

# Untold Stories



## OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

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### "They are tired of working for white people."

What do untold stories of a manufactured race war and a Black labor strike in Bibb county have in common? Both are offshoots of the double lynching on Montevallo's Main St in 1889.

The story of the Montevallo lynching is outlined on a marker installed in 2020 by the city in partnership with the Equal Justice Initiative. Two unnamed Black men were hanged by a white mob in retaliation for the murder the night before of a young white man, John Lawrence. He was fatally shot when he interrupted a burglary at his father-in-law's store at the corner of Main and Shelby Streets, where Provenance Church now stands. In the EJI analysis, the lynching exemplifies the racial terrorism that made life dangerous and uncertain for Blacks in the South well into the twentieth century.

It is fascinating to go back to newspaper coverage from 1889 to see how Montevallo's version of events compares with versions originating elsewhere, especially nearby Bibb County.

A Montevallo correspondent, a white man writing for white readers, creates an almost upbeat account, even expressing pride in the way the lynching was conducted: "no more quiet and orderly hanging ever took place." Readers are assured that everyone in town now feels safer. "A feeling of general satisfaction exists in the entire community" (*Eufala Daily Times*, 4 Sept). The entire community includes people of color. *Prattville Progress* (6 Sept) reported that "colored people of that vicinity seem to rejoice with the whites that the murderers are out of the way." Such accounts seem designed to allay white fears.

There are indications within the articles themselves, however, that things were not so rosy. Why else would a Montevallo citizen seek to squelch rumors that the town's Blacks, "incited by Saturday night's lynching," set fire to Capt. Reynold's barn the following night. The barn burning was in no way connected with the lynching, he insists. In fact, the "negroes here worked faithfully" to get the fire under control. The recent "excitement" has resulted in "a general uneasiness among women and children," he concedes, "but there really never was a community more secure than Montevallo at this time." (*Montgomery Advertiser*, 4 Sept)

Stories offered by Bibb county informants create a strikingly different picture of this "general uneasiness." Inflammatory phrases like "race war," "negro insurrection," "murderous conflict" run through feverish newspaper accounts reprinted across the nation. Typical is one from Chicago entitled "Bad Blood Stirred Up." The Montevallo lynching had "set the entire population, white and black, into a flame, and a murderous conflict may be expected at any moment."

Alarmed white citizens had sent for 100 Winchester rifles from Nashville. A Blocton man predicted troubles. "The negroes were already well aroused, and when they heard of the hanging of the two alleged burglars there were furious and were free with their threats." Whites were free with their threats as well. A Centerville man warned, "if a conflict came every negro in the county would be exterminated." (*Chicago Tribune*, 3 Sept)

### BAD BLOOD STIRRED UP.

WHITE MEN AND BLACKS ENGAGE IN MURDEROUS CONFLICT.

Following a Riot and the Lynching of Two Negro Burglars in Bibb County, Alabama. All the Residents Secure Arms and Talk of Murder—White Citizens of Lawrence, Ala. Burn Out a Negro Postmaster—Quiet at Greenwood, Miss.

BIRMINGHAM, Ala., Sept. 2.—[Special.]—Friday night last white men and negroes near Howerton Store in Bibb county had a big fight. All were drinking and the sheriff summoned a posse and dispersed them. Friday night John Lawrence, a young white man, was killed in his store at Montevallo, an adjoining village, by two negro burglars. The negroes were caught Saturday and that night lynched. These tragedies, following so close upon one another, have set the entire population, white and black, into a flame, and a murderous conflict may be expected at any moment.

*Chicago Tribune*, 3 Sept 1889

To read this and other accounts, Black fury at the lynching and white fears of negro insurrection had brought citizens of this part of the world to the brink of a race war. A touch of hysteria, perhaps? An ingrained if mostly unfounded fear of Black uprisings? What is the untold story here?

Well, we may never know. Black perspectives would certainly help fill out the picture, but given the way Black history is passed down mostly by word of mouth, the chances of coming across a Black diary or letter are slight. But perhaps we can find a useful alternative version in "*Unlooked-for Results of the Race Troubles in Bibb Co., Ala.*" an article which appeared in a Charlotte, NC paper.

After nearly three weeks of panicky evocations of an armed race war, this matter-of-fact approach to the "Race Troubles" will strike some as deliciously comical. Stockpiled Winchesters? Murderous rage? No, it seems some Black cooks and laundresses had stopped working for white folks. The troubles between Black and white begin to look more like a deliberate work stoppage, a strike. At its heart, this may have been a conflict between Black desire to do for themselves and white bafflement on how to handle the loss of cheap Black labor -- the cooks, laundresses, farm workers on whom whites had depended for generations. In the words of the *Charlotte Observer* (22 Sept):

*The negroes have all resolved to do no work for white people. The negro women are in the movement and white families are unable to obtain cooks or women to do their laundry work. The negroes refuse to work on the farms, and many farmers will be unable to gather their crops unless they can obtain white laborers.*

Some may hear an authentic voice of the Black community in the final sentence:

*The only reason given by the negroes for their action is that they are tired of working for white people.*

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Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims. Do you have an untold story you'd like to tell or have told? Contact us at [MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com](mailto:MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com). We want to hear your stories and welcome corrections of fact and interpretation.