georgetown officers escaped from the train and tried to run through the muck to reach Carroll. "Notwithstanding the heavy odds against them," a reporter wrote, "they came forward exclaiming, 'Gentlemen, this must not be done. It is against law and order. We must perform our duty and protect this man.' The crowd stood for a minute; then several of them yelled 'Go back' you can't come here.'" The officers continued their charge but both were seized and taken back to the train, which the conductor had by that time backed into the station. "Both officers on the way kept protesting that it was not right; that the law should take its course." The officers were placed on the train and guarded until the train left for Frederick.⁶⁶

The mob continued dragging Carroll towards "a small clump of woods," about 200 yards from the railroad tracks. Before reaching it, Richard Thomas, the husband of the alleged victim, Regina Thomas, pulled out a knife and tried to stab Carroll, but he was stopped before he could reach Carroll. Up to this point, Carroll had not said a word. But now "gasping for breath"

⁶¹ "The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair," *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879; "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879; "Hemp!," *Frederick Daily Times*, April 18, 1879

⁶² "The Hemen Necklace!," *Frederick Daily Times*, April 19, 1879

⁶³ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ "The Point of Rocks Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

⁶⁶ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879; "The Frederick County, Md., Outrage," *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879

because the rope had tightened around his neck, he said “For God’s sake, kill me as quick as you can.”⁶⁷

Once they had reached the trees, the rope was thrown over a limb of a black walnut tree “by a number of young men who climbed it for that purpose.” One man kicked Carroll “savagely” in the head twice as he lay on his back.

“Three men at the end of [the rope] soon had him swinging with his feet some nine inches from the ground. He drew his tied feet up once or twice and pressed his handcuffed hands against the sapling. A big canal man reached up and forced the victim’s head through his handcuffed hands. He died in ten minutes in that position.”⁶⁸

Carroll died at approximately 6:45 p.m. He was still clutching his old black felt hat in his left hand. As if the hanging could be any more horrific, a reporter remarked that the hanging “was not a professional one, the knot, instead of slipping to the back of the neck, catching under the left jaw, throwing the face upwards.”⁶⁹

Once Carroll was dead, “[t]hen began a scramble for mementos of the hanging.”⁷⁰ Some people took twigs and pieces from the tree, while others “carried off pieces of the clothing (badly torn by the rough handling) from the dangling body as ghastly relics of the execution.”⁷¹ As the mob began to disperse, a man was stationed by Carroll’s body to guard it until county authorities could arrive to take it down.⁷²

The county coroner did not arrive until the afternoon of the following day.⁷³ By early Friday morning, people were gathering at the hanging site to look at the body. A Baltimore *Sun* reporter described his experience:

“Over a fence, across a plowed field, and through a grove of brambles, the visitor, when he had reached the crest of the hill, came upon the scene. Away in the distance Loudoun heights were seen. Near by was Rock Hall run, a little further the railroad track, and as the bleak wind whistled through the leafless trees the dark body swayed gently like a pendulum. The clothing was covered with mud, the left arm, from which the coat had been torn, was bare and dirty, the head drooped to the right, touching the limb of the tree,

⁶⁷ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

⁷¹ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁷² “Dastardly Outrage!,” *Frederick Republican Citizen*, April 18, 1879

⁷³ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879; “Lynching of James Carroll,” *Frederick Examiner*, April 23, 1879

the knot had slipped behind his right ear, the tongue was protruding, and the face, with all its darkness, looked wan and ghastly. Nobody ventured to touch the body, everyone seeming to wait the arrival of the coroner...”⁷⁴

Late in the afternoon, the county coroner John Wallace and a constable arrived from Frederick, had the body cut down, and took it back to Frederick. Carroll’s body was taken to Charles Mealey’s livery stable on All Saints Street, and placed in a coffin.⁷⁵

The Coroner’s Jury

A coroner’s jury was chosen by John Motter, the county’s State’s Attorney, and was composed of William F. Johnson, foreman, William P. Rice, G. Joseph Doll, Lewis H. Dill, Joseph M. Ebberts, Lewis Rice, B.G. Harris, Edward Sinn, John McPherson, John D. Zeiler, Charles W. Miller, and Horatio Bentz. The *Washington Evening Star* pointed out that the jury was composed of six Democrats and six Republicans, which may have been standard practice at the time, or perhaps Motter felt a need to show impartiality in his jury selections.⁷⁶

The coroner’s jury was summoned to Mealey’s stable at 10:00 on Saturday morning, April 19, to view James Carroll’s body. A large crowd had gathered at the stable that morning, and “very great interest was manifested in the actions of the jury.” When the coffin was opened, the rope used to hang Carroll was still imbedded in his neck, and it was discovered that the little finger on Carroll’s hand had been cut off. This was later blamed on one of the lynchers from Loudoun County, who took it as a “ghastly memento of the fiend.” After the jury and a doctor had examined the body, they were adjourned to meet at the Frederick County Courthouse on the following Monday morning, “when testimony will be heard and a verdict rendered.”⁷⁷

Carroll’s body was then taken to the burial ground connected with Montevue Hospital, the county’s almshouse located about two miles northwest of the city, and “there placed in a grave that had been prepared by some of the inmates of the institution. There was no ceremony whatever.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*; “Lynching of James Carroll,” *Frederick Examiner*, April 23, 1879

⁷⁶ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 1879; “The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879; “An Investigation on Foot,” *Washington Post*, April 21, 1879; “The Thomas Outrage Case,” *Frederick Daily Times*, April 21, 1879; “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 21, 1879

⁷⁷ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 1879; “The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879; “Lynching of James Carroll,” *Frederick Examiner*, April 23, 1879

⁷⁸ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 1879

In the meantime, Frederick Constable Rine was sent to Point of Rocks to find witnesses of the lynching to appear before the coroner's jury. Finding witnesses who were willing to testify was difficult, but the constable did summon Frank Hipsley, the Point of Rocks telegraph operator; M.J. McLack, a night watchman; and Charles M. Boyle, a resident of Point of Rocks. Other witnesses summoned were Capt. J.R. Michael, the conductor of the train; Joseph Payne, who had been a passenger on the train; Lewis Moberly, the mayor of Frederick; Oliver Mussetter, baggage master on the train; and Dr. Justin Dunott, the doctor who had examined Carroll's body in the livery stable.⁷⁹

On Monday, April 21, the coroner's jury met in the Grand Jury room of the county courthouse. Witnesses McLack and Hipsley did not appear. The other witnesses all related the details of the lynching, but none could identify any of the people involved in the lynching. The inability of anyone to recognize any of the lynching participants even became a source of humor.

“In answer to the State's attorney's statement that it was almost impossible to find any one who knew anything about the lynching, the coroner, who is a good natured Irishman, said ‘that it was because every man of them was implicated. Why,’ continued he, ‘I saw the boy whom they said had climbed the tree to pull up the rope, but when I asked him he said he know nothing about it, and that I would have to go to h__l if I wanted to find out.’ This remark caused great laughter.”⁸⁰

In the end, the jury deliberated for about two hours, and delivered the verdict “That the negro, James Carroll, was forcibly taken from Capt. Jacob Michael's train at or near Washington Junction, on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, on the 17th day of April, 1879, by a body of men unknown to the jury, and by said body of men unlawfully hanged.”⁸¹

Who murdered James Carroll? Although the members of the coroner's jury were unable to identify a single perpetrator, almost all of the newspaper accounts reveal that most members of the lynch mob were well known. The Baltimore *Sun* reported that “the names of quite a number of those who participated in the lynching are known, and others can be easily obtained.”⁸² None

⁷⁹ “The Thomas Outrage Case,” Frederick *Daily Times*, April 21, 1879; “The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair,” Baltimore *Sun*, April 22, 1879

⁸⁰ “The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair,” Baltimore *Sun*, April 22, 1879; Frederick *Daily Times*, April 22, 1879

⁸¹ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” Washington *Evening Star*, April 21, 1879; “Lynching of James Carroll,” Frederick *Examiner*, April 23, 1879

⁸² “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” Baltimore *Sun*, April 21, 1879

of those involved bothered to wear a mask or try to disguise themselves. The *Washington Post* claimed that they were “among the wealthiest and most respected farmers of this and the adjoining (Montgomery) county.”⁸³ Men from Loudoun County, across the Potomac River in Virginia, were also participants.⁸⁴ In his testimony to the coroner’s jury, Joseph Payne, a passenger on the train with Carroll, “stalwart canal boat men” were the ones who pulled Carroll off the train.⁸⁵ But according to the *Baltimore Sun*, “almost every man in the neighborhood had lent a hand in the lynching.” The *Sun* concluded that those who lynched Carroll felt they had a right to take action. “They said they were not ashamed or afraid of what they were going to do. They were law-abiding citizens, with wives, sisters and children who needed their protection and who were at the mercy of colored tramps, and they were determined that vengeance should be swift and sure.”⁸⁶ One of the Frederick newspapers, the *Republican Citizen*, agreed with this assessment: “They were honest farmers living in a district where hundreds of negroes were employed; they had left mothers, wives, and daughters and sisters at their homes, and the vengeance they had taken was for their future protection.”⁸⁷

The Reaction to the Lynching

The public reaction of white citizens to James Carroll’s execution is difficult to gauge. When the coroner’s jury declared that Carroll’s death was attributable to “a body of men unknown to the jury,” the *Baltimore Sun* claimed that the verdict “seems to give very general satisfaction.”⁸⁸ One local paper, the *Shepherdstown Register*, was strongly supportive of the lynching. An editorial declared that Carroll’s fate “should be approved and applauded by every right-thinking man and woman in our land...”

“To talk of waiting on the law to take its course under such circumstances, where the crime is admitted and no doubt exists as to the identity of the party, is the height of folly, and could only be uttered through false sentimentality or a base of prejudice.”

