

## CHAPTER TWO

### LYNCHEd TWICE: THE MURDER OF A. C. WILLIAMS

The lynching of A. C. Williams in Gadsden County in 1941 was the first recorded in Florida during the decade of the 1940s. Williams' murder itself was full of intrigue and complexity. This twenty-two year old African American male, accused of attempting to rape a twelve-year-old white girl, was kidnapped twice by a group of vigilantes in order to lynch him. The legacy of the lynchings in the previous decades made state officials painfully aware of the national fall-out from such events. The continued debate over anti-lynching legislation and the public education on the part of activists, coupled with the international attention placed on murderous atrocities being committed in Europe shaped the responses of the authorities to Williams' lynching. In the end, despite the heightened levels of publicity and increasing criticism of lynching violence, Williams' murderers were never brought to justice.

Florida's newly elected governor, Polk County native Spessard Holland, upon taking office in 1941, wanted to turn the corner on the lynching record of the previous decade and avoid a repeat of the negative attention drawn to the state because of racial violence. If it appeared that racial violence was beyond the control of state officials, it could frighten potential investors and negatively affect Florida's economic viability and

thwart his goals of developing the state.<sup>1</sup> However, maintaining the appearance of racial harmony was a difficult task to balance. On the one hand, officials had to contend with the national criticism and demands for investigation and prosecution when lynchings occurred. Over the decades, the newspapers across the nation had begun to publish reports on grisly extralegal murders in the South. This increased awareness of southern atrocities brought unwanted criticism and outrage. The usual justifications for these abominable activities became less convincing while the details of appalling lynching bees became too much for many ordinary Americans, black and white, Northern and Southern, to tolerate without comment.

On the other hand, many locals still saw lynching as justifiable homicide and despised the meddling of outsiders who did not understand the southern way of life or "Negro problem." Florida's own Senator Claude Pepper articulated this sentiment in his 1937 filibuster against anti-lynching legislation. Citing the example of Reconstruction and the failure of the Fifteenth Amendment to protect the rights of African Americans to vote, Pepper believed that the Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill was another well-intended but unenforceable Northern intrusion upon Southern traditions. "[T]he colored race [had not and] will not vote," said Pepper, "because in doing so under present circumstances they endanger the supremacy of a race to which God has committed the destiny of a continent, perhaps the world." He concluded that anti-lynching legislation would also fail because "mere legislation does not change dynamic social conditions."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 413.

<sup>2</sup> *U. S. Congressional Record*, 75<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 8756-8758.

For these reasons, state leaders walked a thin line in order to maintain status quo.

The murder of A. C. Williams invited the attention of the national media. While his killers were never brought to justice, white Floridians were forced to defend their state against claims of barbarity and backwardness. In indirect ways, it also forced them to consider how lynching violence reflected on their character.

### **Background**

The history of Gadsden County mirrors that of other locales in the plantation South. Carved out of the Florida frontier, Gadsden County was chartered in 1823. The allure of new lands and new opportunities induced wealthy planters and yeoman farmers to the area. Once there, farmers experimented with several crops, but by 1828 tobacco prevailed as the region's agricultural mainstay.<sup>3</sup> Slavery became the cornerstone of continued prosperity of tobacco cultivation, as slaves performed the demanding labor required to insure profitable tobacco crops. Gadsden became one of the five black belt counties (Jackson, Leon, Jefferson, and Madison) in North Florida in which slaves accounted for half or more of the population. The agricultural wealth produced a class of elite white planters and slave owners. The Civil War interrupted this prosperity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In 1863, there were 4,193 slaves and 5,202 whites in Gadsden County. David A. Avant, *Illustrated Index: J. Randall Stanley's History of Gadsden County* (Tallahassee: L'Avant Studios. 1948), 54.

<sup>4</sup> Avant, 87-100, 137-140; Larry E. Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 36-37.

The defeat of the South and the abolition of slavery meant the end of a way of life in Gadsden County, both socially and economically, for both former slaves and defeated whites. A temporary changing of the guard occurred under Reconstruction as African Americans began to participate in government. The experiment was short-lived, because by the 1880s whites in Quincy and throughout the South began to reestablish white supremacy. They established black codes to remedy the social upheaval caused by their inability to control freedmen. More pressing was the need to stabilize the labor force in order to resume economic recovery. White landowners needed laborers to cultivate crops and blacks needed a way to earn a living and provide for their families. Their complimentary dilemmas were solved by compromise with the advent of new labor structures - tenant farming, sharecropping, and wage labor.<sup>5</sup>

Agriculture in Gadsden County continued under these new systems. Farmers imported the shade technique of cultivating tobacco from Cuba around 1892, which allowed for the growth of a high quality, cigar wrapper leaf, which was previously exclusive to the island. The introduction and successful implementation of shade-grown tobacco resulted, once again, in an influx of people and capital into the region. Gadsden County was the center of it all, with 173 of 211 farms located in the Georgia-Florida District. Over the years, businessmen in the area established several small companies. In 1910 these businesses merged to form the American Sumatra Tobacco Corporation, which became the "world's largest producer and packer of cigar tobacco

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<sup>5</sup> Ennis Lee Chestang, "The Shade-grown Cigar Wrapper Tobacco District of Gadsden County, Florida," (Ph.D dissertation, Indiana University, 1965), 24.

leaf."<sup>6</sup> Nestled between the Ochlockonee and Apalachicola Rivers, "aristocratic old Quincy" became "the shade capital," the heart of the Georgia-Florida shade tobacco district.<sup>7</sup>

