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Bob Lewis' Encounter with the 'Great Death:' Port Jervis' Entrance into the 'United States of Lyncherdom

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Preface

The Minisink Valley Historical Society is proud to have been associated with this fine research project undertaken by Kristopher Burrell. We have long been interested in this extraordinarily tragic moment in our city's history and have acquired a number of resources that are now available for researchers to use including a fairly extensive collection of contemporary newspaper clippings. Years ago I wrote a series of newspaper columns outlining the dimensions of the tragedy but was not able to do the story as much justice as Kris has done here.

Kris has accomplished a great deal with his paper as he has put the lynching in the context of the times along with incorporating other scholarly works into his thesis. Short of a new resource being discovered I think that he has probably told the story in as definitive way as is possible from this late date. He lays out the factual data and then relates it to the larger picture of what was going on around the country at the time, a very important part of the research. One of the most startling facts that he presents is that 1892 was the year in which more lynchings took place either before or after.

In reflecting upon this sad event I have often wondered how people in that time, who in a more rational moment, could have lynched anyone. We all like to think that we could not have been involved in such a terrible act. However in June 1892 many people stood by idly by as Robert Lewis was hanged for a crime that he may not have even committed. He did not get the faintest glimmer of justice. It was a moment that has caused anguish in our community ever since and in fact was not spoken of publicly for many years. Stephen Crane, the author of the Red Badge of Courage, was from Port Jervis and his brother William Crane plays a prominent role in the sordid tale. Stephen

will later write a book called The Monster and this author believes that it was in part inspired by the gruesome lynching that had occurred just a short distance from his brother's house.

While we often want to read about the triumphs of history we do not like to delve into aspects our nation's history that make us feel uncomfortable. The issues of slavery, racism, the treatment of Native Americans and immigrants all come to mind when we think about mistakes made in previous generations. Somehow we do not want to read or hear about them. However if we are to be a better nation we must understand these tragic moments and resolve to do better. In the case of this booklet one will face a very gruesome moment not only for our community but also for our country as a whole. Hopefully we will not stand by the next time and idly watch as a great injustice is done to whomever the victim may be.

Peter Osborne

Executive Director

Minisink Valley Historical Society

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Acknowledgements

Although written acknowledgements are quite rare to include in a seminar paper, I believe they are warranted in this instance. The lynching of Bob Lewis, although an exceedingly intriguing topic, was also an incredibly difficult subject to research. I knew nothing about the area or what resources would be available to me.

In having to travel all the way to Port Jervis from New York City on a semi-regular basis for three months, my research would have been completely fruitless without the assistance of Peter Osborne, III, the director of the Minisink Valley Historical Society, who unselfishly offered his time as well as his vast knowledge of the region's history in order to help me put the lynching in historical context and broaden my source base. He was unfailingly supportive of my ideas and someone whom I could always bounce theories off of. His willingness to help in any way possible and enthusiasm about the potential of my paper sustained me when the prospects for producing a quality final product by the given deadline seemed bleak. This is also the reason that although long after he expects it, I am fulfilling my promise to him to send a copy of the paper to the Society.

I must also give my thanks to the other volunteers of the Minisink Valley Historical Society. They were also extremely helpful, providing anecdotes and other insights about Port Jervis, listening to my ideas about the lynching and my studies more generally, and most importantly, sending me census data via email when I did not have access to a software program that was helpful to me. People at most other institutions would not have taken the time. It meant a great deal to me. Thank you all.

Kristopher Burrell

Abstract

This paper is a local study of a lynching in Port Jervis, New York in 1892. The victim was a black man, Bob Lewis. This study intends to situate Lewis' lynching in both its historical and cultural contexts. Larger than that, this paper argues that even though southern and northern lynchings, particularly when the victims were African American, resembled one another in several important ways—including higher incidences of mutilation and torture; often becoming a form of white communal entertainment in which white participants often collected and/or sold relics in order to commemorate the event; and the bodies often being left in public view for symbolic purposes to warn other blacks or even sympathetic whites of what could happen if legal or customary boundaries of race relations were transgressed in that town or community—northern lynchings cannot be analyzed using the same frameworks as southern lynchings.

The significant disparity in the number of lynchings that occurred in the North as opposed to the South highlights significant social, cultural and economic differences that existed between the two regions in the late-nineteenth century. Two of the most important regional differences were the northern notion of “civility” and the industrial northern economy.

Bob Lewis' Encounter with the "Great Death:"

Port Jervis' Entrance into the "United States of Lyncherdom"¹

One is really at a loss for words in dealing with the subject of lynching. The horrible wickedness of it is so plain, and so gigantic, that only one conclusion is possible; and to comment falls so short of the terrible reality as to constitute an anti-climax. It is hard to stretch the imagination so far as to realize that these deeds belong to our day and land.

—James F. Morton, "The Curse of Race Prejudice," 1904.

James F. Morton's statement expressing the utter inability of writers, journalists, or scholars to adequately recount "the terrible reality" of lynching is still so apt almost a century after he penned those words that they force anyone who studies the topic to consider the efficacy of commenting at all; of injecting their own "anti-climax" into the realm of scholarly discussion. Nevertheless, regardless how true Morton's words, American historians must continue to study lynching in order—if impossible to comprehensively convey the horror—to hopefully shed some light on why lynching became so prevalent in the United States when it did, why the victims were increasingly African American after 1880, why lynching was such a national pastime, and how northern lynchings were both similar to and different from southern lynchings.

It is important to discuss lynching as a national phenomenon for the peculiar practice occurred in every region of the country. Mark Twain correctly renamed the United States of America, the "United States of Lyncherdom" in 1901. Port Jervis applied for, and was granted entrance into the U. S. of L. in 1892 as a result of the lynching of Bob Lewis, a twenty-eight year old black resident of the village, for allegedly raping a white woman. But Orange County, New York where Port Jervis is located had previously experienced a lynching during the Civil War.

¹ The "great death" apparently was Stephen Crane's phrase. In Jacqueline Denise-Goldsby, "After Great Pain: the Cultural Logic of Lynching and the Problem of Realist Representation in America, 1882-1922," Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1998, 54. The "United States of Lyncherdom" was the title of Mark Twain's 1901 protest essay denouncing the double lynching of two elderly African Americans in his home state of Missouri.

In 1863 a black man named Mulliner allegedly committed the same offense and was lynched by an angry mob in Newburgh.² Mulliner was in police custody as a small mob of about fifty people formed outside the jail and demanded the officer to hand over the “d--- nigger.”³ The unfolding drama between police officers trying to disperse the crowd and the mob— “frantic with rum and passion”—lasted about forty-five minutes. Exhortations from the officers, a local priest, and the district attorney to let the law deal with Mulliner could not move the mob intent on exercising its own brand of justice on Mulliner. Once the mob realized that only one door separated them from their intended target, they broke it down and pounced on Mulliner. He was “beaten until before he left the cell his blood covered the walls. In the hall he was again kicked and pounded, hustled under the stairs toward the west door to the upper hall and pounded with heels and fists again, and finally dragged into the yard, where he became the football of the maddened wretches, and was at last strung up by the neck to the limb of a tree. After passing a resolution to ‘stand by each other,’ in case of arrest, the crowd finally dispersed a few minutes before ten.”⁴

Mulliner in Newburgh and Bob Lewis in Port Jervis both met their demise at the hands of mobs. Though separated by thirty years, the details of the Mulliner lynching are eerily similar to those that will follow in detailing the lynching of Bob Lewis. Both lynchings took place in the North—the same county, in fact. Both were lynched for allegedly raping white women. And both lynchings took place in times of economic hardship; Mulliner’s during the Civil War and Lewis’ just a year before the full onset of the Depression of 1893.

² “A War-Time Lynching,” *Newburgh Daily Journal*, 9 June 1892, 2; taken from the *Independent Republican*.

³ It is a sign of the times that the word “damned” was too vulgar to appear in print, but the racial epithet “nigger” was perfectly fine to appear in the paper.

⁴ “A War-Time Lynching,” 2.

Using the Bob Lewis lynching in Port Jervis in 1892, this paper will compare it to other northern lynchings reported in the historiography—of which there is little—as well as the general trends evident in the much vaster historiography of southern lynchings. Northern⁵ lynchings of African Americans tended to be similar to southern lynchings in that blacks were more often mutilated and tortured before they were actually killed, lynchings more often turned into a form of white communal entertainment in which white participants often collected and/or sold relics in order to commemorate the event, and the bodies were more often left in public view for a period of time for symbolic purposes to warn other blacks or even sympathetic whites of what could happen if legal or customary boundaries of race relations were transgressed in that town or community.

But northern lynchings of African Americans were different from many that took place in the South. The significant disparity in the number of lynchings that occurred in the North as opposed to the South is important in highlighting significant social, cultural and economic differences that existed between the two regions in the late-nineteenth century. The northern lynchings that appear in the literature also all take place in industrialized or industrializing communities. The disorienting nature of rapid modernization, with its emphasis on replacing manual labor with machines and economic stratification between managers and unskilled laborers, promoted an atmosphere ripe for violence. Smaller job markets, combined with already pervasive beliefs in white supremacy and black inferiority, made urbanizing, industrializing, northern communities, places where the potential for racial violence—including lynching—was high. Port Jervis provided this backdrop.

⁵ The “North,” for the purposes of this paper will be defined as the states comprising New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the Old Northwest.

Ever since the Erie Railroad arrived in Port Jervis in 1847 the local economy came to depend on it more and more. The village prospered a great deal as a result of serving as a division center for the Erie. The railroad brought jobs to the community and completely integrated the village into the state and northeastern regional economy. As Port Jervis flourished the population grew rapidly. When the town was incorporated in 1853 the population was only 2,585. By 1870 Port Jervis had grown to a population of 6,377 and by 1880, it had jumped to 8,678. The population would reach 9,000 by 1890 but would level off and hover there through the end of the decade.⁶

Surely, nevertheless, for some residents of Port Jervis the arrival of the railroad was a mixed blessing. The Erie increased the importance of Port Jervis as a transportation and economic center but it also made Port Jervis a more desirable place to live for immigrants and the small black population continued to increase. The immigrants may have come either to work on the railroad or in one of the ancillary industries that sprung up as a result of it. But while the predominantly Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, merchant and professional class of Port Jervis welcomed the economic prosperity the railroad brought, they bristled at the prospect of these newcomers with whom they shared little in the way of language or culture living amongst them.