⁸³ “Summarily Strangled,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 1879

⁸⁴ “The Frederick County, Md., Outrage,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879

⁸⁵ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁸⁶ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1879

⁸⁷ “Dastardly Outrage!,” *Frederick Republican Citizen*, April 18, 1879

⁸⁸ “The Point of Rocks Lynching Affair,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1879

The writer claimed to know “the character of the people who did the lynching, and a more honorable, just, humane class of men do not live on God’s green earth.” The editorial concluded that it was, in fact, these men’s “high sense of right and respect for virtue that prompted them to visit vengeance upon the fiend.”⁸⁹

Most newspapers in the region, however, were opposed to the unlawful way in which Carroll was killed, although they expressed no sympathy for Carroll, and as one of the newspapers put it, his alleged crime made his death “as nearly a justifiable case of lynching as can well be conceived.”⁹⁰ The *Baltimore Sun* lamented that the participants resorted to taking the law into their own hands.

“But lynch law, the violent presumption of excited men in taking the law in their own hands, can never be justified – if for no other reason, for this, at least, that no judgment can be clear, or be a safe one when men’s minds are darkened by passion, and must ever be deprecated because of the frightful abuses to which it may lead; and because, without the observance due to the enacted law, society itself is in danger.”⁹¹

The *Washington Evening Star* also criticized the lynching:

“...the act of the lynchers is one that will bring no credit upon the people of Maryland. It has the spirit of lawlessness that one expects to find only in desperate border communities and which has no excuse in a civilization as advanced as that of Frederick County, Maryland. There can be no pretense that ample and speedy justice would not have been visited on the criminal by the courts of Maryland. By their hasty action the lynchers have, however, both discredited their courts as dispensers of justice, and themselves as a law-abiding people.”⁹²

The *Hagerstown Herald and Torch Light*, in neighboring Washington County, held a similar view:

“But at the same time the manner of his execution cannot but be deprecated. We profess to be a civilized community and no man’s life should be taken but by the process of the law. An infuriated mob is not always capable of trying a man’s innocence or guilt....Strong suspicion is equivalent to guilt in the eyes of a body of excited men. The law is wisely slow, and few men who commit heinous offences escape. It is better for a community to restrain its indignation, than to relapse into barbarous practices.”⁹³

⁸⁹ “The Point of Rocks Lynching,” *Shepherdstown Register*, April 26, 1879

⁹⁰ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁹¹ “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1879

⁹² “Lynch Law in Maryland,” *Washington Evening Star*, April 18, 1879

⁹³ “Coroner’s Verdict,” *Hagerstown Herald and Torch Light*, April 30, 1879

Voices Ignored

The missing voices in this story of lynching are those of the African American community. Not a single comment or reaction from a black person was mentioned in any of the many newspaper articles written about this incident. The fledgling African American press in the country seems not to have even covered the lynching. Only the Washington *National Republican* newspaper voiced an opinion that identified the cause of the lynching – because Carroll “was colored.” This newspaper was originally founded in 1860 to support the candidacy of Abraham Lincoln for President, and it continued after the Civil War to support African Americans and their quest to become full citizens of the United States. In an editorial on April 19, the *National Republican* contrasted the treatment of Carroll with that of a white man from Baltimore who had recently raped a woman, which eventually had resulted in her death, and who then had murdered her father. “There is no talk or thought of lynching him,” claimed the *National Republican*, “for the reason that he is a white rascal, and is afforded every opportunity to escape through the loopholes of the law.” Carroll, on the other hand, was lynched. Why the different punishment? Because, answered the newspaper, “the offender was colored, and that afforded a license for a mob of white men to execute justice instead of leaving the law to avenge the outrage after trial and conviction.” The editorial further argued that “The State of Maryland cannot afford to indulge such a laxity of law and government as these two recent cases involve. We wait to see what action is to be taken against the murderers of Carroll, for they are nothing less.”⁹⁴ No action, of course, was taken against the murderers, and they remained unidentified and unpunished.

Aftermath

Regina Thomas survived the alleged attack, and in the 1880 census, she and her husband Richard and their children were still living in Licksville. At some point, however, they moved to Woodbine, Carroll County. Regina Thomas died there in 1891, and was buried in the cemetery of St. Michael’s Catholic Church in Poplar Springs, Howard County. Her obituary in the

⁹⁴ “Law and Justice in Maryland,” Washington *National Republican*, April 19, 1879

Frederick *News* referred to the “peculiarly sad circumstances surrounding” her “sudden death,” but did not elaborate.⁹⁵

As far as is known, James Carroll still lies in Frederick in what was the Montevue Hospital cemetery, known as a “potter’s field,” the final resting place of those who died forgotten, without family, unclaimed, and discarded. The hospital is long gone, but the cemetery remains, still on county property. The dead are remembered by one lone marker that reads, “Memory, Potter Field.”⁹⁶

⁹⁵ “Mrs. Richard Thomas,” *Frederick News*, July 24, 1891; “Funerals,” *Frederick News*, July 29, 1891; “Woodbine Items,” *Westminster Democratic Advocate*, August 1, 1891.

⁹⁶ Katherine Heerbrandt, “No Markers for the Indigent Buried at Potter’s Field,” *Frederick News-Post*, March 2, 2003.

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The Murder of John Biggus, 1887

A few days after John Biggus was murdered by a white mob in Frederick, Maryland, on November 23, 1887, the city was in a state of “intense excitement.”⁹⁷ On the evening of Monday, November 28, the sheriff of Frederick County, Luther Derr, was enjoying a show in the Opera House, on North Market Street. A messenger arrived to inform Derr that an army of armed African American men was approaching Frederick from different directions, intent on exacting revenge for the lynching of Biggus. Derr quickly left the theater, spread the word of the impending attack, and organized a defense. He called out a contingent of the Frederick Riflemen, a local militia of the Maryland National Guard, deputized over a hundred men to guard the town jail and other buildings, and sent out pickets to watch every approach to town. More and more men, with every conceivable type of firearm, joined their townsmen atop the virtual ramparts. By late Monday evening, over two hundred men were estimated to be guarding the town, which had taken on a “warlike appearance,” where on “all sides the glistening steel barrels are seen in the cold moonlight.”⁹⁸ Around 11:00 p.m., a young African American man galloped into town on a horse, and was ordered to halt. He stopped but then wheeled his horse around and took off quickly in the direction from whence he had come. An excitable defender fired toward the rider as he rode off. Figuring the horseman was the advance scout of the approaching army, Sheriff Derr and his men prepared for the onslaught.⁹⁹

Assault on Mary Yeakle

By 1887, there had already been 20 lynchings in Maryland since the end of the Civil War, including one in Point of Rocks in southern Frederick County in 1879.¹⁰⁰ Another one had been

⁹⁷ “Frederick Excited,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 29, 1887. [See Bibliography for complete citations of newspaper sources. All newspaper sources are scans of original newspaper pages.] The last name of John Biggus is spelled differently in various sources. Many newspapers used “Bigus,” but the local Frederick newspapers spelled it “Biggus,” as did other local sources.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ The events of Monday, November 28, 1887, are reported in “Some Unnecessary Excitement,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 29, 1887; “Frederick Excited,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 29, 1887; *Frederick Examiner* as repeated in “Stop This!,” *Middletown Valley Register*, Dec. 2, 1887; and “Local News. Excitement in Frederick,” *Frederick Republican Citizen*, Dec. 2, 1887.

¹⁰⁰ See “Lynchings in Maryland,” a compilation of lynchings that occurred in Maryland between 1854 to 1933, on the website created by the *Baltimore Sun*, <https://news.baltimoresun.com/maryland-lynchings/>. “Lynchings in Maryland” includes the lynching of Page Wallace in 1880, but I do not include him in the total number of lynchings in Maryland because he was actually lynched in Virginia.

committed in neighboring Loudoun County in Virginia to the south.¹⁰¹ But none had occurred in the city of Frederick. Frederick was a prosperous town, and citizens were proud of its progress, its civic attainments, its fine houses, numerous banks and businesses, and cultural attractions such as its Opera House. No one thought a lynching could happen in this, the third most populous city in Maryland.¹⁰² As one of the deputy sheriffs of Frederick County remarked one evening in late 1887, “no one in Frederick had the nerve to do any lynching.”¹⁰³ About an hour after this was said, the first murder by lynching in Frederick was perpetrated by a white mob.

On Friday evening, November 18, 1887, a little after 9:00 p.m., a well-known and prominent white citizen of Frederick, Mary L. Yeakle, fifty-five years old, left the house of friends she had been visiting and started walking to her home on South Market St. in Frederick. In an interview with the *Frederick News* the following day, Yeakle said that as she crossed the bridge over Carroll Creek, an African American man standing in front of a restaurant spoke to her, and then allegedly started following her. The man passed her and she lost sight of him. Half a block later, as she continued past All Saints St., the same man jumped out at her from a doorway and hit her in the face, knocking her down. He continued to hit her and when she screamed, he threatened to kill her. Two men who witnessed the assault ran to her, and the assailant fled. Yeakle was helped to her home, a doctor was called, and a search party formed to look for the culprit. The injuries to Yeakle were severe: a fractured nose, a partially fractured jaw, a serious injury to her right eye, a deep gash in her forehead, a cut on her lower lip, and deep bruises on her face. She said she thought her attacker had struck her with some sort of metal in his hand, and the assumption was he had used brass knuckles. The motive for the attack was never determined because the assailant apparently was not trying to rob Yeakle, nor did he seem intent on sexually assaulting her.¹⁰⁴

The Arrest of John Biggus

Yeakle did not know the assailant, but was able to give a general description of him, as was also a man who had had a conversation with the attacker before the encounter with Yeakle.

¹⁰¹ See “Lynching in Virginia,” on the *Encyclopedia Virginia* website, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Lynching_in_Virginia

¹⁰² U.S Census Office, *Statistics of the Population of the United States, Vol. 1*, Table VI (Washington: GPO, 1883), p.419

¹⁰³ “The State of Maryland,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 28, 1887

¹⁰⁴ “A Dastardly Assault,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 19, 1887.