However, the good times did not last. In the 1920s, an economic bust succeeded the boom. A crop disease known as black shank hit Gadsden County especially hard, wiping out numerous tobacco crops. Unfortunately, the 1930s held no more hope than the previous decade, as the country entered the grips of the Great Depression. In the ensuing economic reverberation, tobacco prices fell from a high of one-dollar per pound in 1918, to 30¢ per pound by 1934.<sup>8</sup> To avoid over extension of their resources, Gadsden County farmers scaled back production from 3,399 acres in 1929 to 1,533 acres in 1934.<sup>9</sup>

Recovery, however, was on the horizon. In the 1940s tobacco prices stabilized and began to rise because of the economic stimulation caused by World War II. Driven by wartime demand, tobacco prices reached a high of one-dollar per pound in 1943, the first time in a quarter of a century.<sup>10</sup> The increased buying power reflected the prosperity as well. Between 1939 and 1941, the per capita effective buying income for Gadsden County

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<sup>6</sup> In Cuba, "shade" tobacco grew under in the shadow of trees, shielding the plants from direct sunlight and improving the quality of the leaf. Farmers in Gadsden County constructed cloth and board structures to simulate the shade phenomenon; Avant, 155.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>9</sup> Florida State Planning Board, ed. *Statistical Abstract of Florida Counties* (Jacksonville: Florida State Chamber of Commerce, 1944).

<sup>10</sup> Avant, 173.

steadily increased, rising from \$196 to \$333. Still, these values were comparatively meager, representing 48% and 63%, respectively, of the statewide mean of effective buying income.<sup>11</sup>

In that matter, not much changed in Gadsden County between 1860 and 1940. Most activity focused on the cultivation of the county's major cash crop, shade-grown tobacco. As long as Gadsden County farm owners relied on shade tobacco for the local economy, they depended on cheap black labor to produce profitable crops. Just as the main economic resource was the same, Gadsden County's racial compositions, as well as its social and economic structure, had remained consistent since the antebellum period. Blacks still made up a majority of the county's population and agricultural labor force. In 1940, 56% of the county's 31,450 residents were people of African descent. African Americans accounted for 54% of farm wage labor in the county.<sup>12</sup> Overall fifty-two percent of all people over the age of fourteen employed in the county worked in agriculture. Even though large numbers of blacks and whites worked in agriculture, there was a disparity between race and the type of agricultural labor. Most whites occupied the higher positions of farm work and were employed as farmers and managers (18%), or outside of agriculture as clerks and salesmen (14%), while African Americans were relegated to the more menial and grueling aspects of field labor.<sup>13</sup>

The majority of black men worked as wage laborers, tenant farmers or sharecropper. For many, tobacco farming was the only

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<sup>11</sup> *Statistical Abstract of Florida Counties.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

way of life they had known. One longtime Gadsden County resident who was born in 1912 recalled, "I was born on 'bacca. Married on a 'bacca farm. Four of my chillin' was born on a 'bacca farm." The work was tedious and the hours were not better; workers recall "workin' from sun to sun, can to cain't."<sup>14</sup> Many still labored under the supervision of white farm managers, much like the white overseers who directed blacks during slavery. Also, blacks often resided on the farms at which they worked. One researcher noted this occurrence:

The laborers (almost 100 percent Negro) are housed in shacks which are located conveniently near the barns and shades. A high dependence upon Negro laborers (which began on the early plantations) has evolved to the point where workers' houses are one of the most significant elements of the rural landscape.<sup>15</sup>

These arrangements insured the black worker's dependence upon white farm owners and managers, establishing living situations greatly reminiscent of slavery. As with other African Americans in the agricultural South, "[t]he prospects for improving their position were not especially encouraging, as opportunities to escape the system contracted rather than expanded... Rather than escaping the arbitrary power of whites, blacks found themselves firmly in their clutches."<sup>16</sup>

According to the design and the intended purpose of Jim Crow policies, combined with the exploitative nature of agricultural wage labor, a level of social and economic

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<sup>14</sup> A. I. Dixie, interview with the author, Quincy, Florida, 21 March 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Chestang, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 137.

inequality thrived in Quincy.<sup>17</sup> Many African American families in Gadsden County earned just enough to live in the shadow of poverty. There were not many opportunities for blacks to accumulate wealth and land. Despite this trend, some African Americans in Quincy did manage to obtain higher education and acquire some material prosperity. Quincy did have a small black middle-class that consisted of a number of professionals, educators, and landowners.

Some blacks were able to take advantage of the forced social separation by starting their own businesses. Located in downtown Quincy on Adams Street was an area known to blacks and whites as "Nigger Corner," a string of businesses owned and patronized by African Americans.<sup>18</sup> There were several black-owned businesses on the block—a dry cleaning shop, a pool hall, a juke joint with a piccolo (a jukebox), and a grocery store. Dr. William Spencer Stevens, an African American physician, operated a hospital, drug store, and soda shop on Adams Street. Additionally, there were black-owned barbershops, restaurants, insurance agencies, and various entertainment spots sprinkled throughout the town.<sup>19</sup> On the weekends, Adams Street became a "Mecca" where blacks made their weekly pilgrimage, congregating and socializing outside of these stores. People "would come in town on a Friday evening and they would congregate, walk backwards and forwards down the Adams Street." One resident

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>18</sup> Vivian Kelley, interview with author, Quincy, Florida, 16 December 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Sharyn Thompson and Gwendolyn Waldorf, *Historical and Architectural Survey: Quincy, Florida's African-American Resources* (Quincy: The City of Quincy, 1996), 13.



recalled, "We'd sit on our cars down there...It was just a place to be, place to go."<sup>20</sup>