The demographic make up was changing rapidly in Port Jervis between 1870 and 1890 as the population grew by nearly a third in just those two decades and immigrants and blacks made up larger percentages of the inhabitants. Roberta Senechal de la Roche's argument about the South in her article, "The Sociogenesis of Lynching," is also applicable in cases of northern lynchings that "although social polarization between the races grew over time, only in places

⁶ <http://www.minisink.org/histpj.html>, Minisink Valley Historical Society (MVHS), October 19, 2001.

with many newcomers, such as fast-growing towns and cities, did it reach the high levels conducive to rioting.”⁷

Therefore, since at least the 1850s, Port Jervis had been a residentially segregated village. There were no laws passed mandating residential segregation, but it happened nevertheless. Italians lived in a section of town commonly known as “Bully’s Acre,” Germans lived a section known as “Germantown,” Anglos lived in yet other sections, and African Americans were dispersed throughout the village in small clusters of families or in white households as servants. These demarcations were not totally rigid. Wealth also influenced where a person lived. Port Jervis was segregated largely along ethnic, but also along class lines.⁸

The African American population of Port Jervis had historically been rather small. There were 147 African Americans listed on the 1860 United States Census.⁹ By 1880 the number had increased to 230 but by 1900 the number had fallen to 125.¹⁰ To further illustrate how small this population was, the 1880 census figure of 230 blacks still only made them 2.7 percent of the village population, which is almost identical to the countywide proportion of 2.6 percent.¹¹

The black community of Port Jervis was predominantly a servant community. According to the 1880 census, there were 48 males over the age of ten¹² and the overwhelming majority of them held unskilled positions. Twenty-five were listed as “laborers,” two were “farm laborers,”

⁷ Roberta Senechal de la Roche, “The Sociogenesis of Lynching,” 62, in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed. *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁸ Interview of Peter Osborne, Executive Director of the MVHS, done by the author on October 11, 2001 in Port Jervis, New York.

⁹ Compiled by author using data from the Eighth Census of the United States, Port Jervis, New York.

¹⁰ Compiled by author using data from the Tenth Census of the United States and the Twelfth Census of the United States, Port Jervis, New York.

¹¹ The figure of 2.7 percent for the black population of Port Jervis was compiled by author using the data of the Tenth Census of the United States and the population figure from the website of the MVHS at <http://www.minisink.org/histpj.html>. The figure of 2.6 percent was compiled by author using data from the website of the United States Historical Census Browser at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

¹² From here forward in terms of occupations, “men” and “woman” refer to those individuals in a household over the age of ten. This was the marker employed by census takers in the Eighth, Tenth, and Twelfth Censuses of the United States.

two were “janitors,” two were “porters,”¹³ one was a hotel porter, another was a restaurant worker, and one was a “hostler.”¹⁴ There were a few blacks that might be considered middle-class, or would at least have had an elevated status within the black community. There was one “clergyman,” one “barber,” another man who was a “dealer” of some sort, and four men that worked in a quarry. Three men were listed as having no employment and two men’s occupations were undecipherable from the microfilm copy. As evidenced here, at least 75 percent of black males held menial jobs.¹⁵

Among the women few worked outside the home. Of the 56 women listed in the 1880 census, 44 “kept house.” Half of the remaining twelve were “servants” in the homes of white families and two were “laundresses”—presumably also in white households. One woman was “hotel cook” and three women were listed without any occupational designation.¹⁶

By 1900 black men in Port Jervis would occupy a wider variety of jobs, but they would still be in menial positions. Fourteen of the 45 men listed in the 1900 census were either “laborers” or had the even more precarious economic status of “day laborers.” Five men were “farm laborers,” five men were “hotel porters,” and three were “bootblacks.” Two men each were employed as “hostlers,” “janitors,” and “cooks.” One man apiece worked as a “porter,” “servant,” “car man,” and “hotel waiter.” There were two farmers and there was still a “clergyman,” although not same individual. The minister listed on the 1880 census was 58 year-old man born in New Jersey and the clergyman on the 1900 census was a 44 year old man from the West Indies.¹⁷

¹³ I assume that this refers to a railroad porter because there is a separate designation for “hotel porter.”

¹⁴ I am not sure whether these hostlers refer to horse caretakers or locomotive engine repairmen. There is no distinction in the census. However, given the time period and the relative position of other African American workers in this village, I am inclined to believe that the hostlers were horse tenders.

¹⁵ Tenth Census of the United States.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Twelfth Census of the United States.

There was also more job diversity for black woman in 1900, but just as with the men the jobs were clustered in service fields. Almost half of the 49 women listed in the census worked inside the home and nine were listed as having no employment. But of the remaining twenty they were spread over eight occupations. Most were “laundresses,” “cooks,” or “servants” in white households, but one woman was a “hostler,” another a “janitor,” and a third was a “day laborer.” All three of these were jobs that women had not held during the previous census. There was one woman that was a farmer compared to two men. And one woman was even a “teacher.” Nevertheless, even with the lone teacher and clergyman, in 1900, as in 1880 and by implication 1890, the black community in Port Jervis was a poor, working class community that depended very heavily on the health of the larger local economy and the benevolence of individual whites for survival. Being employed in the lowest-paying, unskilled jobs, blacks in Port Jervis were located at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder and even in times of prosperity perhaps only benefited marginally. However, in times of hardship, it is likely that many blacks were forced to leave the area as evidenced by the drop off from 230 African Americans in 1880 to 125 by 1900.

Bob Lewis was a member of this community. He was born and raised in Port Jervis. He was the stepson of celebrated Port Jervis resident, “Happy Hank” Jackson. However, for the previous five years he had been splitting his time between Port Jervis and Patterson, New Jersey where his mother then lived.¹⁸ As a single male, born in New York State, Lewis would not have

¹⁸ Newspaper accounts differ in their accounts of how long Lewis had been a resident of Port Jervis. “Lynched: He was Taken by an Angry Mob,” *Port Jervis Index*, 3 June 1892, n.pa., reported that Lewis had been born and raised in Port Jervis but had been splitting his time between Patterson, NJ and Port Jervis over the last five years because his mother had moved there. Another article, “Echoes of the Lynching,” *Middletown Daily Times*, 4 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS, reported that Lewis had only come to Port Jervis in 1886. And other articles claimed that Lewis had only been in Port Jervis for one year. I believe that Lewis had been born and raised in Port Jervis. Lewis was linked to a long-time Port Jervis resident, Lewis’ mother had him buried in Port Jervis after the lynching, and splitting his time between two places

been uncommon in Port Jervis during the late-nineteenth century. Although the majority of blacks in Port Jervis lived in nuclear and extended family groupings, there were men and women who were single and lived alone or boarded with the white families they worked for.¹⁹

And most African Americans in Port Jervis were born in New York State or the tri-states area. According to the 1880 census 76 percent of the black population had been born in New York State. The number of blacks in Port Jervis that had been born in places other than the tri-states area had increased since the 1860 census, but only from one to nine.²⁰ The 1900 Census shows a rather dramatic decrease in the black population of Port Jervis. Nevertheless, the percentage of blacks born in New York still remained near 68 percent. And there were still only nine persons from states other than New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. These figures show that this was an indigenous population that grew up in similar cultural settings.

Port Jervis, however, was affected as much by the influx of immigrants into the area and the railroad as by the characteristics of its African American residents. Most of the population growth that occurred in Orange County, New York during the second half of the nineteenth century was due to the migration of immigrants from New York City to the north and west in search of economic opportunity.

Over the period from 1830 through the turn of the century the inflow of immigrants appears to conform closely to national economic cycles. While in 1830, foreign-born residents represented only 2.5 percent of the total population of Orange County, by 1900 they accounted for 14.2 percent of the total population. However, if one looks at the decennial figures for the

would explain why Lewis was not found in either the 1890 or 1892 city directories. The burial in Port Jervis, in particular, suggests a long-time connection with the village.

¹⁹ Tenth Census of the United States. There were 46 nuclear and extended family households listed in the 1880 census. Four of these families took in boarders, which accounts for 13 people. There are also seven single women, five of them “servants” in white households, but it is only clear that one boards with the white family. There were eight single men, with only one living with his white employers. Most of the others worked as “laborers” and headed their own households.

²⁰ Compiled by author using data from the Tenth Census of the United States.

foreign-born population from the 1860 through 1900 censuses, the proportion of the foreign born population increases from 15.3 percent in 1860 to 17.75 percent in 1870, decreases to 13.9 percent in 1880, makes its way back up to 15.5 in 1890, but decreases once again to the final figure of 14.2 percent in 1900.²¹ From 1870 to 1880 and from 1890 to 1900 there are decreases in the absolute numbers of foreign-born residents—from 14,259 to 12,422 and from 15,195 to 14,662. These statistics speak to the importance of job opportunities as the major attraction of newcomers to the region, for when hard times hit, relatively unsettled individuals left Orange County. A reasonable correlation can be determined between the numbers and economic factors. The decrease in percentages from 1870 to 1880 and from 1890 to 1900 could be attributable to the major depressions of the mid-1870s and mid-1890s.

The Erie Railroad had been in financial straits for many years due to mismanagement and corruption. Things appeared to be improving at the beginning of the 1890s as a new president and board of trustees continued a policy of “reform and retrenchment,” begun five years earlier, and produced the first net profit in many years. However, by 1893 the Depression hit the Erie very hard and the railroad was again on the verge of legal bankruptcy. In fact, the railroad would declare bankruptcy soon after.²²

The economic downturn of the 1890s hit the Erie, and therefore, Port Jervis very hard but the social tensions within the community were being destabilized long before the 1890s. The railroad increased the number of transients passing through the town at any given time and spawned the growth of a rough working-class culture that roused the ire of middle class residents and reformers in Port Jervis. Port Jervis had a large “red light” district in the central business

²¹ Percentages computed by the author taken from the data of the United States Historical Census Browser at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>, November 8, 2001.

²² Edward H. Mott, *Between the Oceans and the Lakes: The Story of the Erie* (New York: Ticker Publishing Co., 1908), 270-3.

area.²³ In fact, the *Philadelphia Ledger* newspaper in 1879 described the growing village this way:

. . . in Orange County, 88 miles from New York, and on the line of the Erie Railroad. It is on the Delaware River, and near the junction of the three states—New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The population numbering nearly 10,000 is composed mainly of persons engaged in railroad shops, or employed on the road. About two years ago there were over 80 drinking saloons, and it is said that much distress was occasioned by so large a number.²⁴

In this article Port Jervis was identified by four major markers; its distance from New York City, the fact that it was a stop on the Erie, its location on the Delaware River and at the intersection of three states, and the fact that it contained over 80 saloons. The first three identifiers were geographic, but the only descriptors relating to the people of Port Jervis referenced railroad workers and the number of saloons. Being recognized by the number of saloons in town was quite disturbing to the middle-class, Protestant residents of Port Jervis.