The *News* reported the following day that, “Suspicion rests on Geo. Parrish and several others, one or two of whom have been arrested.”¹⁰⁵ Parrish was suspected apparently because he had just been released from the state penitentiary, but he was not arrested. Three other men were, however. Joe Hall, a resident of Washington, DC, who had just arrived in town, and John Biggus, a laborer who lived on a nearby farm owned by Harvey Lease, were both arrested on Saturday.¹⁰⁶ On Monday, another man, Andrew Johnson, was arrested because according to the *Baltimore Sun*, Johnson was “a stranger here, who had been acting very suspiciously...”¹⁰⁷

The newspaper accounts of the incident do not indicate why Biggus was initially suspected. The *Frederick News* reported two days after the assault, “Biggus, it is alleged, has already criminated [sic] himself by the conflicting stories he has told.” He also wore three brass rings on his fingers, and had blood on his clothes. He was arrested for “assault with intent to rob.”¹⁰⁸

John Biggus was nineteen years old, and was from the Woodville area of eastern Frederick County. His parents were Henry and Emma Biggus. He had only been in Frederick a short time, and earlier in the year had lived with a Mr. Myers of Woodbine, on the southern edge of Carroll County.¹⁰⁹ Biggus himself had been the victim of an assault after having arrived in Frederick. The *News* reported in August of 1887 that a John James had been arrested for “assault and battery” on Biggus.¹¹⁰ The outcome of that case is unknown.

Biggus was arrested on Saturday afternoon, November 19, and taken before Magistrate J. D. Barrick. As witnesses could not be called then, the hearing was postponed to Monday afternoon. In the meantime, the newspaper press published vivid details of the assault, and one newspaper called it “the most brutal that has ever occurred in Frederick...” The incident “caused general excitement in Frederick,” and the *News* concluded that “had the brute been captured last night he would have been summarily dealt with on the spot.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ “Looking for a Brute,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 19, 1887; “Brutal Assault on a Lady,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 21, 1887; “The Assault Case,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 21, 1887

¹⁰⁷ “Mrs. Yeakle Identifies Her Assailant,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 22, 1887

¹⁰⁸ “The Assault Case,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 21, 1887

¹⁰⁹ US Census information from Ancestry.com; “The colored man...,” *Westminster Democratic Advocate*, Nov. 26, 1887; A photograph of Biggus’s grave marker is found at https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/102902977/john-h_-bigius

¹¹⁰ “At the Magistrate’s,” *Frederick News*, Aug. 4, 1887

¹¹¹ “A Dastardly Assault,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 19, 1887

The publicity given the attack ensured that when Biggus's hearing was held on Monday, a large crowd was present in front of the magistrate's office. Because of the crowd, Magistrate Barrick moved the hearing to the basement of the Courthouse.¹¹² Fifteen witnesses each were called by the State, prosecuting the case, and by the defense. One of the State's witnesses, Henrietta Brooks, was an African American woman who said she had passed Biggus on Market St. earlier on Friday evening, and then later, had met him again coming down an alley about two blocks west of where the assault had taken place. Brooks said that Biggus was very out of breath and fatigued. Another witness, the constable who had arrested Biggus on Saturday, testified that when he placed Biggus under arrest, Biggus did not ask why he was being arrested, and when they passed the spot where the assault had occurred, he began talking about the assault.¹¹³

Biggus said he was innocent, and that on the night of the attack, he had been at a meeting at the Salvation Army building, and then afterward, had escorted a friend home. Biggus's statements "were corroborated by a number of his colored friends," according to a Baltimore *Sun* reporter. Most importantly, none of the State's witnesses were able to positively identify Biggus as the assailant of Mary Yeakle. The *Sun* concluded, "It is not generally believed, however, that the right person has yet been apprehended."¹¹⁴

Magistrate Barrick then moved the hearing back to his offices on W. Church St. to hear the testimony of two additional witnesses. One, Mrs. Charles Eader, claimed she had also been followed by an African American man on the previous Friday evening, and when she asked an acquaintance to walk with her, the man changed course and stopped following her. But neither Eader nor the other witness was able to positively identify Biggus.¹¹⁵

The Identification

Although some of the State's witnesses said Biggus fit the general description of the suspect, including having a limp, Magistrate Barrick was not satisfied that was enough to hold Biggus. Apparently, Barrick had been reluctant to ask Mary Yeakle herself to try and identify

¹¹² "The Assault Case," *Frederick News*, Nov. 21, 1887

¹¹³ "They Have the Man," *Frederick News*, Nov. 22, 1887; "Mrs. Yeakle Identifies Her Assailant," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 22, 1887

¹¹⁴ "Brutal Assault on a Lady," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 21, 1887

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*; "They Have the Man," *Frederick News*, Nov. 22, 1887

Biggus because she was recovering from her injuries. But since no one else could identify Biggus, Barrick made arrangements to take Biggus to Yeakle's house so she could see him.¹¹⁶

Yeakle was looking out her window when the participants from the hearing arrived at her house on S. Market St. When she saw Biggus on the sidewalk she said she immediately recognized him. To be certain, Magistrate Barrick took Biggus inside and asked Yeakle to identify Biggus as her attacker. After asking Biggus to walk around the room, Yeakle said he was the man. Barrick asked her if she was positive, and she said, "I am positive that that is the identical rascal."¹¹⁷ The two other men who had been arrested on suspicion of having assaulted Yeakle, Joe Hall and Andrew Johnson, were not brought before her for possible identification.

At the conclusion of the hearing, Biggus again said he was innocent, but he was formally arrested and taken to the city jail on South Street to await a grand jury's decision as to whether he should stand trial. Both Hall and Johnson were released.

The Lynching

The *Frederick News* reported that no one had interfered when Biggus was taken to the jail and "it is not thought that any violent measures will now be adopted."¹¹⁸ But the State's Attorney, Frank Norwood, and others, were not so sure. Norwood later testified that there had been an angry crowd in the street in front of Yeakle's house when she was identifying Biggus, and "the threatening appearance of the crowd" made him uneasy.¹¹⁹ The *Baltimore Sun* commented on steps taken by Norwood and others because of this mood:

"In view of the prevailing excitement over the occurrence and the many threats of violence toward the perpetrator, if discovered, the justice and State's attorney and jail authorities concluded that it would be advisable not to make public tonight [Monday] the fact of Mrs. Yeakle's positive identification of the man."¹²⁰

But that strategy failed, because there was an apparent attempt that night to lynch Biggus. A mob of men and boys gathered at the jail around 11:00 p.m. on Monday evening and put out all the

¹¹⁶ "They Have the Man," *Frederick News*, Nov. 22, 1887

¹¹⁷ "Mrs. Yeakle Identifies Her Assailant," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 22, 1887; "They Have the Man," *Frederick News*, Nov. 22, 1887

¹¹⁸ "They Have the Man," *Frederick News*, Nov. 22, 1887

¹¹⁹ "The State of Maryland," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 28, 1887

¹²⁰ "Mrs. Yeakle Identifies Her Assailant," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 22, 1887

street lights near the jail. Before they could do anything else, however, someone said the police were coming and the mob dispersed.¹²¹

Frank Norwood continued to be worried on Tuesday. He saw Sheriff Derr in the Courthouse that morning and again warned Derr about the possible danger to Biggus and reminded him that Derr had the power to call for extra men to guard the jail.¹²² For the rest of the day, Norwood said he noticed “suspicious circumstances” in the streets of Frederick. The *Frederick News*, for its part, seemed to be both contributing to the heightened excitement in Frederick while at the same time expressing warnings. An afternoon newspaper, the *News* published this editorial on Tuesday:

“Never before in the history of Frederick have the people been stirred to such feelings of indignation as within the past few days, since the dastardly assault by a negro fiend upon a modest and respected lady. And never before has the need of a more efficient police system seemed more apparent. Until now the good behavior of this city has been unquestioned. Its fair fame in that direction should not be smirched through a lack of proper police vigilance.”¹²³

Around 10:00 p.m. on Tuesday, Norwood noticed various groups of men in the streets, some of whom seemed to be moving towards the jail. He started looking for Sheriff Derr but found Deputy Sheriff Stambaugh first, who reassured Norwood that everything was under control and that a lynching could not happen in Frederick. Norwood remembered Stambaugh saying “no one in Frederick had the nerve to do any lynching.”¹²⁴ Around 11:30, Norwood called Derr by telephone at the jail, and was told by Derr that everything was quiet at the jail. Norwood was somewhat reassured and retired for the night.¹²⁵

Things did not remain quiet at the jail however. More and more men joined the crowd already at the jail. “Some of them came from the county and were mounted on horses,” according to the *News*. “Delegations were present from Point of Rocks, Licksville, New Market and other county towns,” as well as from the city. Almost all of the men wore masks and tried in

¹²¹ “John H. Bigus Hanged,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 23, 1887; htl1124

¹²² “The State of Maryland,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 28, 1887

¹²³ “Never before in the history...,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 22, 1887

¹²⁴ “The State of Maryland,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 28, 1887

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

other ways to disguise their identities, including turning their coats inside out. It was “impossible to recognize more than a few of them,” claimed the *News* reporter.¹²⁶

These men were not the first at the jail with lynching on their mind, however. Earlier in the evening, “a number of small boys hanged a dummy on the telegraph pole in front of the jail.”¹²⁷

The mob at the jail seemed well-organized. There was a definite leader, someone who was never publicly identified. He surrounded the jail with men, had the street lights put out, and posted men at various street corners in the vicinity to block any one else from approaching the jail.¹²⁸ Sheriff Derr later said he had “heard rumors” that men were coming to take Biggus, so put the best locks he could find on all the jail’s doors. Just before midnight he heard his name being called from the yard in front of the jail. From his second-floor office window, he estimated 100-150 men were gathered in front of the jail, and that some had pistols and others carried axes and hatchets. He asked what they wanted, and the answer was they wanted the keys to the jail and they wanted Biggus. Derr, leaning out the window, refused, and as he said this, someone barely missed hitting him with a rock.¹²⁹