However, the generally peaceful atmosphere of Quincy was occasionally shattered by racial violence. In one documented instance previous to A. C. Williams' death in 1941, violence escalated into lynching in Gadsden County. In 1929, a white mob killed forty-year-old Will "Bull" Larkins in Quincy. Local newspaper accounts reported that Larkins had been accused of attacking a twelve-year-old white girl. Given the fury that a crime of this nature was likely to inspire, Sheriff G. Scott Gregory moved Larkins to the jail in Leon County, and then Madison County. Unfortunately, his efforts were in vain. While transporting the prisoner to Duval County for even greater security, a mob ambushed the sheriff and his party and took Larkins from them. The mob made its way back to Gadsden County, where they "trussed [Larkins] to the railroad crossing signal post with heavy galvanized wire, and shot [him] to death." Afterwards, the mob tied Larkins' body to the back of a car and dragged it around the courthouse square.<sup>21</sup>

Generally whites in Quincy supported the lynching of Bull Larkins. The newspaper characterized him as a "bad nigger," citing previous accusations that Larkins harassed other white women prior to his alleged attack on a white girl. To provide further evidence that Larkins was a habitual predator, news reports highlighted that he terrorized other African Americans in Quincy, noting that Larkins had been accused of raping three

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<sup>20</sup> Ronald Summers [pseud.], interview with the author, Quincy, Florida, 9 March 1998; Kelley, interview.

<sup>21</sup> "Negro Rapist Meets Death at Hands Of Angry Mob Sat. Night," *Gadsden County Times*, 14 November 1929, 1; "Quincy Negro Killed by Mob," *Daily Democrat*, 12 November 1929, 1,8.

young black girls, which apparently prompted no action by local law enforcement. Sheriff Gregory added that the "better class of negroes" in Quincy supported the action of the mob. He, too, took pleasure at "the prompt administering of justice" and that no innocent blacks had been killed.<sup>22</sup>

An editorial summed up the occurrence as just another incident in the fight to maintain white supremacy, noting that,

outraged girlhood or womanhood shall be avenged quickly. The brightest hope of our race depends on man's chivalrous attitude toward women...Men spilling blood for worthy womanhood are a part of the scheme which will never permit the race to die.<sup>23</sup>

The circumstances of the Larkins' lynching and the community's reactions offer an important precedent to the later murder of A. C. Williams.<sup>24</sup>

Typical of the social thought of the day, Larkin's supposed habit of sexual assault was not a problem until the victim was white. It appeared that as long as he attacked blacks, Larkins was not a threat to local whites. However, accusations that he committed the same crime against a white girl required swift

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>23</sup> Editorial, *Gadsden County Times*, 14 November 1929.

<sup>24</sup> In interviews and conversations with African Americans in Quincy, explanations of the Larkins lynching vary a great deal. Some say that Larkins was having an affair with a white woman. Others infer that he simply touched a white woman's leg. The initial reaction of the researcher is to deny the credence of these allegation, because they are based on rumor. However, oral transmissions are often the only alternative source of historical documentation which challenge other versions of events, which may have been "contaminated" by the racial prejudice common during this period.

justice, which was satisfied only with Larkins' death. The severity of his punishment served as a warning to other blacks; they could expect the same treatment if they challenged white authority. The threat succeeded. One resident recalled the feeling of Quincy's black residents: "They was frightened. It was pitiful during that time. [Violence] seems to have been a general practice."<sup>25</sup>

Overall, Quincy was not very different from other small towns in the rural South. In Gadsden County, "[t]he use of large numbers of Negro laborers is part of a regional cultural pattern...Dependence upon Negro laborers is almost as striking a characteristic of that cigar-wrapper area as the use of shades and curing barns."<sup>26</sup> This dependence also created a need to control the labor force. Subjugation and control of blacks created a favorable balance of power for whites, which insured continued economic and social stability; they provided a "great, easily-exploitable, common-labor reservoir."<sup>27</sup> In Gadsden County, racism sustained a paradigm of social and economic control based on fear and oppression. Any threat, real or imagined, to the white power structure required immediate attention and action. These were the conditions that defined black life in Quincy during the time of A. C. Williams' murder.

## **Murder**

Probing into the death of A. C. Williams requires sifting through two conflicting perceptions: his image as the

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<sup>25</sup> Summers, interview.

<sup>26</sup> Chestang, 108.

<sup>27</sup> Oliver C. Cox, "Lynching and the Status Quo," *Journal of Negro Education* 14 (Fall 1945): 584.

perpetrator of a heinous crime versus his image as a victim of a brutal murder. To many whites in Quincy and perhaps throughout the South, Williams was a child rapist who received what he deserved. For a black man, the insinuation alone was deadly because the concept of "innocent until proven guilty" did not apply to African Americans in the South. When a black man was accused of rape, the most abominable crime in the minds of Southern whites, "[t]here was no use in denying it. They'd put you to a limb. You'd be lucky to make it to jail."<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, for those who objected to the lynching, Williams became a *cause célèbre*, an American denied due process because a group of white vigilantes took the law into their own hands.

The events that led to Williams' death began Sunday, 11 May 1941, with his arrest. While patrolling the deserted Quincy streets in his car early that morning, Officer Dan Davis, deputy sheriff of Gadsden County, was startled by the loud blast of gunshots. Anticipating trouble, he drove toward the direction of the sound. While driving to the area he determined the sound had come from, Davis could barely make out in the darkness a figure moving swiftly through the shadows. As he continued to approach, the person came closer into view. Through the darkness, Davis saw a black male running from him. He pursued the man, who, in an attempt to elude him, ran behind a chicken coop then entered the backdoor of a nearby African American

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<sup>28</sup> Frank Singleton, interview with the author, Tallahassee, Florida, 7 December 1999; Michael Belknap, *Federal Law and Southern Order: Racial Violence and Constitutional Conflict in the Post-Brown South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 2.

residence. Officer Davis knocked on the front door, went inside and found Williams there.<sup>29</sup>