Middle-class residents attempted to eradicate what they believed to be corruptive institutions from the village. Among other things these residents were trying change the perception of Port Jervis to outsiders as a community full of vice. Established families in town certainly did not relish this description. Therefore, similar to hundreds of other cities, towns, and villages throughout the country reformers took up the temperance cause in Port Jervis. There were two major temperance groups in the village: the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Christian Temperance Union. According to the *Port Jervis Tri-States Union* newspaper these were serious organizations in town. "Judging from the tone of the temperance people, and especially of this Women's Temperance Union, there is to be no let up in the fight until, as they

²³ <http://www.minisink.org/histpj.html>, MVHS, October 19, 2001.

²⁴ Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, *The Crane Log: A Documentary Life of Stephen Crane, 1871-1900*, (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1994), 14-5, quoting the *Port Jervis Evening Gazette*, 15 March 1879.

say, the last liquor shop is closed, as Port Jervis is redeemed from the great curse of dram drinking.”²⁵

Events taking place in Port Jervis were representative of larger trends that took place in American society during the late nineteenth century. The Erie railroad brought prosperity to the village. Port Jervis grew as industries settled there in order to take advantage of its proximity to shipping routes to New York and other places. Migrants arrived in Port Jervis from all over the region reflecting demographic shifts taking place all over the country. And finally, most whites operated within the prevailing racial paradigm of the time in which African Americans were considered inferior and were to be subordinate to whites.

This racial outlook that relegated blacks to the level of second-class citizens in Port Jervis did not necessarily mean that race relations were always fraught with visible, stark repression. In fact, white residents helped to create educational opportunities for the black residents of Port Jervis in the late-1870s. Drew Methodist Church, pastored by Reverend Doctor Jonathan Crane and his wife, Mrs. Crane, established “a Sunday school among the colored people” of which she was elected superintendent. And soon after “Mrs. Crane and four other women organized an industrial school for ‘colored women and children.’” The purpose of the school was to compensate for the lack of early schooling for blacks as well as to supplement the work of the day school by teaching young black women and girls how to sew and keep house.²⁶ Although interest in the school appeared to wane after Reverend Crane’s death in 1880 and Mrs. Crane’s subsequent move back to New Jersey,²⁷ that educational opportunities were furnished for African

²⁵ Wertheim and Sorrentino, *The Crane Log*, 14-5, quoting the *Port Jervis Tri-States Union*, 21 May 1879.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15, 19, quoting the *Port Jervis Tri-States Union*, 30 May 1879.

²⁷ There were only two references to the school in the records of the Drew Methodist Church in Port Jervis where Reverend Crane pastored and none after his death in 1880.

Americans with the relative consent of the community help to demonstrate that race relations were at least civil in the decade leading up to the 1890s.

Civility, however, was tenuous. As the lynchings of Mulliner in 1863 and Bob Lewis just over a decade later would illustrate, if a black person even allegedly transgressed the invisible, yet boldly drawn, line that separated white from black society—particularly sexually—their fate could be summarily determined and the results would be dire. Even in small northern communities that prided themselves on being modern and civil, northern and, perhaps, un-southern, certain crimes had the ability to galvanize the antipathy of an entire community and bring to the surface the ugliest stereotypes of a race. Under these circumstances, the pretense of civility broke down on June 2, 1892 and Port Jervis, New York resembled many a southern, rural hamlet where African Americans were lynched with impunity.

“The Most Memorable Day in the History of Port Jervis”²⁸

Thursday, June 2 began as a typical late spring day. Temperatures were changing from the mild breezy days of spring into the muggier days of summer in upstate New York. Flowers were blossoming and the cherry and maple trees that lined the streets were heavy with leaves. Port Jervis was beautiful this time of the year. As on any other Thursday the downtown shops were open for business as residents enjoyed breakfasts that featured locally bottled maple syrup, shopped for clothing and shoes, or possibly eyed a bracelet or necklace for an upcoming anniversary. The factories churned out the manufactured goods that allowed the small village to grow in importance over the last quarter of the century. Factory workers built stoves at the Swinton Stove Company, blew glass for Pountney and Gillinder or Brox-Ryall, spun silk, and

²⁸ “Came Very Near Lynching Foley at Port Jervis,” *New York Herald*, 4 June 1892, 5.

tanned hides. They also produced cigars, brewed beer, cobbled shoes and made clothes, among other occupations. No one had any reason to believe that this Thursday in 1892 would be very different than any other day, but it definitely would be. The lives of three individuals, and indeed the entire village, would be changed forever.

That morning Lena McMahon, a twenty-one year old white woman, was with Peter Foley, a white man eleven years her senior, walking along the banks of the Neversink River. Foley had met McMahon in October of 1891 about six months after arriving in Port Jervis. He represented himself as an insurance agent for the Greater Alliance Insurance Company.²⁹ They had been dating until Foley was arrested and placed in jail in January of 1892 for evading a bill he had incurred while he was a resident at the Delaware House, a hotel in town. It was during his time at the Delaware House that Peter Foley met Bob Lewis, an employee of the hotel. After Foley's arrest, any contact he had with Lena McMahon was against her parents' wishes. McMahon's mother and father, a local glass blower, believed Foley was a bad influence on their daughter and would only end up hurting her if she remained involved with him.³⁰ But Lena McMahon fought with her parents in order to be with him. Perhaps she was in love with Foley. And conceivably, he was the subject of the fight that drove Lena McMahon out of her parents' home and into his arms.

Peter Foley was comforting Lena McMahon on this morning because she had been in an argument with her mother a couple of days earlier and, after fleeing to New York City to visit friends, had returned to Port Jervis. Lena vowed never to return to her parents' home again.³¹

²⁹ "Lynchers Knew No Mercy;" "Came Very Near Lynching Foley," 5.

³⁰ John McMahon, Lena's adopted father, would bring blackmail charges against Foley as part of the fallout from Bob Lewis' lynching.

³¹ "Foley Tells His Story," *Middletown Daily Times*, 8 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS. This is the story according to Peter Foley as he told a *New York Times* correspondent. According to Foley, McMahon told him that "her mother had abused her terribly on Tuesday and she would not stand it any longer; she had beaten her and in the struggle with her mother had cut her lip so bad that she had to stop at Luckey's

That morning they both may have imagined that they were the only two people in the world that understood their relationship. Peter Foley believed they were a happy couple. Later evidence would reveal that there were signs that the relationship was on rocky ground before June.

While they were walking along the riverbank Foley decided to head back towards town in order to get lunch for the both of them. It was soon after Foley left that Bob Lewis allegedly attacked Lena McMahon in the presence of several witnesses. Lewis supposedly kept bystanders at bay with a gun until he had finished his dastardly deed and made an escape. Soon afterwards Lewis fled Port Jervis.³²

After Lewis fled, Foley maintains that he attended to McMahon briefly before she was helped home by several of the town's female residents, her mother, and local resident, Solomon Carley. McMahon was cut, bruised, and bloodied by the attack, but according to an interview Foley gave to a *New York Times* correspondent, she seemed to walk "with apparent ease."³³ While being attended to by Dr. Solomon Van Etten, McMahon allegedly gave a description of a black man fitting Lewis.³⁴ Dr. Van Etten probably furnished Carley with the description given by McMahon. In any event, once word of the attack reached back to Port Jervis and a description of the assailant was given, a posse of four men including Carley, Seward H. Horton, John Doty, and Walter Coleman immediately started after him.

drug store . . ." I am using this version because in another interview given by Lena McMahon prior to Foley's interview she stated that she was only at the banks of the river to await on incoming train to go to Boston. Foley makes the astute observation, however, that it would not have made sense to await the train at the banks of the river when the train depot was over a mile-and-a-half from the river. This made me suspicious of her testimony, not that his is to be totally trusted either.

³² That Foley left McMahon alone on the banks of the river just before the alleged attack with the pretense of getting lunch for them both is reported in all of the newspaper accounts of the assault. McMahon told a reporter in an article titled "Miss M' Mahon's Story," *Middletown Daily Times*, 9 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS, that she had never seen Lewis before the attack. A detective Elwell who had been tracking Foley revealed that both parties knew Lewis as he had acted as a "go between" for them both several times. "What Detective Elwell Knows," *Middletown Daily Times*, 10 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

³³ "Foley Tells his Story."

³⁴ "Something About Foley," *Port Jervis Evening Gazette*, 8 June 1892, 1. This article reports that Lena McMahon gave Dr. Van Etten a description of her assailant that fit Lewis.

Lewis had already been presumed guilty. It is not clear how the description given to Dr. Van Etten was known to be that of Bob Lewis, especially since McMahon maintained that she had never seen Lewis before the assault.³⁵ The deliberate nature of Lewis' seizure, however, suggests that the search posse knew exactly who they were looking for. Rather than searching for the man that fit the description, they appeared to be looking for Bob Lewis.

Carley, Horton, Doty, and Coleman rode wagons in the direction they believed Lewis had gone. Once Coleman and another man discovered a boat on the canal, they spotted Lewis and drove on past it until they linked up with Carley and the others. Carley and Horton then boarded the boat and sat next to Lewis. Lewis supposedly took out a knife and stuck it into a board next to himself. Then Carley approached Lewis on the pretense that he wanted to whittle a toothpick and asked to borrow the knife. Carley pretended to whittle a piece of wood until the boat reached the shore and then put the knife in his pocket and seized Lewis. Apparently, Carley said "Lewis, I guess we will have to take you with us." Lewis resisted but was grabbed by Carley on one side and by Doty on the other. With two other men behind him and Horton and Coleman waiting on shore, there was no chance for Lewis to escape. Once Lewis was brought ashore, a phone call was placed to Port Jervis and Coleman and Doty were sent ahead. Carley and Horton rode Lewis back to the village.³⁶ News traveled quickly and a mob of white men awaited Lewis' return to Port Jervis.³⁷ Coleman alerted police officer Patrick Salley that "he had the nigger" and that the wagon would be arriving in Port Jervis shortly.³⁸

³⁵ "Miss M'Mahon's Story." In another article, "What Detective Elwell Knows," detective Elwell refutes Lena McMahon's claim that she did not know Bob Lewis. He said, "Bob Lewis was a go-between for Foley and Miss McMahon. He carried more than one note for Foley to that young lady."

³⁶ "Lynched: He was Taken by an Angry Mob."

³⁷ "Lynched at Port Jervis: Robert Jackson, A Colored Man, Hanged by a Mob," *New York Times*, 3 June 1892, 1.

³⁸ "But Little Information," *Port Jervis Evening Gazette*, 7 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS. This was the testimony of John Doty at the coroner's inquest into the death of Bob Lewis.