Derr had not called for reinforcements, and the only men in the jail that night, other than prisoners, were Derr, two men who worked in the jail, and a civilian, a bricklayer, whom Derr had asked to stay and help protect the jail. But there were others present in the jail that night. This Frederick jail was relatively new, having been built in 1876. The jail part of the structure was actually attached to and positioned behind a big house, which served as the home of the county sheriff. So trapped inside the jail with Derr and the others was Derr’s wife, Victoria, and their six children. He later said his family was “nearly crazed with fright, my wife becoming very sick.”¹³⁰

After the sheriff refused to hand over the keys, the leader of the mob selected six men and they went to the west side of the building and began hacking at the door with an axe. Supposedly, the axe, and rope and other tools, had come from the United Fire Company’s engine house a few blocks away on Market St. While the mob was trying to break into the jail, the

¹²⁶ “Lynched!!,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887; “John H. Bigus Hanged,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 23, 1887

¹²⁷ “Lynched!!,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887

¹²⁸ “John H. Bigus Hanged,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 23, 1887; “The Frederick Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

¹²⁹ “The Frederick Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

warden of the jail, Jacob Miller, took the keys and ran up to the attic to try and hide them. Sheriff Derr later said that since he had recently upgraded the quality of the locks on all the jail doors, he felt confident that night that no one could break in without the keys. He also began to ring the bell atop the jail as a signal for help. Someone from the mob told him to stop or else he would be made to stop. Derr said no one came to their assistance or if they did, they had been unable to get through the mob. Since State's Attorney Norwood later testified that he had called Derr on the telephone earlier that evening, it was never explained in the press reports why Derr did not simply use the phone to call for help.¹³¹

The attackers found the west side door too sturdy to break down, so they next tried a basement door. They easily broke through this door and ran through the jail's basement engine room and upstairs to the cells, breaking locks on all the doors in their way. The warden of the jail, Jacob Miller, was later asked by the coroner's jury why he had not tried to stop the mob from taking Biggus. His reply: "Did not make any effort to rescue the prisoner from the mob for the reason that I think a man would have been a D—d fool to have tried it."¹³² Sheriff Derr agreed, saying that it "would have been a reckless waste of life for my man to have fired into the mob."¹³³

Once in the jail, members of the mob quickly found Biggus's cell, broke the lock, and tried to put a noose around his neck. Biggus fought fiercely and it took three men holding him down before they succeeded. They then marched him out of the jail. According to Sheriff Derr, only fifteen minutes had elapsed between his hearing voices in the jail yard and Biggus being taken out of the jail.¹³⁴ When Sheriff Derr was asked later why he had not followed the mob after they had taken Biggus, he said he was tending to his wife, "who was completely prostrated by the sudden onslaught upon our home."¹³⁵

Biggus protested that he was innocent and that they had the wrong man. The mob did not stop however, and led him to the street in front of the jail (South Street). The plan had been to lynch Biggus there on one of the street's telegraph poles. But they deemed the crossbar too high, so they continued westward on South St. Whether the mob had planned an alternate site, or

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ "Lynched!!," *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887; "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

¹³⁵ "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 25, 1887

happened to think of it on the spot is not known, but they turned off South Street onto the Jefferson Pike and stopped in front of the farmhouse of George Rizer. This, as someone in the mob must have known, was Mary Yeakle's childhood home. George Rizer was not a relative of Yeakle's and he had no idea what was happening in front of his house until after the hanging.¹³⁶

The mob led Biggus by the rope to a locust tree in the field opposite the house, on the east side of the road. His red flannel shirt had been torn from his body and all he had on was a pair of blue overalls. The rope was thrown over a crook in the tree, and it was tightened around his neck. Biggus asked for the noose to be loosened so he could speak. Then the rope tying his hands came loose and he reached for the noose to take it off. "Though he fought desperately and begged for his life, his arms were pinioned promptly and the rope again adjusted."¹³⁷ Biggus was asked to confess to assaulting Mary Yeakle. Instead of confessing, he repeated that he was innocent, and that Joe Hall was the guilty man. He said he was with Hall that night and saw Hall attack Yeakle. Someone called out he was lying. Almost immediately the rope was pulled from behind, raising Biggus several feet off the ground. Three pistol shots were then fired into Biggus's body by someone in the mob, and he was declared dead.¹³⁸

The Inquest and Coroner's Jury

Biggus's body remained hanging through the night. Later that morning (Wednesday), "hundreds of men, women and children" visited the scene of the lynching and the jail.¹³⁹ At 10:00, Frederick County Coroner Thomas Turner convened an inquest at the lynching site, and after Biggus's body was examined, he was cut down, placed in a plain coffin, and taken to Montevue Hospital. (Montevue was the hospital for the county's poor and indigent population.) A coroner's jury was scheduled for Friday morning to determine the cause of death. Biggus's

¹³⁶ "Lynched!!," *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887; "John H. Bigus Hanged," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 23, 1887; "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887. This was the second hanging near the Rizer farmhouse. The first occurred during the Civil War in 1863 when Confederate spy William Richardson was hanged on Rizer's farm after a military trial. A few months before the lynching of Biggus, the locust tree that had been used to hang Richardson was cut down. See "Hanging of a Spy," *Middletown Valley Register*, July 10, 1863, and March 1, 1887 entry in James Boston, Ed., *So We Move Along...": The Diaries of Lewis and Jacob L. Engelbrecht, 1882-1896* (Historical Society of Frederick County and Publish America, 2006), p.81

¹³⁷ "John H. Bigus Hanged," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 23, 1887

¹³⁸ "Ibid.," "Lynched!!," *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887

¹³⁹ "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887; "Lynched!!," *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887

father, Henry Biggus, from Woodville, arrived in town and asked for possession of his son's body, which was eventually granted.¹⁴⁰

When Biggus's clothes that were left in the jail were searched, a letter was found in his vest pocket addressed to a young woman in town, Ida Barnes. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, Biggus was "very devoted in his attentions" to Barnes.¹⁴¹ For some reason, the *Frederick News* printed the contents of the letter in the newspaper, with apparently no thought for the feelings of Barnes and others:

"My Dear Lady Friend, Miss Ida Barnes: It does afford me much pleasure to inform you in a few lines that I am well and hope when these few lines reach you they may find you in the same state of health. My dear indeed, indeed I love you and no one but you, for you lay near to my heart and I think about you day and night. No more at present. Please answer this, My Dear, John Biggus"¹⁴²

Barnes had visited Biggus in jail. When Biggus was first arrested the day after the assault on Mary Yeakle, it was noticed that he wore three rings on his fingers. At the hearing on the following Monday, Biggus was no longer wearing the rings. After the lynching, the *Baltimore Sun* reported that "it is asserted" that he gave the rings to Barnes when she visited him in jail and asked her not to return them to him as they could be used to convict him.¹⁴³

The coroner's jury met on Friday morning, November 25, in the Courthouse. The members of the jury were Lewis G. Kemp, Benjamin F. Brown, George W. Cramer, Leonard C. Mullinix, John Ebert, George Eissler, Milton A. Woodward, George Brust, Rufus Rager, John Baumgardner, Henry F. Schmidt, and Robert Ramsburg.¹⁴⁴ The *Baltimore Sun* said the hearing "is looked forward to with much interest. It is believed an effort will be made to discover the names of some of the participants in the lynching for the purpose of presenting them before the grand jury."¹⁴⁵

Various witnesses were called, including Sheriff Derr, Jacob Miller, the warden of the jail, and Henry Miller, a jail employee. They were asked questions about the attack on the jail, and each was also asked if they could identify any of the men who were part of the mob. All of

¹⁴⁰ "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887; "Lynched!!," *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887

¹⁴¹ "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

¹⁴² "Biggus' Love Letter," *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1887

¹⁴³ "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

¹⁴⁴ "The Lynching Case," *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1887, rc25

¹⁴⁵ "The Frederick Lynching," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 25, 1887

the witnesses said they were unable to identify anyone. Although the *News* had reported that the masks worn by the members of the mob made it “impossible to recognize more than a few of them,” apparently even those few could not, or would not, be identified by the jury witnesses.¹⁴⁶ Sheriff Derr said he had “no knowledge whatever as to the identity of anyone connected with the hanging as they wore masks and it was quite dark.” Jacob Miller, the warden, said, “Did not recognize any of the party as most of them were masked.” Deputy Sheriff J. E. Stambaugh testified that he “knows scarcely anything about the matter,” and that he has “no knowledge whatever as to who composed the party who did the lynching.” Henry Miller also said he was unable to recognize anyone. Various newspaper reporters were also called as witnesses, and asked about who in the mob they had spoken with, but the reporters all refused to reveal their contacts.¹⁴⁷ So although the *News* reported that some members of the mob were recognizable, and although authorities for two days had witnessed angry groups of men milling around town, and although State’s Attorney Norwood and others had noticed men heading towards the jail the night of the lynching, no one could identify a single member of the mob.