After talking with Williams, he inspected behind the chicken coop, where he saw Williams stop. There on the ground Davis found several coins and a kitchen knife. When searching through Williams' clothes, he also discovered a pocket watch and a wristwatch. Davis confronted Williams with what he had found, asking Williams if the items belonged to him. After some hesitation, Williams confirmed that they were his and that he had won them out of town while gambling. Suspicious of his elusive behavior and unconvinced by his claim of ownership of the watches, Officer Davis decided to take Williams into his custody.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, the other officers on duty that evening sought to locate the source of the gunfire. They came upon William Bell, a white man, who appeared to be extremely upset, standing outside his home with a shotgun. He had fired his weapon, he informed the officers, to summon help because someone had broken into his house and attempted to rape his daughter. Upon learning of the alleged attack on the Bell family, Officer Davis then decided to arrest Williams. On Monday, 12 May 1941, authorities charged Arthur C. Williams with burglarizing the

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<sup>29</sup> Testimony by Dan Davis, transcription, "Investigation into the Seizure of A. C. Williams" 12 May 1941, 10-12, Governor Spessard Holland Administrative Collection, Record Groups 102, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida (hereafter referred to as Holland Collection). This investigation was conducted by Orion C. Parker, state attorney for the second judicial circuit of the state of Florida. Hereafter referred to as Seizure Investigation.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

TABLE 1: Chronology of Events Surrounding the Lynching of A. C. Williams

Date	Time	Occurrence
Sunday, 11 May 1941	2:30 AM	Deputy Davis takes A.C. Williams into custody.
	8:00 AM	Davis relays the night's events to Sheriff Luten.
	1:00 PM	Annie Bell calls Dr. Wilhoit to examine Thelma Bell.
Monday, 12 May 1941	12:30 AM	Davis kidnapped by masked men, who force him to open the jail. They abduct A.C. Williams.
	12:30 AM	Luten awakened by yelling. Davis informs him of the kidnapping.
		Law officials searching for Williams.
		State Attorney Orion Parker conducts investigation into Williams' kidnapping.
		A. C. Williams is "discovered" at the Seaboard Quarters.
	10:00 PM	Luten is notified of Williams' arrival at the Seaboard Quarters. He then contacts Judge Love, Dr. Wilhoit, and Chief of Police Ed Wynn.
Tuesday, 13 May 1941	12:30 AM	Webb and party embark for Tallahassee.
	1:00 AM	Webb informs Luten that Williams was kidnapped.
	5:00 AM	Williams' body located.
		Attorney Parker conducts coroner's inquest into Williams' death.
25 May 1941		Special Investigator Maurice Tripp submits his report to Gov. Holland.
14 July 1942		U.S. Attorney George Hoffman submits an investigative report to the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C.
23 July 1942		Assistant Attorney General Wendell Berge closes the case to further investigation.

Note: Information (except where indicated) compiled from sworn testimony given at the Seizure Investigation on 12 May 1941, and the Coroner's Inquest on 13 May 1941. Approximations are given for generalized or conflicting time frames.

Bell home and attempting to rape twelve-year-old Thelma Bell. Davis placed Williams in the jail located at the Quincy courthouse, where he remained without guard throughout the night.<sup>31</sup>

Sometime the next day Officer Davis spoke with the sheriff, M. P. Luten, and told him about the event of the previous evening and about the arrest. At that time, as they would later claim, neither one of the men considered the possibility that Williams' life might be in danger. They sensed no feeling or threat of mob violence. Although Quincy residents went about business as usual, the news of the attempted assault quickly spread. In keeping with tradition, a black man's attempt to rape a young white girl could not go unrequited.<sup>32</sup>

In the seemingly tranquil early morning hours of Monday, 12 May, Officer Davis, traveling on foot, conducted his rounds in downtown Quincy. The still of the morning was interrupted by the sounds of an approaching car. A vehicle pulled up beside Officer Davis and four masked men exited. One of the men pointed a gun at the stunned Davis while the others forced him into the car. The driver pulled off into the darkness, in the direction of the county jail. It was then that the kidnappers informed Davis of their intent: "we just want that goddamn negro out of the jail and we don't want any fuss about it." Davis had little choice but to comply. He was outnumbered and outgunned. The car slowed in front of the jail and the men got out of the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Testimony by M.P. Luten, transcription, Coronor's Inquest on the body of A.C. Williams, Quincy, Gadsden County, Florida, 13 May 1941, 25-26. This investigation was conducted by Orion C. Parker, state attorney for the second judicial circuit of the state of Florida. Hereafter cited as Coronor's Inquest.

vehicle. As they entered the building, Davis attempted to turn on the lights. One of the men stopped him, saying "we will furnish the light for this party." Davis pointed them to the director of the cells. The masked men proceeded into the cell block and returned with Williams. Before leaving the building, the kidnapers locked Davis in a jail cell.<sup>33</sup>

Sheriff Luten, asleep in the cottage adjacent to the jail, awoke to the sound of Davis' yelling and went to investigate the situation. He found Davis locked in a cell. As Luten released him, Davis divulged to the sheriff the morning's event, "[t]hey got my gun, my handcuffs, and that nigger."<sup>34</sup> After learning the details of the situation, Luten and his deputies began to scour the town in search of Williams and his kidnapers.

Their efforts appeared to be too little, too late. During the course of their probe, the sheriff's search team discovered a severed rope, hanging from a pecan tree with blood splattered beneath it, near the Georgia, Florida, and Atlantic (G. F. & A.) Railroad station. From that spot, a bloody trail continued on the ground for fifty feet, leading underneath a nearby building. Luten and his men brought a bloodhound to the scene, and the dog followed a trail leading directly to the building. Other than the blood, there were no signs of Williams, living or dead.<sup>35</sup>

Since they could not locate Williams, the sheriff assumed he was alive. In a last-ditch effort, they proceeded to the

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<sup>33</sup> Davis, Seizure investigation, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> "Governor Holland Awaits Reports on Quincy Negro Slaying," *River Junction Tribune*, 6 May 1941, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Luten, Seizure Investigation, p. 32.