On the way back to Port Jervis Lewis was reported to have confessed to committing the assault and implicated Peter Foley. Lewis told his captors that Foley put him up to assaulting McMahon as part of a conspiracy against her. According the *Orange County Farmer*, which took the report of Lewis' alleged confession from Solomon Carley, Lewis flatly admitted to assaulting Lena McMahon and simply asked his captors "what will they do to me?" Carley told Lewis that he would probably get ten years in the state prison. Then Lewis purportedly said, "Well, if I could only see Mr. McMahon I could fix it with him so that I could get off with a few months. It was this way. I was going to the river fishing when I met Foley. He said there was a girl down there on Cold Brook, and he didn't care what happened to her. I went down where he told me and acted as he had wanted me to act. He's the one that ought to get the penalty."³⁹ It is uncertain whether or not this account is true. For one, this is only one side of the story. By now, Bob Lewis was dead and therefore, could not refute this account. Second, if Carley and Horton did secure a confession, there is no way to know the circumstances under which the confession was given. Lewis had been bound by the hands and feet and sitting in between two hostile white men.⁴⁰ It is possible that Lewis would have said anything to save his life. Perhaps he was guilty of the crime. However, the scenario of an alleged plot against Lena McMahon gained some legitimacy amongst white town members once they learned that Foley was the last person to be seen with her before the assault.

When Lewis arrived back in Port Jervis at the "lock-up" at about eight o'clock he was met by an angry white mob that had grown to between 1,000 and 2,000 people. Village president, O. P. Howell, arrived just as Lewis' wagon entered town. Howell ordered his

³⁹ "Lynchers Knew No Mercy," *Orange County Farmer*, 3 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

⁴⁰ "Lynched: He Was Taken by an Angry Mob."

policemen to protect Lewis but only two of Howell's eight man police could respond in time.⁴¹ Instantaneously, "maniacal shouts of 'Hang him!' 'Kill Him!' 'String him up!' [arose] and all this mingled with vilest obscenity and profanity."⁴² Officers Simon Yaples and Ed Carrigan engaged in an Olympian struggle to get Lewis into the jailhouse unharmed as the three of them were immediately seized upon, dragged, and kicked by members of the mob. But despite efforts by police officers and the village president to protect Lewis, he was taken, a rope placed about his neck, and dragged through the streets of Port Jervis to be hanged at the nearest tree.⁴³

The procession halted in front of a tree as preparations were made for the hanging. A rope was thrown over a tree, tied to a lamppost, put around his neck, and his body was lifted off the ground. At this point President Howell took out a pocketknife, cut the rope and citizens Dr. Halsey Hunt, William Bonar, and Benjamin Ryall, who all wanted to dissuade the mob from lynching Lewis, rushed forward and pleaded for his life. Dr. Hunt implored the crowd to "Let the law take its course. If the man is guilty he will suffer for what he's done. You men are about to commit murder, and remember, you will disgrace this town forever. Remember, too, you may have the wrong man." Lewis also pleaded with the mob. "I didn't do it, I am the wrong man," he cried.⁴⁴ No one really listened. As Dr. Hunt later told a reporter, "you might as well as have talked to the ocean."⁴⁵ Bonar finally suggested that he first be brought to McMahon to be definitively identified as the assailant.

⁴¹ "Came Very Near Lynching Foley at Port Jervis," 5.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The article, "Came Very Near Lynching Foley at Port Jervis," 5, reported that Officer Salley was the one helping Yaples, but Officer Salley's own testimony at the Coroner's Inquest revealed that he never made it to Bob Lewis. In fact, Salley never even lifted his club to protect himself, his fellow officer, or Bob Lewis. It was Officer Carrigan that made it to Lewis and was trying to assist Officer Yaples in protecting Lewis. "But Little Information."

⁴⁴ "Lynchers Knew No Mercy," 1.

⁴⁵ "Came Very Near Lynching Foley at Port Jervis," 5.

Initially, the crowd agreed and headed toward the McMahon house. Lewis' capital trial continued through the center of town. While en route, Lewis was beaten, kicked, and stabbed mercilessly by members of the mob.⁴⁶ Several men continued to try and persuade the mob to disband and let the law deal with Lewis. President Howell even rushed to the McMahon residence ahead of the mob in order to persuade Lena McMahon to not recognize Lewis in order to save his life.⁴⁷ The streets of Port Jervis were filled with pandemonium as the orations of citizens who pleaded for Jackson's life competed with the frenzied cries for Lewis' head to carry the day.

While on the way to the McMahon home the leaders of the mob suddenly changed their minds and decided to delay the execution no longer. The rain was beating down on the throng and the thunder rolled. They stopped in next to a Methodist church and attempted to hang Lewis from a maple tree in front of the home of E. G. Fowler. The already high drama of the scene went up another notch as prominent lawyer and special county judge William Howe Crane emerged from his home and immediately rushed to the scene. By this time Lewis was three feet off the ground and beginning to lose consciousness. Due to his prominent position in the village and his forcefulness a path was cleared for Crane and he immediately demanded that Lewis be let down. After a moment Lewis fell to the ground prostrate. Lewis' execution was temporarily stayed as Crane went over to Lewis and removed the noose from his neck. Blood flowing from various wounds, Judge Crane looked for allies to finally secure Lewis' safety. Crane spotted Officer Yaples and asked him "will you defend this man?" Yaples declared that he would with

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The article reported that Howell's object in going to the McMahon household "was to advise Mr. and Mrs. McMahon not to recognize Lewis in order that a lynching might be prevented. This move brought out one of the most startling features of the entire day. Not only were the McMahon's willing to deny the identity of the accused, but President Howell said this afternoon [4 June], 'They told me that he was not the guilty man.'" But the reporter was skeptical whether or not Lena McMahon would stick by the statement and she did not.

his life. Then Crane recognized a doctor amidst the crowd, Dr. Walter Illman, and asked him if he would take Lewis in as a patient. Dr. Illman agreed and even said that Lewis could recover if he were left alone. The tide appeared to be turning in Lewis' favor. The mob had been jolted by Crane's action and no one moved toward Lewis for about three or four minutes.⁴⁸

But within an instant the mob would rediscover its penchant for blood as someone yelled that Lena McMahon was dead and another man—later identified by Judge Crane as Raymond Carr, son of noted local lawyer, L. E. Carr—struck a match in front of Lewis' face and exclaimed ““That's the -- -- --, hang him.”” After that the mob was again focused on the task at hand and Crane and Yaples were swept to the side even though they fought valiantly. Within minutes Bob Lewis was dead, although the entire scene lasted over an hour.⁴⁹ In the end, all pleas for Bob Lewis' life fell on deaf ears that night and he was lynched. Lewis became yet another piece of “strange fruit” dangling from a tree that was not meant to bear blossoms of his shape. The hard rain fell on his body washing off some of the blood and dirt that was caked on him, but it could not wash the blood and dirt of the event off of the town. After Lewis died, his body hung from the tree for an hour where it was viewed by passing crowds. In cases of southern lynchings, “the spectacle of the dangling corpse, the charred remains of the body, and stern signs of warning” were often left in public view for hours or even days after a lynching.⁵⁰

For days following the lynching men, women, and children were reported to have “hacked the tree on which the hanging occurred until it looks as if a cyclone had struck it. Bits of the rope were cut up and distributed among the crowd of morbid relic seekers.”⁵¹ The event had become communal entertainment and many wanted a piece of the event to remember it by.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 43.

⁵¹ “Echoes of the Lynching,” *Middletown Daily Times*, 4 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

It was morbid, but collecting a piece of bark from the hanging tree or a piece of the hanging rope allowed one to possess physical affirmation of the psychological superiority gained from asserting racial dominance. Relic hunting gave those who found them a stake in the white supremacist order, no matter their class background.

The quest to possess Lewis and the claim for racial superiority continued even in death. Bob Lewis was buried in Port Jervis on Saturday, June 6 after black residents had raised money amongst themselves to buy a grave and the village provided some money in order that he have a proper burial. At the service hundreds of people looked at Lewis in the pine box and some tore strips of clothing from his body and others even cut locks of hair from Lewis' head. Eventually, the crowd became too difficult to control and they were shut out of the service.⁵²

Port Jervis as a "Citadel of National Culture"

For most, if not all, of the men who tried to save Lewis' life it was not Lewis' guilt or innocence that was at issue. They still, however, wished to have the laws of the state deal with Lewis. The residents of Port Jervis, as most northerners, prided themselves on the highly civilized nature of their society particularly in contrast to the South. Port Jervis inhabitants also held to the belief that nothing like this could ever happen there, not just because of geography but because everyone knew each other in Port Jervis. Things like this simply did not happen in Port Jervis.

One part of the notion of civilization, in this context, had to do with industrialization and Port Jervis was still in its ascendancy. Although the village was about to enter into some tough economic times in 1892, by 1900 Port Jervis felt very good about itself again. The town was still

⁵² "The Port Jervis Horror," *Middletown Daily Times*, 6 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

on the path toward becoming an incorporated city in 1907. A booklet published in 1900 by local businessmen advertised the village as a place for the “progressive citizen” that was looking for a place to settle down and find prosperity.⁵³ Port Jervis factories produced finished goods that found their way to New York City, Boston, Trenton and beyond. Residents of Port Jervis quickly availed themselves to modern conveniences. The village was the Orange County leader in harnessing electricity. It had already implemented a limited arc street lighting system by 1882, beating out neighboring towns to employ the new technology first. Villagers used phones as early as 1878 and the Port Jervis Telephone Company was founded in 1898. Also, the Erie paid over \$125,000 per month to employees that lived in and around Port Jervis.⁵⁴

Another part of the notion of civilization had to do with the cultural vitality and habits of the village. For the members of Port Jervis’ “industrial and professional classes”⁵⁵ cosmopolitanism was very important. As Jacqueline Goldsby writes:

These men and their families did not feel as if they existed on the margins of metropolitan culture because they arranged for those riches to be delivered upstate. Their homes were designed and built by architects from New York City. Their children attended public schools whose curricula were “fully abreast of the times.” Three opera houses served as venues for traveling theatrical troupes that “furnish[ed] a high order of drama and spectacles” for the town. D. W. Griffith shot his early Biography films nearby. In the summers, the elites of Port Jervis played host to the urban sophisticates who chose to spend their vacation time upstate. Proud of these attractions, the writers of this brochure advised its readers: “it is well not to be misled by the name ‘village’ to infer that Port Jervis is a mere country hamlet.” Instead, the author-advocates explained, visitors and potential residents should regard Port Jervis in light of what its financial fortunes enabled it to do; to transform itself into a different entity altogether—a citadel of national culture.⁵⁶

While it is important to note that “Port Jervis:1900” was a brochure written by local merchants, it is still useful in illustrating how Port Jervis saw itself and how it wanted to be

⁵³ Jacqueline Denise Goldsby, “After Great Pain,” 1.