Unsurprisingly, the verdict of the jury found no one responsible:

“We do say upon our oaths that on the 23rd day of November, 1887, at Frederick city in the said county a masked body of men, variously estimated, in the night time did attack and force an entrance to the jail of said county where said John H. Biggus was confined, and held captive, and by force took from the jail and the legal authorities in charge of said jail the said John H. Biggus, and then and there, after placing a rope around his neck, did take him, the said John H. Biggus, to a tree on the Jefferson pike but a short distance from the city limits and then and there hung him by the neck and pierced his body with several pistol balls, whereby the said John H. Biggus then and there came to his death and so the said masked body of men then and there feloniously killed and murdered the said John H. Biggus against the peace and dignity of the said State of Maryland, which masked body of men are unknown to this jury.”¹⁴⁸

“This is Not Right”

How did the white citizens of Frederick react to the lynching? There is very little evidence other than what was reported in the newspapers. Lewis Engelbrecht, a resident of Frederick, referred to the attack on Mary Yeakle in his diary entry of November 19, 1887,

¹⁴⁶ “Lynched!!,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887; “John H. Bigus Hanged,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 23, 1887

¹⁴⁷ “The Lynching Case,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1887; “The Lynching of Bigus,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 26, 1887

¹⁴⁸ “The Lynching Case,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1887

writing, “We hope the rascal will be caught and properly dealt with as his case deserves.” Four days later, however, Engelbrecht noted the lynching of Biggus and adds, “This is not right and we think the officers of the law should look into the matter.”¹⁴⁹ H. Clay Naill, the former Provost Marshal of Frederick during the Civil War, said in an interview with the *Baltimore Sun* that he was convinced the attack on Yeakle had been a case of mistaken identity, and he also was critical of Sheriff Derr: “It is folly, however, to say that any effort was made by the sheriff to protect his prisoner, for it was only seven minutes from the time of the arrival of the crowd at the jail until they had possession of their man.”¹⁵⁰ Others also criticized Derr. The *Middletown Valley Record* a newspaper in Middletown, Maryland, just west of Frederick, said:

“The Frederick jail is one of the strongest and best in the State, and it must appear to the mind of every reasonable person that Sheriff Derr failed to do his whole duty last Tuesday night in preventing a mob from taking a prisoner therefrom and lynching him. Bigus, if he was the guilty man, richly deserved death for his crime, but not at the hands of a mob.”¹⁵¹

Overall, newspapers reported a very divided reaction in Frederick. On the day of the lynching, the *Frederick News* reported, “There has been a great deal of public sentiment expressed in regard to the matter. Those who are in favor argue that wives, daughters and sisters must be protected. Others think the law should have been allowed to take its course.”¹⁵² The *Baltimore Sun* said, “There is a marked difference of opinion, however, as to the method of punishing Bigus.” Those who thought lynching was justified claimed that a clever lawyer could have gotten Biggus off with only slight punishment, and then “no woman would have been safe alone on the streets at night.” It was “necessary to set an example that would never be forgotten.” The *Sun* noted the stances of the different newspapers in Frederick:

“Of the Frederick newspapers, the *Citizen* and the *News* regret the occurrence, but do not think it was entirely unjustifiable, while the *Times* makes a red-hot attack on the lynchers, saying that some of them were under the influence of liquor, and that their act was a disgrace to the county. The *Times* also accuses Sheriff Derr of not having done his duty.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ James Boston, Ed., *So We Move Along...”: The Diaries of Lewis and Jacob L. Engelbrecht, 1882-1896* (Historical Society of Frederick County and Publish America, 2006), p.102

¹⁵⁰ *Baltimore Sun* article as repeated in “Capt. Naill’s Opinion,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 28, 1887

¹⁵¹ “Lynched,” *Middletown Valley Register*, Nov. 25, 1887

¹⁵² “Lynched!!,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887

¹⁵³ “The Frederick Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

Two days after the lynching, the feeling of white citizens in Frederick about the hanging was still very much divided. The *News* admitted that “the feeling today among the best people, is that, although Biggus, if the guilty man, received his just deserts, they cannot reconcile themselves to the thought that lynch law was the proper thing for the incensed people to resort to.”¹⁵⁴ But in an editorial, the newspaper also defended the lynching, since it was “for the protection of women and to teach the lawlessly inclined that sometimes punishment does not wait upon the law....” Weak laws and lax enforcement were part of the problem, according to the *News*. “If the law has been disgraced, it was only that it may be more generally respected and strengthened in the future.”¹⁵⁵

There was much focus on whether Biggus had actually confessed. A day after the lynching, the *Baltimore Sun* said, “Everybody was talking about the lynching and the most important point under discussion was as to whether Biggus had been clearly identified as the assailant.”¹⁵⁶ None of the first accounts said that Biggus confessed, and in those reports, in fact, Biggus had continually, right up to the end, claimed that he was innocent. But a few days after the lynching, papers began reporting that various members of the lynching party said that Biggus had indeed confessed at the last moment. On November 26, the *Frederick News* excitedly reported, “Today the *News* received from reliable sources and publishes for the first time the confession of Biggus and the scene at the tree just before the confession was made.” The newspaper apparently accepted at face value, and without any further investigation, this claim of a late confession. One reason the newspaper might have been inclined to accept such a statement was revealed in the article itself: “This is published in view of the fact that a great many people are inclined to doubt that Biggus made any confession at all.”¹⁵⁷

There were a great many African Americans in Frederick who evidently believed that as well. Many were angry about the lynching. On the day of the murder, the *Frederick News* claimed, “The members of the colored population have been very fierce today in their threats against the white people.”¹⁵⁸ The *Baltimore Sun* reported, “The colored part of the population are

¹⁵⁴ “The Lynching Case,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1887

¹⁵⁵ “The Lynching of Biggus,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1887

¹⁵⁶ “The Frederick Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

¹⁵⁷ “Confession of Biggus,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 26, 1887

¹⁵⁸ “Lynched!!,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1887

talking of holding an indignation meeting, and are making threats of retaliating by lynching Marshall F Harding, an ex-policeman, who killed a colored man while in the discharge of his duty, and was acquitted.”¹⁵⁹ Harding had killed an African American man the previous May, and had been acquitted by a jury. According to the *Sun*, a crowd of African American men had gathered near Harding’s residence on Wednesday evening, but no disturbance had occurred. The *News* referred to a “perceptible state of lawlessness” in Frederick that night, and stated, “The indignant colored people seemed to be organizing a move of some kind and early in the evening it was ascertained that they intended to drag ex-policeman Marshall F. Harding from his home and lynch him.”¹⁶⁰ The newspaper also reported that “small groups of colored men, apparently well-armed, some of them carrying whips,” were spotted on the streets of Frederick. The United Fire Company was also allegedly a target of angry African Americans for having let the lynchers use its axes and other implements to break into the jail.¹⁶¹

The anger of African Americans was met by a backlash from some whites. One young African American man got into a fight with some men from the United engine house and was badly beaten. Another young man by the name of Payton Brown, who allegedly was one of the leaders of the group threatening to hang Harding, had left town.¹⁶² Perhaps most chillingly, the *News* reported a threat made against an African American man:

“Thomas Mills, the shoemaker, has received an anonymous letter threatening him with complete annihilation if he does not keep his mouth still, as it is believed by the writer of the letter that Mills has been engaged in inciting his colored brethren to use violence. Mills flatly denies that he has ever in any way been connected with the troubles. At the bottom of the letter was a coffin and a rope. The letter was signed “Executive Committee.”¹⁶³

Still, rumors persisted that African Americans were going to exact revenge for the lynching, and on Saturday night, November 26, Sheriff Derr called on a “posse” of men to help protect the jail after hearing that it was going to be attacked. No attack was made, if one had ever even been contemplated.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ “The Frederick Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 24, 1887

¹⁶⁰ “The Lynching Case,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1887

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² “Unknown to the Jury,” *Washington Evening Star*, Nov. 26, 1887

¹⁶³ “The Lynching Case,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1887

¹⁶⁴ “Prepared for Them,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 28, 1887

All in all, by the end of the week, and after the coroner's jury had delivered its verdict, many just wanted the whole incident to disappear. According to the *News*, "The general feeling in Frederick today over the Biggus case seems to be one of relief that the excitement occasioned by the deed has cooled down. The public generally is tired of hearing the case talked about and seeing it in the public prints. The desire evidently is to forget the details of the horrible occurrence."¹⁶⁵

But the ramifications of the murder were not quite over.

Fears of Retaliation

On Monday evening, November 28, two white men in New Market, Maryland, east of Frederick, allegedly overheard several African American men talking about the lynching and intimating that they and others were going to march on Frederick in retaliation. Someone decided to call the Frederick jail to let the sheriff know what had been said. This was just a variation of the same rumor that had been sweeping Frederick for almost a week, but this time, the rumor became greatly exaggerated.¹⁶⁶

Sheriff Derr was attending a performance at the Frederick Opera House that Monday evening. By the time the message from New Market reached him, the number of African American men possibly invading Frederick had ballooned from a few to at least 150 armed men coming from all parts of the county. This army supposedly had several objects in mind: destroying the jail, lynching Sheriff Derr, attacking the United Fire Company, and lynching Marshall Harding, the former policeman.

Sheriff Derr left the Opera House and started deputizing extra men to help protect the jail. A contingent of 25 men from the Frederick Riflemen, a local militia associated with the Maryland National Guard, joined Derr's forces, and more men, hearing of the alleged danger, volunteered as well. Before long, over 200 men were armed and waiting. The *News* reported that "intense excitement prevailed." Occasional pickets were sent out in all directions to look for signs of an invading force. Around 11:00 p.m., a young African American man on a horse

¹⁶⁵ "Confession of Biggus," *Frederick News*, Nov. 26, 1887

¹⁶⁶ "Frederick Excited," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 29, 1887; "Stop This!," *Middletown Valley Register*, Dec. 2, 1887

galloped into town. One of the Riflemen called for him to halt, but the rider instead turned around and started back in the direction from where he had come. Someone fired a shot in his direction (or up in the air, depending on the newspaper report), but the rider kept going. The young man was later discovered to be Charles Gaither, who lived with a white family near town, and who had been sent to get a doctor for an ill member of the family. “He was very much frightened when he arrived home,” according to the *News*.