**FIGURE 1:** Accused of robbery and the attempted rape of a twelve-year-old white girl, four armed men kidnapped A. C. Williams from the jail in Quincy, Florida, and tried to kill him. Williams survived only to die after he was kidnapped again and shot to death. Family members indicate that Williams was only visiting Quincy at the time of this death, after leaving Quincy for Illinois at a young age. This picture seems to confirm Williams' urban orientation. Source: *Pittsburgh Courier*, 24 May 1941.

Seaboard Quarters to visit Hattie Williams, A.C.'s mother, to see if she knew of his whereabouts. Shocked to hear of her son's fate, she maintained that she had not seen him. Sheriff Luten and his party continued to search for Williams.<sup>36</sup>

The dire situation and fear of later controversy prompted officials for the state of Florida to act. On the afternoon of Monday, 12 May, State Attorney Orion Parker conducted an investigation into Williams' abduction from the county jail. Several individuals were summoned to testify at a hearing: Officer Dan Davis; Sheriff Luten; William Pittman, a black man who was an inmate in the jail at the time of Williams' abduction; Thelma Bell, the victim of the attempted rape; her sister, Marie Bell; and Annie Bell, their mother. Notably,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

William Bell was not questioned as to his whereabouts on the evening of the kidnapping.<sup>37</sup>

The testimony that afternoon described one version of what went on in the Bell home on the morning of Sunday, May 11. The family had settled down for the evening. The two young girls, Maria and Thelma, slept in their bedroom. In the middle of the night Maria, the younger sister, awakened to Thelma's screams. As she awoke, she claimed she saw a black man fleeing the room. Her screams woke her parents, who then came to see what was the trouble. Afterward, William Bell, the girls' father, dressed, retrieved his shotgun and, desperate for help, shot his gun into the air to signal for assistance. Annie Bell, the mother, comforted the girls and tried to discern what had occurred.<sup>38</sup>

In her testimony on May 12, Annie Bell revealed other important details about the discoveries made on the night of the alleged attack. First, she identified as hers the watches and the knife Officer Davis reported that he had taken from A. C. Williams earlier. Further, she related, upon inspecting the bedroom, the officers found a crowbar on the bed and several burned matches on the floor. She concluded Williams intended to use them to harm her children, "Lord, have mercy!" she exclaimed. "He was going to kill my young girl." However, when asked, Mrs. Bell had difficulty explaining how Williams managed to maneuver through the house, first entering the parents' bedroom, burglarizing it, and then proceeding to the girls' room without being detected. In explaining the phenomenon, Anne Bell suspected that Williams used some sort of "black magic," some sort of spell or tranquilizing concoction that deepened the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Testimony by Maria Bell, Seizure investigation, 28-29.

family's sleep thereby preventing his detection. Seeking to explain the inexplicable through the supernatural, she suggested that maybe he "threw something over us to make us sleep."<sup>39</sup>

Aside from accounting for A. C. Williams' remarkable stealth, other issues hampered the credibility of the Bells' version of events. In particular, Thelma Bell's testimony about the events that occurred on the night of the attack contained questionable inconsistencies that undermined the validity of her story. When questioned by Parker, Thelma would only confide that there was a man in her bed who was "trying to do something nasty." When pressed further she declared "I don't know what he was trying to do, only to rape me." However, only a few moments later in her testimony Thelma stated that the assailant was never between her legs. Further she testified that she was unsure of the race of the perpetrator.<sup>40</sup>

The truth about the events that transpired the morning of May 11 remained elusive once the testimony of Mrs. Bell and the examining physician were taken into account. When testifying about her daughter's condition on that night, Mrs. Bell recalled that upon examining her daughter after the alleged attack, that Thelma was "as nasty there [genital area] as she could be," but, she did not see lacerations in the area.<sup>41</sup> However, according to an examination conducted by Dr. Sterling E. Wilhoit, a local white physician, Thelma Bell was bruised and scratched around

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<sup>39</sup> Testimony of Annie Bell, Seizure Investigation, 24-27.

<sup>40</sup> Testimony of Thelma Bell, Seizure Investigation, 18-23.

<sup>41</sup> Annie Bell, Seizure Investigation, 24.

her neck and had experienced trauma in her vaginal area, leading him to the definite conclusion that she had indeed been raped.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, the testimony given on May 12 during the inquest seemed questionable, particularly when it came to the alleged rape. Thelma Bell, a scared and confused young girl, offered a confusing description of what went on in her bedroom the night before. An especially glaring loophole centered on Thelma Bell's statement that her attacker was never on top of her. Moreover, if taken as truth, the accounts given by the members of the Bell family propose an almost fantastic display of daring and stealth on the part of A. C. Williams, who decided to conclude his thieving expedition with the rape of a young girl while her sister slept in the same room, a few feet away. Nevertheless, the combined testimony of Officer Dan Davis, Annie Bell, Thelma Bell, and Maria Bell, confirmed in many minds Williams' guilt despite the fact that he was not present to defend himself. Even if he had been able to testify, Williams' word would not have counted for much in the eyes of local whites. The intended purpose of the session, to investigate the seizure of a prisoner, was fruitless because Dan Davis was unable to identify his kidnapers, which meant there were no suspects. More importantly, A. C. Williams still had not been located.