⁵⁴ <http://www.minisink.org/histpj.html>, MVHS, October 19, 2001.

⁵⁵ Goldsby, 203.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 203-4.

viewed by the outside world. Merchants wanted to be sure, just as the temperance advocates back in 1879, that Port Jervis was not only known for the number of saloons in town, but rather as a “citadel of national culture.” There was a good deal of money to be made from summer tourism, the selling of finished products to major cities, as well as from the use of the theaters and other cultural spaces. Not only was the brochure a community-wide effort to ensure the health and morale of Port Jervis, the creation of this image was a communal effort to distance Port Jervis from its working-class culture.

Port Jervis was a bastion of national culture. However, it manifested itself in ways other than the acceptance of the corporate capitalist ethos.⁵⁷ Lynching was also a part of the national culture. National culture was both progressive and backward at the same time. So was Port Jervis. The community immediately began trying to distance itself from the events of June 2, 1892.

Local officials investigated the lynching of Bob Lewis in order to punish his murderers. A Coroner’s Inquest attempted to reveal the individuals that pulled the lynching rope that killed Bob Lewis. From the onset the proceedings took on the look and feel of criminal trial. A jury of sorts was assembled, although opinions differed as to whether this body was of the requisite “character” to find out the perpetrators of the lynching. A *New York Tribune* article made a point of disclosing that of the ten men empanelled on the jury three were barkeepers and one was a liquor wholesaler.⁵⁸ Being associated with the distribution of alcohol, the implication was that these men promoted vice. Once the doors to the chamber were opened on Monday, June 6, spectators filled the courtroom immediately.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 205. I agree with Goldsby that Port Jervis “embraced the ethos of corporate capitalism with enthusiasm.”

⁵⁸ An article, “The Lynching Denounced,” *New York Tribune*, 4 June 1892, 1.

The first witness called to the stand was Officer Simon Yaples. Yaples recounted the grizzly details of the lynching and implicated several well-respected men as mob leaders. Altogether Yaples incriminated nine men as taking an active role in inciting the crowd to violence and committing violent acts against Lewis' person. Among them were John Kinsela, a well-known Erie railroad engineer, for trying to obstruct his handling of Lewis and D.C. McCombs, former Port Jervis police chief, whom Yaples was not sure was trying to aid or work against him. Yaples also implicated seven other men. He testified that he recognized John Eagan—a grocer—, John Henly—a switchman for the Erie—, Patrick Collier—an undertaker—, Louis Avery, James Kirby, Lorenzo Wood, and a man named Fitzgibbons all brutalize Lewis. Yaples told the assemblage that Collier was even trying to incite the crowd to kill him. After Bob Lewis was lynched and the order was given to cut down his body, Collier joked that he would be willing to take charge of the body, being an undertaker. Yaples asked him, “You don't want to take this man down after hanging him, do you?” To which Collier responded, “[T]here will be \$25 in it.” And there was laughter in the chamber. In Yaples' opinion these men definitely appeared to be the leaders of the mob.⁵⁹

Yaples supplied damning testimony against the men but over the course of the next several days, every other witness except William Crane would take the stand and refuse to implicate anyone, while denying or minimizing their own participation in the affair. Solomon Carley and Seward Horton, two of the men that originally delivered Lewis to the police were the next two witnesses on the stand. They stood by one another's stories of Lewis' capture. Carley testified that he saw D.C. McCombs in the crowd but that was all.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “Who Hanged the Negro?,” *Port Jervis Evening Gazette*, 6 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

⁶⁰ “But Little Information.”

On day two, John Doty, another man involved in Lewis capture, took the stand and said that he heard lots of noise, but could not “distinguish any words.” He could not identify anyone in the crowd. Doty called into question Bob Lewis’ character by testifying that he heard Carley say to Lewis that “he was ashamed” of him. Doty continued, “[t]he darkey said, ‘I was drunk all day yesterday and day before and was set up to do it.’”⁶¹ Doty’s racism was apparent in his “darkey” comment. His testimony also shifted the focus of the inquest back to Lewis’ alleged confession and brought his reputation back into question by casting him as a drunkard.

Officer Salley was next on the stand and he again heard lots of noise but could not distinguish any words or calls for lynching. Salley also could not identify anyone in the crowd. He acknowledged that “[t]he crowd was much excited . . . [but] he heard no angry cries.” Officer Salley’s testimony was full of contradictions. He testified that he saw a crowd around Yaples and Lewis but “did not see that violence was being offered to Yaples or the colored man” so he did not use his police club to protect himself, his fellow officer, or the prisoner even though he was “doing his best to get to Lewis.” Salley also admitted that he did not try to arrest anyone and he was not present when Lewis was hanged.⁶²

It was so evident during his testimony that Officer Salley was more a collaborator than an officer of the law that a *New York Times* report commented “[t]he evidence of Patrick F. Salley brought out in a most painful manner the inefficiency of that officer. He was conveniently ignorant of all that took place, and could name none of the lynchers.”⁶³

Several other witnesses testified that day including Lorenzo Wood and Benjamin Ryall, who had tried to restrain the mob, but neither man implicated anyone else as a mob participant. The same *New York Times* article reported the inquest had been “utterly barren of results so far

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “Lewis Lynching Inquest,” *New York Times*, 8 June 1892, 8.

as fixing responsibility of the affair is concerned.” Also, that Kinsela and Eagan denied their participation in the lynching and that their statements had been “borne out by the evidence of reputable and respectable witnesses.”⁶⁴

By the second day of the inquest, prominent witnesses for the prosecution were receiving threats they would “suffer” if they testified.⁶⁵ President Howell also received numerous “crank” letters from all over the country regarding the lynching.⁶⁶ The white members of the middle-class were closing ranks in an effort to protect one another from being punished.

The next day Judge Crane took the stand. Crane told the story of the lynching once he entered the fray pretty much as he told it to the papers but he also maintained that Raymond Carr was directly responsible for Bob Lewis’ death. According to a *New York Times* report, “Mr. Crane was asked if, in his opinion, young Carr’s words precipitated the hanging, and he replied in the affirmative. It was a critical moment, [Crane] said, when a word either way might be decisive. The crowd was momentarily quelled and there was certainly an opportunity to save the negro, which was destroyed by young Carr’s words.” Crane was unable to identify anyone else that conducted the hanging as he stated that his attention was fixed on Lewis and not on those with the rope.⁶⁷

Carr sat silently through Crane’s testimony waiting impatiently for the chance to clear his name. When it was his turn, he agreed with Crane on every major point other than what was said after he struck the match to Lewis’ face. He denied that he used any of the words attributed to him or that he responded to Crane’s admonition at all.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid. In this article, Kinsela is spelled “Kinsella” and “Eagan” became “Reagan.”

⁶⁵ “Nine of the Lynchers Were Identified,” *Newburgh Daily News*, 7 June 1892, 2.

⁶⁶ “Naming the Lynchers,” *New York Tribune*, 7 June 1892, 1.

⁶⁷ “Port Jervis Inquest,” *New York Times*, 9 June 1892, 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Several others testified including Patrick Collier, Officer Carrigan, John Kinsela, William Bonar, Dr. W. H. Illman, and Dr. Solomon Van Etten, the physician who treated Lena McMahan and examined Bob Lewis after the lynching. Van Etten was charged with making statements to incite a mob, but their testimonies were rather uneventful. By June 9 whatever belief the district attorney held out for guilty verdicts at the beginning of the inquest had faded. A headline in the *New York Tribune* read, "Lynchers Likely to Go Free." The *Middletown Daily Times* was not satisfied with the nonsensical direction the inquest had gone in by the final day. An article expressed the paper's frustration with the proceedings.

The inquest has fast been developing into a farce and the only conclusion that this jury can come to, it seems, according to the evidence is that Lewis was the only one on the rope and that his death must have been self-inflicted.⁶⁹

The inquest ended on June 10 with no one convicted. The jury rendered the following verdict after only one hour of deliberation:

We find that Robert Lewis came to his death in the village of Port Jervis on the second day of June, 1892, by being hanged by his neck by a person or persons unknown to the jury.⁷⁰

The *Middletown Times* was not the only paper that was frustrated with the outcome of the inquest. The *New York Morning Advertiser* believed that the verdict of the inquest was reached because the citizens of Port Jervis engaged in a cover up.

That many of the persons called to testify as to the identity of the lynchers have deliberately perjured themselves is reasonably clear. The lynchers made no attempt to

⁶⁹ "Lynchers Not Revealed," *Middletown Daily Times*, 10 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

⁷⁰ "Bob Lewis's Death," *Middletown Daily Times*, 11 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

conceal their identity; they were seen and recognized by scores of persons; and yet, when they are placed on the witness stand and asked if they can name any of the members of the mob, they are able to throw no more light on the affair than if they had been in the heart of Africa when it took place.⁷¹

Many of the middle-class citizens of Port Jervis had indeed closed ranks in order to protect one another from possible punishment. These were prominent men in the village including railroad engineers, doctors, police officers, a former police chief, and a lawyer's son. They came together to protect their personal interests as well as those of their race and class. The lynchers—and not just the leaders, but everyone in attendance—obviously believed that they had the right to deliver justice as they saw fit based on their own racist conception of who deserved due process and under what circumstances.

Less than one week after lynching Bob Lewis, the village had the opportunity to avenge the assault of another of its female citizens with a lynching. John Damm, a white man, was arrested and charged with an indecent assault on a nine-year-old girl. He, however, was not lynched. The incident was merely blamed on intoxication, he was sentenced to two months in Goshen jail and that seemed to be the end of it.⁷² Intoxication had also been used in the Lewis case, but it was used to justify mob action. In the Damm case, his intoxication was used to dismiss the crime. As the paper reported, “[t]he man was intoxicated at the time and he did not know what he was doing.”⁷³ The same men that were so incensed by Lewis’ transgression as to decide within hours that he should die, apparently did not bat an eyelash over the assault of a young girl by a white man.

⁷¹ “More of Port Jervis,” *Middletown Daily Times*, 13 June 1892, 2; citing *New York Morning Advertiser*.