No attacking forces appeared. As the *News* described the city’s defenders, “They waited in vain for the mob, in the meantime indulging in coffee and enjoying the event immensely.”¹⁶⁷ There was much criticism in the press in the following days about the “unnecessary excitement” caused by the overreaction to a rumor on the part of the sheriff and others. The *Republican Citizen* of Frederick complained, “The spectacle witnessed at various places, of old men and young men running hither and thither, armed to the teeth, was at times very ludicrous, even in the face of possible danger.”¹⁶⁸ The *Frederick Examiner* was particularly withering in its criticism: “The rumor of an attack by the negroes upon the jail was simply the alarmed thought of some feather-brain who sees a conspiracy in every private consultation and an army with banners in every social group.” The attempt “to halt a colored man by firing over his head is simply an outrage and should meet with prompt and vigorous punishment.” The *Examiner* even suggested the whole affair may have had an ulterior motive: “The alarmed reports circulated on Monday night were utterly without foundation and may well have served to distract attention from some of the participants in the affair of Tuesday night of last week [the lynching].” The *Examiner* concluded that “If the jail officials had been half as solicitous last week over the safety of their prisoners as they were Monday night over their own, our laws would not have been set at defiance by a mob.”¹⁶⁹ The *Middletown Valley Register* agreed and marveled that it only took a rumor to get authorities to call in the Riflemen and others and create an armed fortress, but on the night of the lynching, when there was every reason to know that a white mob was going to attack, no one was called in. Although the *Valley Register* said the “whole affair was one of great

¹⁶⁷ “Some Unnecessary Excitement,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 29, 1887

¹⁶⁸ “Local News. Excitement in Frederick,” *Frederick Republican Citizen*, Dec. 2, 1887

¹⁶⁹ “Stop This!,” *Middletown Valley Register*, Dec. 2, 1887

absurdness, and uncalled for, and cannot but prove damaging to the hitherto fair name of Frederick,” over 150 men were still guarding the jail on Tuesday night.¹⁷⁰

The Baltimore *Sun*, which had been singled out and blamed for publishing a particularly incendiary article about a pending mob attack by African Americans, tried to make a larger, more ridiculous point on November 30. Any attempt to revenge a lynching, the paper seemed to say, should be put down quickly: “...when a man whose guilt has been established has been dealt with at the hands of a mob, any attempt on the part of his friends to revenge his death upon the community, or upon particular individuals whom they may choose to hold responsible for it, should be sternly and swiftly suppressed.” Without any sense of irony or consistency, the paper continued, “Such demonstrations are distinctly anarchistic and destructive of all law and order. They have no place in a civilized community and should be put down at any cost.” Apparently, it was acceptable for whites to lynch, but not for blacks.¹⁷¹

Some African Americans in Frederick felt a need to respond to all the rumors of revenge. On Monday evening, as the town was preparing to repel non-existent invaders, a resolution was passed at a meeting of what the *Republican Citizen* called the “better class of colored citizens of Frederick”:

“Resolved, That we emphatically contradict the statements that have been circulated that the colored people of this city have made threats against ex-policeman Marshall F. Harding or Sheriff Derr, or against those persons reported to have been connected with the recent lynching. True, a few drunken colored men might have been heard to make threats, but such expressions do not meet our approbation. The law has cleared Mr. Harding, and can be expected to investigate the lynching and deal out justice to the offenders, and we are satisfied.”¹⁷²

The Frederick *News* just wanted everything to stop. For one thing, the newspaper argued, the reputation of Frederick was taking a beating. “A great deal of undue attention has been called to the condition of excitement in Frederick by the garbled and inaccurate reports of the incidents in the New York, Philadelphia and Western papers,” complained the *News*.¹⁷³ After the scene of the town scrambling to defend itself from a mythical invasion, an editorial hoped that the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ “Mob Violence at Frederick,” Baltimore *Sun*, Nov. 30, 1887

¹⁷² “Local News. Excitement in Frederick,” Frederick *Republican Citizen*, Dec. 2, 1887

¹⁷³ “A great deal of undue...,” Frederick *News*, Nov. 30, 1887

incident “should be the finale of the feeling which has been prevalent here since the lynching of Biggus. It is time now to forget the matter and enter upon a new era of respect for the law and the interests of the community. We believe one and all are favorable to having a rest.”¹⁷⁴ To emphasize the point one last time, the next day the newspaper followed with another editorial saying, “The *News*...refrains, for the interests of our community, commercially and otherwise, from publishing another line in its news columns calculated to call public attention to the lynching of John H. Biggus or the alleged existence of alleged negro mobs.”¹⁷⁵

The Brotherhood of Liberty

But not everyone could “forget the matter,” as the *News* requested, especially not the Biggus family and his friends, Ida Barnes, and the African American community in Frederick. Others also did not want the world to “forget” the lynching. One of the organizations that protested the murder of John Biggus was the United Mutual Brotherhood of Liberty in Baltimore. The Brotherhood of Liberty had been created in 1885 as Baltimore’s first, and one of the nation’s first, civil rights organizations. Founded by a group of African American ministers and their allies, the Brotherhood of Liberty used protests and lawsuits to fight back against the growing tide of Jim Crow laws that were enacted after the Reconstruction era throughout the South to limit the citizenship rights of blacks. According to one historian, “the group fundamentally altered the fight for racial equality in Baltimore and helped shape the civil rights movement in the United States.”¹⁷⁶ Lynching was one of the topics of concern to members of the Brotherhood, and the group’s annual report in 1887 stated:

“We believe that all classes of lawbreakers among our people should pay the full penalty of the law. Yet we cannot help feeling that if white men are permitted to be tried in the court for crimes against women colored men should be allowed to have a hearing, and the right of bail, especially where a doubt is expressed of their guilt.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ “The trouble at the jail....,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 29, 1887

¹⁷⁵ “The *News*, always fonder....,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 30, 1887

¹⁷⁶ Dennis Patrick Halpin, *A Brotherhood of Liberty: Black Reconstruction and its Legacies in Baltimore, 1865-1920* (Univ. of PA Press, 2019), p.65

¹⁷⁷ “Rights of Colored People,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 29, 1887

The Brotherhood's Annual Meeting in 1887 in Baltimore happened to convene only a few days after the lynching of Biggus. One of the actions taken by the organization was a resolution denouncing the lynching as “a crime against the State, society, the colored race and humanity,” and censuring the “sheriff and other public officers as guilty of gross criminal neglect.”¹⁷⁸ They also offered a reward of \$500 for the arrest and conviction of anyone implicated in the lynching.¹⁷⁹

The killing of Biggus also brought condemnation from a New York City African American newspaper, the *New York Age*. One of the paper's reporters described for its readers how “one hundred men surrounded the jail, battered down the door and took the prisoner with a noose around his neck, a short distance from the jail, riddled him with bullets and then hanged him to a tree, where he remained until 10 o'clock the next day with every vestige of clothes torn off and his body covered with blood frozen, from the bullet holes in the body.” The paper reported that several African American men from Frederick who knew some of the members of the lynch mob were forced to leave Frederick “at the peril of their lives.” The lynching of Biggus, declared the paper, “is the most appalling murder that has ever taken place” in Frederick.¹⁸⁰

“Without Result”

The resolution passed by African American citizens in Frederick on Monday, November 28, ended with the belief that “The law... can be expected to investigate the lynching and deal out justice to the offenders...” The law, however, did not investigate the lynching, nor did the courts, the leaders of Frederick, the press, or anyone else. When the Frederick County Grand Jury met in February, 1888, there was some speculation that witnesses would be called and an investigation opened into the killing of Biggus, but the investigation, if there actually had been one, “was without result,” according to the *Baltimore Sun*.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ “The Brotherhood of Liberty...,” *Frederick News*, Dec. 8, 1887; “The Brotherhood of Liberty...,” *Baltimore County Union*, Dec. 31, 1887

¹⁸⁰ “Lynching in Maryland,” *New York Age*, Dec. 3, 1887; Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me – African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (NY: NY University, 2012), p.90

¹⁸¹ “Investigation of the Bigus Lynching,” *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 20, 1888; “Frederick County Grand Jury Report,” *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 27, 1888

Mary Yeakle recovered from her injuries, and continued living in Frederick until her death in 1905.¹⁸² One of her sons, Aquilla R. Yeakle, became mayor of Frederick in 1895. On one of his first days in office, he participated in a hearing to investigate an alleged assault of a white woman by an African American man. The allegation led to Frederick's second lynching, that of James Bowens.¹⁸³

Henry Biggus took his son home to Woodville, and buried him in the Woodville Methodist Church cemetery.¹⁸⁴ The tree on which Biggus was murdered was struck by lightning and shattered in the summer of 1890.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² "The Work of Death," *Frederick News*, February 23, 1905

¹⁸³ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895, and list of Frederick mayors found on <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/37mun/frederick/html/fmayors.html>

¹⁸⁴ A photograph of Biggus's grave marker is found at https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/102902977/john-h_-bigius

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The Murder of James Bowens, 1895

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving in 1895, citizens of Frederick, Maryland, awoke to news that a white mob had murdered a young African American man just hours earlier, a little after midnight of the previous evening. James Bowens, a laborer who lived in Frederick, was kidnapped from the city's jail and lynched on the outskirts of town on suspicion of having assaulted 21-year old Lillie Long, a white domestic servant.¹⁸⁶ Bowens' body had been left hanging all night, and on Sunday morning "hundreds of men, women and children" visited the lynching site to view the body.¹⁸⁷ One local newspaper reported that "Several 'Kodak' fiends were on hand at the scene of the lynching Sunday and took pictures of the spot and of the negro."¹⁸⁸ Later that morning, from the pulpit of the city's Evangelical Lutheran church, Rev. E. H. Delk condemned the murder, and warned that "The anger or scorn of sixty millions of people in this country was today directed at the fair fame of this city."¹⁸⁹ Bowens was buried on Monday afternoon, less than 48 hours after the alleged attack had occurred.