This last fact would not remain true for long. Later that evening, Sheriff Luten learned that Williams had returned to the Seaboard Quarters, severely wounded and in need of medical

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<sup>42</sup> Dr. Wilhoit had also examined the twelve-year-old victims in the Larkins rape case in 1929. Maurice Tripp to Governor Spessard Holland, 24 May 1941, Holland Collection. Tripp's correspondence will hereafter cited as the Tripp Report; "Negro Rapist Meets Death at Hands of Angry Mob Sat. Night," *Gadsden County Times*, 14 November 1929, 1.

attention. In actuality, the Williams family and their neighbors had hidden A. C. throughout the day. Although the family realized A. C. needed medical attention, they feared that his attackers would seek to finish the job they started, or worse, that the lynchers would harm other family members.<sup>43</sup> In order to throw off suspicion, they denied knowing his whereabouts. They even went so far as to assist the sheriff earlier in the day to search for Williams. It was later suggested that another reason for the family's hesitance in contacting the authorities was that A. C. himself asked his mother not to contact Sheriff Luten because he had been involved with the first attempt on his life.<sup>44</sup>

Now that Williams had been located, Sheriff Luten had to decide the proper course of action, an arduous task considering that one attempt on his life had already occurred and that state officials from nearby Tallahassee were paying close attention to the case. If Williams was not protected or it was found that Luten failed to act properly, the sheriff could find himself in the middle of national scrutiny, drawing negative attention to his hometown and the state. Luten certainly was under extreme pressure. At the age of sixty-six, Luten had been installed as sheriff in January and a short five months later, his deputy and

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<sup>43</sup> Ann Flipper is the sister of A. C. Williams, the youngest child and the only daughter of Frank and Hattie Williams' fourteen children. A. C. was the oldest. Ann Flipper [pseud.], interview with author, tape recording, Indian Spring, Nevada, via telephone, 27 March 1998.

<sup>44</sup> Mr. Singleton is the brother of Sam Singleton, a member of the party that attempted to transport Williams to Tallahassee. Sam Singleton, now deceased, relayed an account of the events to his brother after the incident. Singleton, interview.

an inmate in his jail had been kidnapped.<sup>45</sup> His reputation was on the line if he could not maintain good order or protect the inmates in his own jail.

Given the gravity of the situation, Luten decided to consult with other citizens in order to decide how to proceed. After receiving news that Williams had been found, Sheriff Luten contacted Edgar C. Love, the judge of the Second Judicial Circuit for the state of Florida and a Quincy resident. The judge advised him to take Williams to Tallahassee to the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College (FAMC) Hospital, the only medical facility in the region that treated African Americans. Luten, accompanied by Chief of Police Ed Wynn and Dr. Sterling Wilhoit, proceeded to the Seaboard Quarters where the Williams family lived.<sup>46</sup>

At the Williams home, they found Williams lying, writhing in pain, his body bloody. After examining Williams, Dr. Wilhoit noted several gunshot wounds, two through the buttocks, two in the chest, one in the shoulder, and a grazed right wrist. Most of the gunshot wounds were on the right side of the body. He also observed that Williams had been beaten about the head. In his estimation, A. C. Williams was lucky to be alive. One detail that was not included in Dr. Wilhoit's report was whether or not Williams had been castrated. This accusation was a key contention of Denmark Vesey, a reporter for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, in his report on the events in Quincy. The newspaper's headline for May 24 proclaimed "Florida Lynchers Forced Victim to Castrate Himself." According to Vesey's

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<sup>45</sup> "Luten, Bassett Take Office Tuesday," *Gadsden County Times*, 9 January 1941, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Luten, *Coroner's Inquest*, 28.

report, Williams' abductors had removed his handcuffs and forced him to castrate himself. He spent time in Quincy talking to Williams' family members and people in the community. However, more recent testimony does not support the accusation that Williams had been castrated, either by himself or the mob.<sup>47</sup>

Despite his injuries, Dr. Wilhoit thought Williams to be in "damn good condition," still conscious and with a normal pulse; with adequate medical treatment the doctor believed he had a good chance of surviving with proper medical treatment. However, the customs of the day prevented Williams' from receiving the quickest treatment at a hospital in Quincy because the facility provided services for whites only. Instead, Wilhoit spoke by telephone with Dr. L. H. B. Foote, director of the FAMC hospital and arranged for Williams to be transferred there. Meanwhile, Sheriff Luten contacted Will Webb, a 64-year-old African American funeral home director in Quincy, and made arrangements to have Williams transported to Tallahassee in Webb's hearse.<sup>48</sup> Despite their planning, perplexingly neither

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<sup>47</sup> Baltimore *Afro-American*, 24 May 1941.

<sup>48</sup> Many African Americans dealt with Dr. Wilhoit, despite the fact that an African American physician, Dr. W. S. Stevens, practiced in the city. Considering the practice of segregation, this seemed a curious practice. As it turned out, land owners or farm managers would send their injured workers to Dr. Wilhoit and paid him for the service and medication he administered. It would seem natural, considering the time period, that whites would prefer to patronize the white doctor. Also, when asked about this seeming preference for Dr. Wilhoit, some interview subjects seemed to be less than impressed by Stevens' medical acumen, stating that he had a reputation for "butcherin'" his patients. Testimony of S. E. Wilhoit, Coroner's Inquest, 2-5; Singleton, interview; Webb, Coroner's Inquest; Luten testimony, Coroner's Inquest.

the sheriff, the police chief nor the judge thought to assign a guard or police escort to accompany the party.