⁷² “He Was Not Lynched,” *Middletown Daily Times*, 8 June 1892, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

The inquest ended unsuccessfully for those that wanted the lynchers punished, but the legal investigation was not over. The case was brought before the grand jury in hopes of securing indictments so that these men would stand trial. At the end of the Grand Jury session, the district attorney did secure nine indictments; five for assault and four for creating a riot. The most surprising indictment was of Village President O. P. Howell for criminal negligence. With this verdict, the grand jury sent a message that would not have been sent in the South;⁷⁴ that even the highest of local officials could be held accountable for the death of a black man by illegal means. However, the district attorney immediately challenged this indictment and the judge agreed to throw it out.⁷⁵ Ultimately, no one served any jail time for lynching Bob Lewis.

It is difficult to know what to make of the grand jury action and the investigation into the lynching more generally. The judge presiding over the grand jury hearings believed that the men should have been indicted for manslaughter, rather than assault and inciting a riot,⁷⁶ suggesting that the jury was too lenient. At the same time, however, they indicted the village's highest official on a serious charge and the judge threw that indictment out. The inquest in Port Jervis appeared to begin as a serious investigation for the perpetrators in Lewis' death, but degenerated into a "farce." The end result—that no one was punished in this lynching—was consistent with what happened in the majority of cases, particularly in those involving black victims. But the proceedings still extended farther than many such investigations did in the South.

⁷⁴ Brundage argues that "communal participation in mob violence ensured that no single individual would be held responsible for the execution because mass lynchings became the expression of communal values of law and order, of family honor, and white supremacy rather than personal vengeance." *Lynching in the New South*, 40.

⁷⁵ "Nine Indictments in the Port Jervis Lynching Case," *Newburgh Daily Journal*, 29 June 1892, 4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

What these two investigations allow one to conclude about the judicial system in Port Jervis, Orange County, or New York State is difficult to answer. That the legal mechanisms existed to prosecute individuals that were accused of criminal acts—that was certainly true. That the system was effective in prosecuting those individuals—that is more difficult to discern. The irony of this is that in the literature on lynching, many mob members justified lynchings by arguing that the legal remedies available in their counties were not harsh enough in their punishments to deter future offenders from committing the crimes again, thereby forcing individuals to take matters into their own hands for protection. Similar rhetoric occurs in some of the editorials regarding the Bob Lewis case. But do not the lack of convictions in the criminal investigations only serve to prove them right?

Response to the Lynching

The day after the lynching a *New York Herald* report concluded by saying that “[p]ublic sentiment on the lynching is divided, although a majority approves and openly applaud the work of the lynchers, claiming that a terrible warning was necessary to prevent future repetitions of the same offense.”⁷⁷ For the white men who lynched Bob Lewis—or watched with approval—his dead corpse was a symbol of their ability to possess the sexuality of white women and black men. Lynching served as a visible warning to local blacks to remain subordinate and provided white men with tangible proof of their continued predominance in American society.

Another editorial expressed the point in a slightly different way. In speaking about lynchings generally, the author stated that “their real significance, wherever they occur, seems to be that popular sentiment regards this particular crime, when committed by a negro against a

⁷⁷ “Negro Lynched by an Angry Mob in Port Jervis,” *New York Herald*, 3 June 1892, 5.

white woman, as one deserving of death. The law does not provide a death penalty for it, and so the people take the matter into their own hands. It is not a matter of politics or of section but of sentiment, and so far as the sentiment involves a race distinction the prejudice underlying it seems not less prevalent in Northern than in Southern communities.”⁷⁸ And apparently, according to W. Fitzhugh Brundage, lynchings involving mass mobs were not entirely about murder. He argues that “mass mobs were not solely intent on murdering victims . . . Mass mobs also had didactic aims; their actions both conveyed the degradation that they believe their victim deserved and underscored the legitimacy of the extralegal execution.”⁷⁹ The mob that lynched Bob Lewis was certainly sending a message to the other African Americans in Port Jervis. Their brutality towards him showed their belief in Lewis’ fundamental inhumanity in addition to their outrage that a black man might have sexual relations with a white woman. The white men of Port Jervis proved to themselves that they could protect “their white women” from the “lascivious black rapists” they believed were lurking within every black male.

Over the coming weeks, public representatives of Port Jervis—and those who wanted to be seen as such—would present a different assessment of “public sentiment” as editorials from all over the country, local sermons, comments from local organizations, and other factors put pressure on the residents to repent for their communal sin—at least publicly. Locally, Port Jervis president, O. P. Howell, attempted to perform damage control for the village image in the eyes of the outside world by condemning the lynching and blaming the incident on railroad workers and other ruffians. Other professionals did the same. President Howell met with his officers the very next day, interrogated them, and determined that William Altermeyer⁸⁰ had been negligent in his

⁷⁸ “Port Jervis Lynching,” *Newburgh Evening Press*, 4 June 1892, 2.

⁷⁹ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 39.

⁸⁰ Also spelled Altemeyer, Altemeier, Altermeir, and Altermaeir

duties. Howell replaced Altermeyer with William Bonar who had tried to assist police in stopping the lynching.⁸¹

By June 4, the reported “public sentiment” in Port Jervis had done a complete 180-degree turn. An extended citation from the *Newburgh Daily Journal* is necessary.

The lynching of a miserable Negro here yesterday by an angry and, to a limited extent, a drunken mob was denounced as a disgrace and an outrage by all the respectable people in [Port Jervis] to-day. That in a civilized community in the State of New York a mob of men should ignore the officers of the law, drag a wretched Negro through the public thoroughfares, choke him, kick him and club him, and then in the view of 2,000 people string him up to the limb of a tree, almost in the shadow of a church—this the better element in Port Jervis say they can only denounce as shameful and disgraceful.

The majority of the men who went to make up the crowd which has brought such dishonor upon Port Jervis and New York State were not men engaged in the respectable walks of life. The Tribune reporter has the statements of some of the most trustworthy officials and citizens of the place that many of the men who assisted and incited the mob to bring about the tragic scene were thieves and loafers. Others of them were railroad employees who chanced to be in the town.

The respectable people who took a hand in this affair at all did everything in their power to persuade the mob to permit the police authorities to take charge of the culprit, but they were scoffed at, stoned and assaulted by several men in the crowd, who had spent the day in the liquor stores of the town. . . .

The people of Port Jervis admit that the crime of which the brutal Negro was guilty was a most heinous one, but they believe that the law should have been allowed to take its course.⁸²

This passage is illustrative of several themes. First was the attempt to disassociate the “respectable” citizens of Port Jervis from the lynching. It was claimed that the “respectable people” only tried to assist the police. Public officials attempted to shift the blame for the lynching to “thieves and loafers” and other transients before it could be proven otherwise with a criminal investigation.

⁸¹ “Echoes of the Lynching.” Interestingly, Officer Altermeyer appears nowhere else in the records of the lynching.

⁸² “The Lynching Denounced,” *Newburgh Daily Journal*, 4 June 1892, 2. This same article was also printed on the same day in the *New York Tribune*.

Second, the role of alcohol was key in trying to sway public opinion back in favor of the village. Influential residents of Port Jervis, while benefiting materially from the presence of the railroad, despised the working-class culture that accompanied it and consistently refused to acknowledge railroad workers as members of the community. The mob was described as “drunken” and full of transient “railroad employees.” Whether or not this was true, of the leaders that were implicated by Officer Yaples during the inquest, only one worked for the railroad. The class division that public officials attempted to create using the phrase “respectable people,” between the middle-class residents who only tried to assist the police and the working-class inhabitants, who were drunken and violent, did not bear itself out in this instance. As we saw, however, the inquest brought to light that several prominent residents of the village played leading roles in the lynching.

Third, the passage reflects that people did not denounce the lynching because they believed that Bob Lewis was innocent. Quite the contrary, residents presumed he was guilty. Instead, they argued that nevertheless, the law should have been allowed to deal with him.

Fourth, this illustrates how important the axioms of “civilization” and being “un-southern” were to the residents of Port Jervis. Both the use of the word “civilized” and its linkage with New York State was deliberate. For the people of Port Jervis, lynchings only occurred in “uncivilized” communities, or in earlier times long since past. As long as villagers could associate lynchings exclusively with the South, they could believe they existed in a higher state of “civilization.” That Port Jervis would now be included in the “United States of Lyncherdom” forced residents to take an uncomfortable collective look in the mirror at what type of community they lived in. Where residents may not have wanted to turn the reflective glass on themselves, editorials from all over the region and the country did it for them.

This was an early attempt at public atonement for the lynching, but the explanation for Bob Lewis' death did not satisfy many. Editorials came from as far south as Memphis and the majority either castigated Port Jervis residents for participating in such a barbaric practice or took a moderate position condemning the lynching because they now believed that Peter Foley, who they considered to be the viler criminal, was more likely to go free.

Many of the editorials condemned the lynching in strong terms and questioned the validity of northern communities arguing for sectional differences when lynchings seemed to be on the rise in the North. The *New York Daily Press* commented "for the murder of the colored criminal at Port Jervis there may be palliation; there can be no excuse. . . . They were guilty of an act which will be a lasting stain upon their community, and which is a blot on the State of New York." The editorial went on to say that "the lynching was a disgrace to the wealthiest and most *highly civilized* [italics mine] state in the Union. Lynch law is barbarism everywhere. There is no justification for it whatever in any community, North or South, where the machinery of justice exists . . ." ⁸³ Again the rhetoric of civilization appeared and again it was linked with New York State. Among other things, northerners prided themselves on being civilized and, therefore, better than southerners. Lynching was considered by many northerners to be barbaric. It was also supposed to be a "southern" practice. As long as lynchings did not occur in the North then northerners could maintain the fiction of moral superiority over the South. Now that a lynching had scandalized New York State and appeared to be on the rise throughout the section, that myth was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

The belief among northerners that the North was more enlightened than the South took a serious blow after the Bob Lewis lynching. Several editorials from around the region picked up the theme of sectional distinctiveness and challenged it. One editorial, in particular, put many

⁸³ Quoted in "What is Said of it," *Middletown Daily Times*, 4 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

widely held beliefs about lynching at the time under scrutiny and found that they did not hold up in the Port Jervis case. The *Philadelphia Press* wrote,

The State of New York has been disgraced by one of the most cowardly lynchings that has occurred in 1892—a year in which lynching appears to have become more popular as a punishment for crime than ever. . . . The fact that such a lawless event could take place in such an orderly community as Port Jervis is much more discouraging than if it had occurred in the South. The reasons which it is held justify mob violence in the South when revolting crimes are committed have no force when applied to this Port Jervis case. The people number only a small minority of the population in that neighborhood. In the main they are peaceful and law-abiding, and are as worthy of protection. The courts are also well organized, and there is no reason to suppose that any unnecessary leniency would have been extended to the prisoner. It is useless to denounce such violence in the South if it is to be encouraged in the North.⁸⁴

In one fell swoop the editorial slashes away at many of the rationalizations that were used for lynching; that blacks were threatening to take over the community and that they needed to be kept in their “places,” that all blacks were criminals, that the justice system would have been incapable of prosecuting Lewis, and that the North can continue to stand in righteous indignation, rebuking the South, when the same peculiar practices also occur in the North. Port Jervis was indeed a “citadel of national culture,” although not for the reasons it hoped.