The Attack and Accusation

On late Saturday afternoon, November 16, 1895, two white Frederick County farmers accosted James Bowens, a black laborer from Frederick, on South Street in Frederick.¹⁹⁰ They accused him of having just attacked a white domestic servant, Lillie Long, at the farmhouse of Hamilton Geisbert, about a mile south of town on Cemetery Road. Bowens protested that as they were not constables, they had no authority to arrest him. But one of the farmers pointed a pistol at Bowens, and they led him to City Hall on North Market Street to appear before a magistrate.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ The most complete accounts of the incident are from "Mob Law," Frederick *Examiner*, Nov. 20, 1895, and "Lynched," Frederick *News*, Nov. 18, 1895, but see also "By a Maddened Mob," Baltimore *Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895. [See Bibliography for complete citations of newspaper sources. All newspaper sources are scans of original newspaper pages.]

¹⁸⁷ "By a Maddened Mob," Baltimore *Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

¹⁸⁸ "Lynched," Frederick *News*, Nov. 18, 1895

¹⁸⁹ "By a Maddened Mob," Baltimore *Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

¹⁹⁰ In several of the newspaper accounts of James Bowens' lynching, his name is misspelled as "Goins."

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*; "Lynched," Frederick *News*, Nov. 18, 1895

The alleged attack on Lillie Long had occurred around 5:30 that afternoon. William Warner, a farmer who lived near Geisbert, claimed that Bowens showed up on his farm that afternoon asking for something to eat. Warner told Bowens he didn't have anything to give him, but that he might try the neighboring farm of Geisbert. Long later told a reporter that Bowens came to the Geisbert farmhouse, and she told him she would give him some food. Long was alone at the house, and Bowens allegedly made "an indecent proposal" to her and offered her a dollar. Long remembered later that Bowens had said to her, "I am Wilson."¹⁹² According to her statement, she tried to run from Bowens but he caught her and knocked her down several times, cut her with a knife or something about the neck, choked her, bit her nose, and tore her underclothes off.¹⁹³ Hamilton Geisbert and his son Roger were working in a cornfield near the house, and heard Long's screams. Roger Geisbert started running towards the farmhouse, and seeing Geisbert, Bowens ran away, towards town.

Geisbert and another farmer, William Fout, started running after Bowens, and William Warner, who had talked with Bowens on his farm, got his wagon and took off in a different direction to find Bowens. Geisbert and Fout caught up with Bowens at the corner of South and Bentz streets in Frederick, said "We want you," and forced him to accompany them at gun point.¹⁹⁴

The Arrest

They took Bowens to appear before Magistrate Edward Hewes in the mayor's office on North Market Street. Mayor Aquilla Yeakle and the city attorney, C. V. S. Levy, were also there. [Mayor Yeakle was the son of Mary L. Yeakle, the victim of an assault that led to John Biggus' lynching in 1887.]¹⁹⁵ Geisbert and the neighboring farmers Fout and Warner told Hewes their version of events, with Warner adding that when Bowens first spoke to him on his farm, Bowens said he was from Baltimore and was headed to Pittsburg. Bowens was interviewed, said he was innocent, that he had not attacked Long, and that he had been in town all day unloading hay for another farmer, a Mr. Padgett, and had then been at the home of a friend at the time of the

¹⁹² "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

¹⁹³ "Mob Law," *Frederick Examiner*, Nov. 20, 1895

¹⁹⁴ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

¹⁹⁵ US Census information from Ancestry.com, and list of Frederick mayors found on <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/37mun/frederick/html/fmayors.html>

assault.¹⁹⁶ [Padgett later confirmed that Bowens had worked for him that day, and that he considered Bowens a good workman.¹⁹⁷] Bowens had then walked from All Saints Street to South Street where Geisbert and Fout suddenly grabbed him.

Another witness, Walter Weller, claimed that he had seen Bowens and another man, Hiram Bowman, heading south out of town on Cemetery Road about 4:00 that afternoon. Deputy Sheriff James Crum was dispatched to find Hiram Bowman, and when he arrived, Bowman requested that Bowens be arrested for theft. Bowman said that he, Bowens, and John Tonsil were drinking and walking on Cemetery Road and that at some point, near the Geisbert farm, he, Bowman, laid down to rest. Bowman claimed that Bowens then robbed him of \$4 he had in his pocket and continued walking. Bowens was questioned again and he claimed Tonsil had stolen the money.¹⁹⁸

Bowens was searched for both the knife or scissors that supposedly had been used on Long, and for Bowman's money. Neither was found on Bowens, although later, at the jail, the police claimed another search by jail warden John Groff uncovered a pair of scissors hidden in one of Bowens' boots. The scissors supposedly had blood on them.¹⁹⁹ In an interview later with the *Frederick News*, Lillie Long said a "butcher knife, with a dark brown handle" was used to cut her neck, and that knife could not be found. A butcher's knife was missing from the neighboring farm of William Warner, and Warner said he believed that Bowens was at his house, alone, a full fifteen minutes before he came out to the fields to find Warner. His theory was that Bowens had stolen their butcher's knife and used that on Long.²⁰⁰ Warden Groff, however, found a pair of scissors on Bowens, not a butcher's knife.

After the testimony, Magistrate Hewes declared Bowens under arrest, pending a hearing on the following Monday. He also arrested Bowman, as a witness. Neither could pay the \$300 bail that Hewes set, so they were handcuffed together and taken from the Mayor's office to be transported to the city jail on South Street. As he was being handcuffed, the local newspaper reported that Bowens "grew very insolent, used abusive language, swore at Wm. A. Fout, said he

¹⁹⁶ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

¹⁹⁷ "Lynching Echoes," *Frederick News*, Nov. 19, 1895

¹⁹⁸ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895; "By a Maddened Mob," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

¹⁹⁹ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²⁰⁰ "Miss Long is Better," *Frederick News*, Nov. 20, 1895

was not the man who made the assault, that he had not been to Geisbert's and that they all 'had it in for him' because he was a Republican and they were Democrats."²⁰¹

Unfortunately for Bowens, he had a history of brushes with the law before this incident. Bowens was around 24 years old, worked as a laborer, and also played baseball for the Uptown Browns Base Ball Club of Frederick.²⁰² But he had been in trouble in Frederick before, and according to the *Baltimore Sun*, "He has figured very prominently in the police courts here [Frederick] for the last eight years."²⁰³ The *Frederick News* referred to Bowens as a man "of bad reputation."²⁰⁴ Less than a year earlier, he had appeared before this same Magistrate Hewes and had been sent to jail on a charge of intent to kill another man. In reporting on that case in 1894, the *Frederick News* at the time had described Bowens as "an old offender, and it is probable that a term at the House of Correction might be of benefit to him."²⁰⁵

During the hearing before Hewes, word of the alleged assault had spread quickly and a large crowd had gathered on Market Street in front of City Hall. They had learned that Lillie Long had been gashed on her neck and face several times, and the first reports were that the injuries were severe and that she might not recover. As Bowens and Bowman were led from City Hall, the policemen escorting them had some trouble getting them to a waiting wagon. Bowens "uttered defiant and abusive words several times while getting in the wagon and afterward. The officers say he protested his innocence repeatedly and when at the jail he was told that the crowd might try to harm him said always, 'I ain't done nothin', I'm not the man.'"²⁰⁶ As the wagon headed off for the jail, it was followed "by an angry mob yelling 'Lynch him!'"²⁰⁷

The Lynching

In the hours after the hearing, "[g]reatly exaggerated rumors of her [Long's] condition were circulated by excited men and boys," according to the *Frederick News*.²⁰⁸ Later that

²⁰¹ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²⁰² United States Population Census, 1880; "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895; James E. Brunson III, *Black Baseball, 1858-1900 – A Comprehensive Record of the Teams, Players, Managers, Owners and Umpires* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2019), 522.

²⁰³ "By a Maddened Mob," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

²⁰⁴ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²⁰⁵ "In the Law's Grip," *Frederick News*, July 25, 1894. See also "The Police Court," *Frederick News*, January 9, 1890; "A Serious Charge," *Frederick News*, June 6, 1891; "Found Guilty," *Frederick News*, July 31, 1894; and "At the Jail," *Frederick News*, August 21, 1894.

²⁰⁶ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²⁰⁷ "By a Maddened Mob," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

²⁰⁸ "Lynched," *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

evening, around 11:30, someone started the erroneous rumor that Lillie Long had died from her injuries. Angry men had been milling about the streets and near the jail ever since the hearing in City Hall, and when this report was received, most of the mob started heading towards the jail. Along the way, some of them broke into the blacksmith shop of Robert Fraley at 121 All Saints Street, and stole sledge hammers, crowbars, and files. Many people in the mob had pistols, and only a few wore masks.²⁰⁹

By midnight, the crowd around the jail had swelled to 300-400 people, and around 12:30 a.m. (November 17), some of the men stormed the jail door on the west side of the building. As they were doing this, shots rang out from the upper windows of the jail. The deputies in the jail were apparently firing into the air, since no one was hit, to warn the crowd to back off. Those trying to break into the jail persisted, and after being stymied by an iron door, they rushed through a door to the basement. As this was happening, the wife of Deputy James Crum tried to ring the bell atop the jail to summon help, but after three pulls, the bell rope broke. The deputies inside the jail tried to resist the mob but they were quickly unarmed and the crowd proceeded to the cells.²¹⁰

In addition to Bowens and Bowman, the jail had other inmates that night, including an African American man, Robinson, who had been accused of assaulting a black girl in Urbana, and a young white man, Robert Crutchley from Brunswick, who was in jail for supposedly assaulting two young white girls. Both Robinson and Crutchley thought the mob was after them, and began shouting for help. According to the *Frederick News*, no one was aware of their alleged crimes, however, “or they might have shared a fate similar to that of Bowens, as the mob was aroused to a high state of excitement.”²¹¹