Within the black community, one detail of the events that evening would be of great importance in establishing guilt or complicity on the part of those charged to enforce the law - the route Will Webb traveled to Tallahassee. Before the construction of Highway 90, which has become the lifeline between Tallahassee and Quincy, travelers used a system of circuitous streets and back roads to reach the state's capital. The most common route traveled north from Quincy through Havana. On the evening in question, however, it has been suggested that Dr. Wilhoit directed Webb to drive through what was known as St. Hebron, northwest of town, on his way to Tallahassee instead of the usual route through Havana. This suspicious detour became revealing detail in the minds of black Quincy residents. How did A. C. Williams' murderers know where to find him, given that there were only a few people who were aware that he was alive so late that evening? From the testimony that remains, it was only a span of two hours and a half between locating Williams and his departure for Tallahassee, roughly between 10:00 p.m. and 12:30 a.m. For some, it made sense that an "insider" with knowledge of Williams' whereabouts and the plans for his transportation to Tallahassee had to have leaked the information. Oral transmissions of the event maintain that it was Dr. Wilhoit who alerted the lynchers about the route Webb's party would be traveling.<sup>49</sup>

In the early morning hours of May 13, the party of five black men set off on their way to Tallahassee. Traveling with Webb were Rufus Williams, A.C.'s brother, Sam Singleton, Jesse

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<sup>49</sup> Summers, interview.



Lee Hill, and Horace Courtney. As they journeyed through the night towards Tallahassee, Webb noticed the glare of a pair of headlights in his rearview mirror. As the glow grew larger and the car drew closer, the men in the hearse grew more apprehensive. Who else would be traveling on this road at this time of night? In due course, the car overtook the hearse and sped ahead into the darkness. Webb continued and crossed over the railroad tracks about four miles outside of Quincy. Once across the tracks, the men inside the hearse noticed a light on the dark road ahead.<sup>50</sup>

As they approached, they saw someone standing in the middle of the road, flashing down Webb's hearse, signaling him to stop. As Webb brought the hearse vehicle to a stop, the men in the hearse discovered the signaling person was not alone. Three masked men armed with shotguns emerged from the darkness and stood in the road. They demanded that the injured Williams be turned over to them. Reluctantly, Rufus Williams helped Sam Singleton remove his brother from the hearse and placed him in the awaiting car. Rufus later testified that he knew his brother was alive at that point because he heard him exclaim, "Oh Lord," as he was being placed in the vehicle.<sup>51</sup> The men stood by helplessly as the masked men drove off into the night with A. C. Williams. The four black men traveling in the hearse would be the last people, aside from the murderers, to see Williams alive. Later that morning, a passerby discovered Williams' body, riddled with buckshot and bullet wounds, lying

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<sup>50</sup> The presence of another car is mentioned in this report but not in the testimony given by Webb at the Coroner's Inquest on 13 May 1941. Tripp Report, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Testimony by Rufus Williams, Coroner's inquest, 48.

face up on the bridge over the Withlacoochee River, five miles north of Quincy.<sup>52</sup>

### **Aftermath**

After the discovery of Williams' body on Tuesday morning, 13 May 1941, State Attorney Orion Parker initiated a coroner's inquest. Called to give testimony were Chief of Police Ed Wynn; Sheriff Luten, Dan Davis, and William Pittman, a black jail inmate; Dr. Sterling Wilhoit, the physician who examined Williams; Will Webb, the hearse driver; Jessie Lee Hill, Horace Courtney, Sam Singleton, and Rufus Williams, all of whom were in the hearse when Williams was kidnapped for the second time.<sup>53</sup>

One by one, the witnesses spoke of the events the previous night. One by one, they denied involvement, vindicated themselves, or failed to identify any suspects. However, the most revealing portion of the session that morning was not what was spoken but what remained unsaid. When testifying in the coroner's inquest, African Americans seemed nervous and evasive. What the record indicates is a painful attempt on the part of the state attorney to extract information from resistant witnesses. The tension emanates from the pages of the transcribed inquest. For instance, Attorney Parker continuously coaxed Will Webb to remain calm while on the stand: "Now, Will, don't get excited. Just go on and tell us what happened." Later in the interrogation, Parker again urged Webb not to "get so scared that you can't tell this Jury what happened."<sup>54</sup> At the

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<sup>52</sup> Tripp report, 6.

<sup>53</sup> Coroner's Inquest.

<sup>54</sup> Testimony by Will Webb, Coroner's Inquest, 10-12.

conclusion of the inquest, none of the four black men who were in the hearse with Williams could either positively identify the race or recognize the voices of the men who stopped them that night.<sup>55</sup>

Will Webb's reluctance to testify and hesitance to give detail continued as Parker conducted his inquisition. Early in Webb's testimony, he had referred to the kidnappers as boys. But when Parker pressed him about the reference, Webb quickly retreated: "I will tell this jury I was looking at that gun and my eyes got crossed and I wanted to get away from there." The next time Parker pushed him to estimate the ages of the kidnapers, Webb responded that he "would be afraid to say. You know a man just walked up and you see a thing like that and know a man wasn't joking, you would forget what you know."<sup>56</sup>

For Webb, this was a precarious situation indeed. As a mortician serving a primarily black clientele, he enjoyed a certain level of independence. However, like many blacks living in the South, the attitude of the whites around him affected, directly and indirectly, his success. If Webb inspired the hatred of whites by cooperating with investigators, there were a number of ways they could seek retribution. They could contract his credit. Whites could 'encourage' their black employees not to patronize his mortuary. They could run him out of town or do him physical harm. Certainly having a gun pointed in his face on the night of the kidnapping reminded Webb of his own mortality. Whatever the case, there was little that he could do to protect himself. Webb was an old man who could not afford

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<sup>55</sup> Testimony by Will Webb, Sam Singleton, Horace Courtney, Rufus Williams, Jessie Lee Hill, Coroner's Inquest, 8-23, 39-43.