Other editorials were more moderate in denouncing the lynching. They condemned mob violence generally, but were most upset that Lewis’ death made it unlikely that Foley would be punished for his alleged role in Lena McMahon’s assault. A *New York Times* editorial addressed the dangers of the mobocratic spirit allowing passion and “indignation” to take precedence over law and truth. But ultimately, the editorialist was more upset that “the greater criminal [Foley], if he be a criminal at all, is likely to go scot free because the people of Port Jervis have hastily

⁸⁴ Quoted in “The Lynching of Lewis: How it is Viewed by the Press Elsewhere,” *Port Jervis Evening Gazette*, 5 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

and carelessly hanged a man who, if he had been spared, might have proved a valuable witness.”⁸⁵

There were also editorials that applauded the actions of the mob, or at least resigned themselves to the belief that until New York made rape a capital offense lynchings would continue. Several of the editorials cited above also advocated for the law to be changed to make the penalty stiffer for rape, even though they came out against the lynching. An *Elmira Star* editorial praised the lynching. “[T]he hanging seems to have been as justifiable as such executions ever are. The people are supposed to make all laws, and they do not always have time to stop and have them sanctioned by their representatives in the legislature.”⁸⁶ A *Philadelphia Times* editorial quipped, “[t]he theory of the majesty of the law is undisputed; but the peculiar condition sets it aside, and lynching is excused even when none can justify it. . . . [U]ntil some system of government shall be devised to restrain the brutes who assault women, there will be little practical resistance to the enforcement of lynch law where a helpless woman’s dishonor is to be avenged.”⁸⁷ Besides acquiescing to the mob’s action, and invoking the rhetoric of protecting white womanhood, these editorials point to another important theme in the evolution of the practice of lynching in America and that is the relationship between Americans and the law.

James Cutler, in *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (1905), the first major scholarly study of lynching in the twentieth century, discussed the relationship between American attitudes towards the law and lynching. Cutler argued that lynching, particularly the way it manifested itself after the Civil War, was a uniquely American

⁸⁵ “The Dangers of Lynching,” *New York Times*, 4 June 1892, 4.

⁸⁶ Quoted in “Seems to Have Been Justified,” *Middletown Daily Times*, 4 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

⁸⁷ Quoted in “The Port Jervis Lynching,” *New York Evening Press*, 6 June 1892, 5.

quasi-institution. The peculiar practice persisted not because Americans were any more predisposed to violence or lawlessness than Europeans, but because they had a fundamentally different attitude toward the law. While British common law was based upon centuries of tradition therefore making it “something in itself to reverence and respect,” American law lacked that long tradition and, creating new governing structures, Americans grew to view the law as “little more than a device for securing freedom.”⁸⁸

White Americans used the law as a device for securing their freedom at the expense of African Americans. James McGovern argued, “whites were conscious of their unlimited power over blacks and were willing to administer it through lynchings because they knew they could do it with impunity.”⁸⁹ The mob members in Port Jervis were confident that they would receive communal sanction for Bob Lewis’ lynching. As a previous editorial made clear, these men did not attempt to conceal their identities and even joked about Lewis’ death at the scene of the crime. That no one was ever convicted was the ultimate sign of communal approval.

Besides editorials, local ministers sermonized against the peculiar practice to their congregations and the Newburgh, New York branch of the Afro-American League also came out with resolutions condemning the lynching. Reverend Ame Vennema, pastor of the Reformed Church in Port Jervis, preached against the lynching by affirming the unique heterogeneity of the American population and all Americans as “fellow citizens with saints in the household of faith.”⁹⁰ Vennema also spoke about American’s relationship with the law. He censured both Lewis’ crime and the crime of the mob leaders. “I therefore repeat and emphasize the truth, that

⁸⁸ James E. Cutler, *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1905, 1969), 267-9.

⁸⁹ James R. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 151; quoted in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 10.

⁹⁰ “Ministers of the Gospel,” *Port Jervis Evening Gazette*, 6 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

in a Republic like ours where the people govern in order to enjoy good government, it is essential that every citizen should learn to control his passion and prejudice in subjection to reason and conscience and to law and order.”⁹¹

Reverend W. H. Hudnut, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in the village, told his congregation “he did not know what injustice was until the other night.” Outraged by the assault on Lena McMahon and admitting that he believed that the state laws were not stringent enough when it came to rape, he still reminded his parishioners “the place to rectify them is in Albany. No frenzied mob in a village street is a legislative body. Untried, this man was uncondemned, and uncondemned he was punished far in excess of the extremest legal penalty. He had the right of trial by a jury of fair men whose reason should not be affected by prejudice and passion.” Reverend Hudnut went on not only to chide the leaders of the mob, but also those who stood passively by and did nothing to interfere. He told them that their “deed was not justifiable in the eyes of Heaven . . .”⁹²

Both ministers spoke against the lynching in strong terms, but Vennema was still uncomfortable discussing the event. If he had it his way, he “should rather have passed this disgraceful affair without comment.” But he was compelled to speak because the lynching occurred in front of his church. Public officials would also have rather had the publicity simply fade away, but it would not. Port Jervis was on the U. S. of L. map and the village now aroused the ire of anti-lynching activists near and far.

The Afro-American League (AAL) was an organization established by T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the *New York Age*, in 1890. He had been calling for a national organization of African Americans to fight for their rights as American citizens since 1887. He listed six

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Rev. W. H. Hundnut’s Sermon,” *Port Jervis Evening Gazette*, 6 June 1892, n.pa., file of the MVHS.

grievances in his initial appeal for the League and second among them was “the universal and lamentable reign of lynch and mob law.”⁹³ That combating lynching was second on the list of grievances articulated by Fortune was significant because, as Donald Grant argues in his book, *The Anti-Lynching Movement, 1883-1932*, between the 1880s and 1930s anti-lynching was the cause that rallied the most support within the black community.⁹⁴

By 1892 the Afro-American League had branches all over New York State and around the country. In response to Bob Lewis’ lynching, the Newburgh branch issued two resolutions repudiating the lynching and released them to all the area newspapers. On June 7, the Newburgh Afro-American League resolutions were printed in several papers across New York State. It read:

We the members of the said league have seriously considered the action of the angry mob upon Bob Lewis, at Port Jervis, county of Orange, State of New York, and do hereby

Resolved, To express our indignation in the treatment that was perpetrated upon the said Bob Lewis, being drawn or dragged through the streets of the said city, finally and disgracefully lynched without law or justice.

Be it *Resolved*, that we, the members of the said League, do hereby offer our thanks to the President of the village for the efforts to protect the prisoner in such a perilous predicament. And we do earnestly appeal to the citizens of the Empire States as American citizens to give us the protection that is due American citizens.⁹⁵

Little else is known about the Newburgh Afro-American League. Nevertheless, the Newburgh branch as well as the national AAL were the predecessors to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the anti-lynching movement.

⁹³ Emma Lou Thornbrough, “The National Afro-American League, 1887-1908,” *Journal of Southern History* 17 (Nov. 1961), 495; quoting T. Thomas Fortune, *New York Freeman*, 4 June 1887.

⁹⁴ Donald Grant, *The Anti-Lynching Movement, 1883-1932* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975), introduction.

⁹⁵ “The Afro-American League,” *Newburgh Daily Journal*, 7 June 1892, 4.

No less a figure than Ida B. Wells commented on the Port Jervis incident. A vigorous anti-lynching activist, she asserted that sexuality was an important theme in provoking lynchings in the South, but that the stereotype of the black male rapist was a myth. In that vein, Wells called attention to the fact that Foley had written McMahon on several occasions asking for money and that she gave it to him even though they were supposedly no longer dating. Lena McMahon did it, Wells pointed out, because Foley threatened to expose secrets about McMahon to her father. Wells inferred that the only sensible hypothesis was that Foley knew a relationship existed between McMahon and Lewis and the money was to keep Foley quiet.⁹⁶ Well's claim was provocative but no evidence supported her claim.⁹⁷

Historiography and Conclusions

The lynching of Bob Lewis in Port Jervis touches on several themes that are prominent in the literature on lynching. Interracial sex, mob violence, communal sanction of violence against African Americans, and the relationship between white Americans and the law are some of those subjects. Although it is possible to discuss these topics when writing about northern or southern lynchings, it does not necessarily follow that historians can therefore analyze northern and southern lynchings using the same paradigms. While the historiography of southern lynchings is

⁹⁶ Ida B. Wells, "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases," 1892, 23; in Wells, *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, and Mob Rule in New Orleans* (Salem, N.H.: Ayer Company, Publishers, Inc., reprint 1990).

⁹⁷ The details that Wells focused on, the letters between McMahon and Foley as well as the money she continued to give him after they were supposedly no longer seeing one another were troubling to me as well. The nature of the relationship between Foley and Lewis as well as between Lewis and McMahon, if there indeed was a relationship between them, has been a question of mine throughout this investigation. However, there are far too many holes in the evidentiary base to make definite conclusions about whether McMahon and Lewis had been involved in a romantic relationship before June 2, 1892. Wells' hypothesis may well be plausible if she was privy to other information that has since been lost in the historical record, but while my gut believes that Wells may be on to something, I cannot put forth that theory in my argument.

vast and scholars from the fields of sociology, psychology, as well as history have contributed greatly to our current understanding of the phenomenon,⁹⁸ aspects of northern lynchings have to be contextualized in the North.