One person was missing from the jail that night. The sheriff of Frederick County, Daniel Zimmerman, was staying at his farm in Woodsboro that evening, and there was no explanation given in the newspaper accounts of the lynching explaining his absence. When he arrived back in town on Sunday evening, Zimmerman “was much surprised to learn what had transpired during his absence,” and said that more deputies should have been assigned to the jail that night. The newspapers reported, without comment, that Lillie Long was Zimmerman’s niece. He was not

²⁰⁹ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895; “By a Maddened Mob,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

²¹⁰ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895; “By a Maddened Mob,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

²¹¹ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

the only one associated with the jail that was related to Long. The wife of Deputy Sheriff James Crum, who tried to ring the jail bell that night for help, was a first cousin of Long.²¹²

After finding Bowen's cell, he was dragged out of the jail wearing his night clothes and no shoes. He told them he was innocent. One of the leaders of the mob asked if anyone could identify that the prisoner was Bowens, and when someone said yes, they continued out of the jail. No one had thought to bring a rope, however, so someone cut down the rope holding the electric light outside the jail and placed this over Bowen's head.²¹³

As the mob started leading Bowens westward on South Street, many in the mob fired pistols into the air. They turned off South Street and onto Jefferson Pike, heading towards the outskirts of town. There was a debate as to the best spot to hang Bowens – one site was deemed too near houses – until they came to the Kennedy Butler farm and a “locust tree in a wheat field on the east side of the road....” This was the old George Rizer farm and just happened to be close to the spot where John Biggus was lynched in 1887.²¹⁴

The rope around Bowen's neck was thrown over a limb of the locust tree. Someone asked Bowens to confess but he said, “Indeed, I didn't do it, I'm not the man.”²¹⁵ Then, “much to the surprise of the lynchers,” two Salvation Army officers, Capt. Eugene Mott and Lieut. William Anthem, appeared, and asked to pray with Bowens. One of the officers had pleaded with the mob in front of the jail to not go through with the hanging. They were allowed at the locust tree to pray with Bowens, and then they recited the Lord's prayer, which both Bowens and the mob repeated. One of the mob then gave a brief speech about the purpose of the lynching: “It is not with spirit of malice toward this unfortunate wretch or his race that we are here tonight, but it is to teach men of his class that they must let the white women of Frederick county alone or suffer the consequences, of which this is an example.”²¹⁶

Bowens' hands were tied and someone gave the command to lift him up. As he was lifted about six feet off the ground, someone shot at him. The unidentified leaders of the mob ordered

²¹² “State of Maryland,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 19, 1895

²¹³ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895; “By a Maddened Mob,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

²¹⁴ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895. This farm was known as the George Rizer farm in 1887. Rizer's daughter Sarah married Kennedy Butler, and after George Rizer's death in 1894, the Butlers leased out the family farm. US Census and genealogical information from Ancestry.com; “His Fall was Fatal,” *Frederick News*, Sept. 17, 1898; “On Saturday afternoon...,” *Westminster Democratic Advocate*, July 2, 1898.

²¹⁵ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²¹⁶ “By a Maddened Mob,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895; “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

no more firing, and his murderers waited by the tree until Bowens was dead. An estimated 300 people saw the lynching, “among whom were a number of farmers.”²¹⁷

The Inquest

No one touched Bowen’s body until the county coroner arrived at the spot the next morning. The Baltimore *Sun* reported that hundreds of “men, women and children” visited the hanging site to view Bowens’ body, including many who brought cameras.²¹⁸ After Acting Coroner C. H. Eckstein had examined the body and the site, Bowens was cut down at 9:15 a.m. Sunday morning. After the body was lowered “the rope was eagerly sought after and divided among a number of the crowd in small pieces.”²¹⁹ Undertakers took Bowens’ body, prepared it for burial, and placed it in a coffin to take to the jail where the coroner’s jury was to meet.

The coffin was placed in the jail so that the public could see it, and many people showed up to look at the coffin, the jail, and the lynching site. “Warden Groff was busy all day showing visitors about” and answering questions.²²⁰ The coroner’s jury was to meet at 3:00 but that was postponed as “the State” wanted to know if Bowens had been killed by strangulation or by the bullet fired at him. The coffin was taken to the basement of the jail and an autopsy was performed by two doctors. They determined the bullet had only grazed Bowens’ head and that he had died by strangulation.²²¹

After the autopsy Bowens’ remains were taken to the home of his father, Simon Bowens, in Locust Alley, “where many members of their race called to console with the parents.”²²²

Verdict of Coroner’s Jury

The coroner’s jury met on Monday morning, November 18, in secret session, to which no one was admitted except witnesses who were summoned. The jury was composed of E.T.H. Delasmutt, foreman; Robert T. Danner, George W. Plunkard, Reuben E. Hann, Cyrus A. Fout, George Esterly, John W. Poole, C. Elmer Hull, Henry G. Dull, Lewis E. Burck, William A.

²¹⁷ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895; “By a Maddened Mob,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

²¹⁸ “By a Maddened Mob,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

²¹⁹ “Lynching Echoes,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 19, 1895

²²⁰ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²²¹ *Ibid.*; “Mob Law,” *Frederick Examiner*, Nov. 20, 1895

²²² “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

Hann, and Thomas Eaves. The jury interviewed a number of witnesses. A little after 1:00, the verdict was announced: “James Bowens came to his death on the night of November 16, 1895, in Frederick county, of strangulation, at the hands of parties unknown to this jury.” [Bowens was actually killed on the 17th.]²²³

About an hour later, James Bowens’ funeral was held in his father’s home, and he was buried in the Laboring Sons Cemetery on East 5th Street in Frederick, which was attended by a large crowd.²²⁴

As for Lillie Long, when she was told of Bowen’s lynching, she declared herself “well satisfied.”²²⁵ On the day after Bowen’s funeral, the *Frederick News* reported that Long “still suffers very much from her injuries,” but by the following day, she was “much improved.”²²⁶

The Reaction of the White Community

Reaction to the news of the lynching by Frederick’s white community was mixed. An editorial in the *Frederick News* said that the hanging “was revolting, of course, to every lover of law and order,” but it concluded that the lynching “was inevitable in the state of mind that had been reached by the people here over the numerous and too frequently occurring assaults on defenseless white women.” Supposedly, this was the fourth assault on a white woman in the county within the past six months.²²⁷

On the other hand, the newspaper reported that, “There are some who openly and bitterly condemn the action of the lynchers.” In church services on that Sunday, just hours after the murder had taken place, ministers “denounced” the lynching “in strong terms.”²²⁸ Rev. E. H. Delk, who was filling in at the Evangelical Lutheran church for the regular pastor, condemned the mob. “A mob is citizenship in anarchy. Let no young man here think he did justice or womanhood a service in the lynching of that black.”²²⁹ Instead of justice, “The anger or scorn of sixty millions of people in this country was today directed at the fair fame of this city.”²³⁰

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ “Lynching Echoes,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 19, 1895

²²⁵ “State of Maryland,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 19, 1895

²²⁶ “Lynching Echoes,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 19, 1895; “Miss Long is Better,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 20, 1895

²²⁷ “The prompt but horrible...,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²²⁸ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895. See also “A Vigorous Condemnation,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 25, 1895.

²²⁹ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²³⁰ “By a Maddened Mob,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 18, 1895

Reaction of the African American Community

Within the African American community of Frederick, “The ministers of the colored churches denounced the lynching last night, but the members of the race here declare that while they do not uphold the mob they think Bowens’ deed deserved severe punishment. Many sympathize with the father of the negro, who is a sober, industrious, well-behaved man.”²³¹

But rumors of a different reaction began to circulate through the city. The *Frederick News* reported three days after the lynching about anger among local African Americans.

“Passengers on the 9 o’clock B. & O. train into Hagerstown yesterday stated that the colored people of southern Frederick county are greatly enraged over the hanging of James Bowens and have made open threats to take Wesley Crutchley, white, of Weverton [near Brunswick], who is in the Frederick jail charged with assaulting two little girls, from prison and lynch him out of revenge.”²³²

Crutchley had been in the jail when the mob broke in to get Bowens, and he at first was afraid they were coming for him. The *Baltimore Sun* repeated the same rumor on November 27, saying that the lynching of Bowens had “awakened a feeling of resentment among the young colored men” of Frederick. Supposedly, young African American men in Frederick had been meeting at night and preparing plans to lynch Crutchley. The attack was supposed to occur on Saturday, November 23, a week after Bowens’ lynching.²³³

Hearing these reports, a nervous Sheriff Zimmerman summoned a large number of deputies and placed some in the jail and others outside to patrol the jail yard and vicinity. No attack was attempted, but it was reminiscent of when John Biggus was murdered by a mob in Frederick in 1887. The same rumor of an eminent attack by African American men to burn the jail and lynch white prisoners caused the sheriff at the time to call out the Frederick Riflemen, part of the Maryland National Guard. No attack occurred then either, but the Riflemen were there for over a week.²³⁴

²³¹ “Lynched,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 18, 1895

²³² “Miss Long is Better,” *Frederick News*, Nov. 20, 1895

²³³ “Frederick County,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 27, 1895; and “Forecast for Baltimore and Vicinity,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 27, 1895

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

A little over a week after the false alarm of retaliation, Wesley Crutchley was released from the Frederick jail. His fellow workers on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad claimed that he was with them at the time of the attack on the two girls, so he was released for lack of evidence.²³⁵

The Locust Tree

On Saturday, November 23, a week after Bowens' murder, the locust tree on the Butler farm used for the hanging was cut down. The newspaper notice about this did not say who cut the tree down, nor why it was cut down, but it did add that the tree used in the lynching of John Biggus in 1887, which stood about 100 yards from where Bowens was lynched, was no longer standing either.²³⁶

²³⁵ "Wesley Crutchley Released," *Baltimore Sun*, Dec. 7, 1895

²³⁶ "The Tree Cut Down," *Frederick News*, Nov. 23, 1895; and "The locust tree in the field...", *Frederick Examiner*, Nov. 27, 1895

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