The historiography of northern lynchings is limited. There is much more room for work. Of the four book length studies of lynching in the North, one is an unpublished dissertation and of the other three, only one is a scholarly study. *"They Was Just Niggers,"* by Michael Fedo, does an excellent job of reconstructing the events around a lynching in Duluth, Minnesota in 1920. Fedo placed the event in the context of an increasingly urbanizing, but demobilizing city in the wake of World War I at the very beginning of the book. However, he does not sustain this most important thread throughout. Fedo also touches on the theme of civility, but again all too briefly. Using newspaper accounts, police records and interviews of elderly residents who were alive at the time of the lynching, Fedo pieces together the details of the incident that led to the lynching of three young black men. A mob of thousands murdered the men for assaulting a white woman. With the necessary ambiguity to illustrate both the specious nature of the stories of the alleged crimes as well as the process that brought the young men to "justice," Fedo writes

⁹⁸ Examples of early works on lynching in the South which tended to put forth, according to Brundage, a "frustration-aggression thesis" include Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933); John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Small Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937); Earl Fiske Young, "The Relation of Lynchings to the Size of Population Areas," *Sociology and Social Research* 12 (March-April, 1928); and W. E. Wimpy, "Lynchings: An Evil of County Government," *Manufacturers Record* 76 (Dec. 25, 1919). Studies of the 1950s through the 1970s tended to attempt to explain mob violence in general. Examples include John Caughey, *Their Majesties The Mob* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) and Richard Hofstadter and Michelle Wallace (eds.), *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: 1970). Later works have reexamined southern lynching with the new ideas about social and cultural history. Some of these include Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); George Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); and W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed. *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

a book that reads like a novel. Nevertheless, there is little larger discussion of northern lynchings or of the practice of lynching more generally.⁹⁹

Along the same lines, James Cameron's, *A Time of Terror*, is a survivor's tale of his near fatal encounter with "the great death" in Marion, Indiana. Again, Cameron renders a compelling account of his experiences and the less fortunate experience of his two friends who were lynched. However, *A Time of Terror* is also not a scholarly work on northern lynchings. It is rather, an account of a lynching in a northern state.¹⁰⁰

The two scholarly works on northern lynchings are *No Crooked Death: Coatesville, Pennsylvania, and the Lynching of Zachariah Walker* by Dennis Downey and Raymond Hyser and "They Lynched Jim Cullen: New England's Only Lynching" by Dena Winslow York. In *No Crooked Death* Downey and Hyser challenge historians to "come to terms with the subjective element of lynching, the moment of individual choice when persons willfully turn thought into action and engage in the hanging, burning, or mutilation of a human being."¹⁰¹ Downey and Hyser rely heavily on social theory, particularly the work of Kai Erikson and Emile Durkheim. As Downey and Hyser explain Erikson's theory of boundary maintenance,

In any localized society there is an accepted pattern of relationships, a sense of "communality" that gives to each member and group a place in the larger social structure. Traditionally, these relationships are defined by law *and* by custom [Italics author's]. This sense of community, or communality, is, in Erikson's words, a state of mind based on a "network of understandings" that has endured over time. The "deviant," according to Erikson, "is a person whose activities have moved outside the margins of the group, and when the community calls him to account for the vagrancy it is making a statement about the nature and placement of its boundaries." The issue of acceptable conduct is clearly related to that of power and authority, but it is also intimately tied to the shared

⁹⁹ Michael Fedo, "They Was Just Niggers" (Ontario, CA: Brasch and Brasch, Publishers, Inc., 1979)

¹⁰⁰ James Cameron, *A Time of Terror* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1982, 1994)

¹⁰¹ Dennis Downey, and Raymond Hyser, *No Crooked Death: Coatesville, Pennsylvania, and the Lynching of Zachariah Walker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 4.

values of the community. It is possible for a person to be within the law but to have transgressed the custom(s) of a community.¹⁰²

They argue that the lynching of Zachariah Walker was intimately bound up with the local white community's desire to come to grips with the changing social, economic, and demographic makeup of Coatesville in the first decade of the twentieth century. They concluded "that in many respects Coatesville was also a community in the midst of a boundary crisis."¹⁰³ Showing that the first decade of the twentieth century was the most transformative in the history of the town with regards to industrial and demographic growth, long time white residents, feeling that their way of life was threatened, recaptured a sense of community in the aftermath of Zachariah Walker's lynching. Coatesville residents reaffirmed the boundaries of acceptable behavior and race relations in their community and, henceforth, engaged in communal self-delusion.¹⁰⁴

Downey and Hyser put forth Erikson's theory of boundary maintenance not only as a way of understanding why Zachariah Walker was lynched, but also to understand white solidarity in the aftermath of the lynching in order to protect one another from prosecution for Walker's death. Historians always have to be careful when trying to apply psychological theories to historical figures or events. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to uncover the psychological state of individuals or mental profiles without having examined them personally over an extended period of time. However, if historians are ever to come to grips with the "subjective elements of lynching," perhaps applying psychological concepts is necessary—as long as they do not become the sole explanatory device.

These works are important for debunking the prevailing perception that the peculiar practice only occurred in the South. They also help us understand how northern lynchings were

¹⁰² Downey and Hyser, *No Crooked Death*, 127-8.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter 5.

both similar and different from southern lynchings. However, all the authors deal with twentieth century lynchings. The lean towards the twentieth century probably has to do with the availability of sources, but the 1890s was the decade with the most lynchings in American history. In fact, in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania there were six lynchings between 1891 and 1900 alone.¹⁰⁵ There are only fourteen reported lynchings in the histories of these three states.¹⁰⁶ In addition to the three states already mentioned, broadening the number to include those of New England and the north central plains (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin), 49 of the 164 total lynchings between 1882 and 1968¹⁰⁷ occurred during the period between 1891 and 1900. Just fewer than thirty percent of the lynchings taking place in these states occurred in this single ten-year span. This figure is close to the nation wide figure of a fraction under thirty-three percent.¹⁰⁸ This suggests that something quite national happening here in terms of lynching.

The Bob Lewis case enhances our understanding of northern lynchings as a national practice with similarities and differences based on race and place. In the literature, whether the lynching took place in the North or South, there was a higher incidence of torture and/or mutilation among African American victims. “Lynch mobs seldom tortured or mutilated their white victims. Although bodies were perforated with gunfire, an equal number were not. . . . In

¹⁰⁵ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1899-1918* (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1969), 34, 83, 88. Three of the victims were white and three were African American.

¹⁰⁶ This figure is compiled from several sources. NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching*, 34; York, “They Lynched Jim Cullen”; “A War-Time Lynching,” *Newburgh Daily Journal*, 9 June 1892, 2; and the Archives at Tuskegee Institute for Lynchings by state at <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingsstate.html>, 10 December 2001.

¹⁰⁷ Figure compiled by author using data from <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingsstate.html>, 10 December 2001 and NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching*, Appendix 2.

¹⁰⁸ Figure compiled by author using data from <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html>, 10 December 2001. The percentage of lynchings occurring between 1891 and 1900 is nearly identical whether one includes the states of New England and the north central plains (32.8%) or not (32.9%).

contrast, the bodies of most black victims were riddled by gunfire, if not mutilated in some more grisly manner . . .” This was true for Bob Lewis as well as in the cases of the other African American victims reported in the historiography. There seemed to be a line drawn on the basis of race that mobs, even in the frenzy of vigilantism did not cross with white victims, still suggesting even in death, that white lives were more sacred than black lives.¹⁰⁹

Along these same lines, lynchings of African Americans often became communal entertainment. Bob Lewis, just as all the other black victims were lynched by what W. Fitzhugh Brundage characterized as mass mobs.¹¹⁰ The mobs, containing thousands, took great pride in carrying out “justice” and vengeance. Part of the ceremony was torturing the victim and another part was collecting relics and or souvenirs from the lynching site. This type of communal ritual was prevalent in both the North and the South.

The theme of protecting white womanhood from black rapists is common in the literature of lynchings in both sections. Even though early African American activists including Ida B. Wells and Walter White worked to refute this claim and recent scholarship has succeeded in characterizing this justification as a myth, the rhetoric of protecting white female virtue was rife in contemporary editorials and played a prominent role in the lynching of Bob Lewis. In discussing the notion of southern honor, Brundage writes, “ in a society where skin color determined status, white women, regardless of class, were enshrined on the pedestal of ladyhood and became the symbol and repository of white racial purity. The defense of white feminine virtue, especially against sexual aggression by black men, was at the heart of southern honor.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching*, 92.

¹¹⁰ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 18-9. Mass mobs “numbering from fifty to hundreds and even thousands of members, punished alleged criminals with extraordinary ferocity and, on occasion, great ceremony.”

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Apparently, defending “white feminine virtue” was a concept national in scope and capable of breaking through northern notions of civilization.

Another prominent theme common to both northern and southern lynchings was that of the perceived inefficacy of the law. Commentators in the Bob Lewis case believed that the legal punishment for rape was inadequate whether or not they condoned the lynching. This same belief also showed up in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, and Duluth, Minnesota, as well as all over the South.

But there are two important themes that make northern lynchings different. They are the twofold importance of the notion of “civility.” One part of this concept has to do with the different character of race relations between blacks and whites in the North. The omnipresence of stark terrorism that African Americans lived with in rural areas of the South was much less visible in the urban North. The divergences in the economic systems of the two regions resulted in different types of relationships between white and black workers as well as between white employers and black employees. The agricultural economy of the South required a much larger supply of manual labor than the factories of the North. Both systems required a certain division of labor, and the racial outlook in both regions determined that African Americans would fulfill the menial positions, but the factory system made African Americans somewhat less beholden to individual whites for their livelihoods, unlike the sharecroppers of the South. In Port Jervis, many blacks were servants to white families but rarely were these blacks enmeshed in cycles of debt to their employers.

The second part of the notion of civility had to do with the belief in a higher level of “civilization” in the North than the South. The idea of “civility” in race relations was key to the idea of an “enlightened” North. Whites would have used Mrs. Crane’s school for Negro women

as one example of their benevolence towards blacks. Local whites may have also cited the nearly three decades of relative calm in race relations between the 1863 and 1892 lynchings in Orange County as another marker of northern civility when compared to the South where perhaps dozens of lynchings may have occurred in a single county over the same period. As evidenced by many of the editorials in the aftermath of the Lewis lynching, northerners defined themselves, in large measure, in opposition to the South.

Industrialization played a significant role in the organization of northern society, from where people worked, to where they lived, to what they produced, and how they produced it. Duluth, Coatesville, and Port Jervis were rapidly industrializing communities when their lynchings took place. The influx of wealth also attracted many different groups of people and significantly changed the racial and ethnic makeup of those communities. Long-time residents felt threatened by what was happening and exacerbated tensions that already existed around issues of wealth and poverty, factories and farms, technology and traditional modes of production, and immigration and race. Prosperity was, in many instances, a double-edged sword to the inhabitants of these places. The lynchings, in some ways, served as a way for the white communities of Duluth, Coatesville, and Port Jervis to reassert a sense of control over what was happening in their cities. Powerless to stop the advance of mechanization, they sought to assert control in any way they could. White residents in these rapidly changing cities fought to make sure that the racial hierarchy remained in tact.

There is still more work that needs to be done on lynchings in general, but more in particular needs to be done on northern lynchings examining ideas of civility and the distinctive aspects of northern culture that made lynchings less numerous there. However, historians should

not directly equate the relatively small percentage of lynchings in the North with insignificance.
Northern lynchings are a worthwhile topic of study.

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