<sup>56</sup> Will Webb, Coroner's Inquest, 13-14.

the financial or physical consequences his testimony might bring.

Even though their testimony revealed little information as to who kidnapped Williams, the fact that these black men were called to testify was a significant act in itself. Typically in Southern courts, black testimony was not given the same credence as testimony from whites. Although Webb and the others were not being asked to testify against any one person, accusing white men they suspected of kidnapping Williams would have had the same effect. Even so, they were not foolhardy enough to believe that their statements would make a difference in the outcome of the trial. Furthermore, to speak up would have placed their lives in danger; in light of the existing vigilante mentality that sealed Williams' fate, identifying or even suggesting details could jeopardize their jobs and personal safety, as well as that of their families.

The suspicion did not end with Webb's dubious statements. Conspicuous contradictions arose in the sworn testimony taken by State Attorney Parker after the murder and the report submitted to Governor Spessard Holland by special investigator Maurice Tripp. One point of contingency concerned Chief of Police Edward Wynn. Sheriff Luten, Dr. Wilhoit, and Will Webb identified Wynn at the Williams' home when arrangements were being made to transport A. C. Williams to Tallahassee. Wynn testified that he received a call from Luten saying "that negro [Williams] is at his mammy's house and I want you to go out with me." Wynn testified that he accompanied Luten to the Williams' home and "was there all the time."<sup>57</sup> However, in the Tripp report, Luten and Wilhoit were identified as "the only two white

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<sup>57</sup> Testimony of Ed Wynn, Coroner's Inquest, 24-25.

persons" present on that night.<sup>58</sup> This detail is important because of the few people who knew of Williams' whereabouts and the plans for his transportation, it is a probable deduction that someone on the scene informed the individuals who kidnapped and killed him. For this reason, the discrepancy should have alerted reviewers of the need for further analysis of the case.

Another aspect of the case that the authorities neglected was the charge of attempted rape. The Bells' testimony established Williams' guilt but their claims went uncontested, even though the accusation of attempted rape was the central event to the situation. Their version of events left many troubling questions unanswered. For instance, what was the time frame of the alleged events which took place at the Bells' home the morning of Sunday, 11 May? Could the assailant break into the house, enter the main bedroom and make off with stolen goods, enter a room with two sleeping children and attempt to rape one of them without waking the other? How long would the assailant be able to attempt to rape twelve-year-old Thelma before she awoke? How long would it have been before she screamed and awoke her younger sister? More important, where was William Bell on the night of 11-12 May, the evening Williams was kidnapped from jail? As the father of the alleged rape victim, why did the investigating authorities not require William Bell to account for his whereabouts?

Even though they were central to the case against A. C. Williams, the inquest revealed little information about the Bell family. According to reports and census information, William Bell worked as a laborer, specifically a woodcutter. He, his wife, Annie, and their five children lived in a rented home.

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<sup>58</sup> Tripp Report, 5.

Also, in the same census report, conducted in the county's 13<sup>th</sup> Precinct, the Williams and Bell families were listed one after the other. This suggests that the two families lived next to or in close proximity to each other. Equally important, those familiar with Williams recall that he worked for the Bell family.<sup>59</sup>

While seemingly circumstantial, the economic indicators of employment and housing, along with family size, imply that the Bell family belonged to the economic and social lower class of "poor white trash" who lived near and possibly worked with blacks. According to newspaper reports, at the time of the murder the Bell's son was serving time on the chain gang for auto theft.<sup>60</sup> Under the social structure of segregation and racism, such close contact could foster tension and resentment between the races. Evidence of propinquity, while not conclusive, provides another perspective on Williams lynching, by introducing the plausibility of interpersonal conflict or an array of ulterior motives in the alleged encounter between A. C. Williams and the Bell family. This detail, if explored, had the potential to either substantiate or refute the allegation of robbery and attempted rape. Existing hostility between the two parties could have inspired a false rape accusation against Williams or, conversely, could have motivated an attack upon the Bells as retribution for a perceived insult or slight.

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<sup>59</sup> Florida Department of Agriculture, *Sixth Census of the State of Florida* (Tallahassee: Department of Agriculture, 1935), microfilm, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 24 May 1941; Singleton, interview; Summers, interview.

<sup>60</sup> Baltimore *Afro-American*, 24 May 1941.

Under normal circumstances, these loopholes would have clearly signaled a need for deeper research. Unfortunately, there would be no deeper investigation. The results of the inquest were inconclusive. No suspects were identified, and, as Parker reported to the governor, "no evidence has been secured thus far showing any particular person to be involved in this lynching."<sup>61</sup> The lynching of A. C. Williams would remain a tragic mystery.

Overall, the carelessness of legal authorities was the single most significant factor in the Williams' lynching. The double kidnapping and eventual murder of A. C. Williams took place while he was under the general authority of Gadsden County law officials. Williams was accused of the attempted rape of a twelve-year-old girl, a crime certain to arouse Quincy whites, yet law officers did not think it necessary to guard the jail where Williams was being held. Once Williams was located, having survived the first attempt on his life, the officers of Gadsden County again failed to provide protection for him. Both Sheriff Luten and Chief of Police Ed Wynn were present when arrangements were made to transport Williams to Tallahassee but neither thought it necessary to protect a man who had already been kidnapped from their custody once and almost killed. Later, Sheriff Luten claimed that after the first kidnapping, he was not aware of the seriousness of the charges against Williams. Following the second kidnapping and the eventual murder of Williams, Luten claimed that he did not think the

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<sup>61</sup> Orion C. Parker to Governor Spessard Holland, 19 May 1941, Holland Collection.

murderers would be so bold as to make another attempt on Williams' life; he "wasn't dreaming of any such thing."<sup>62</sup>

According to authorities, in cases where people were abducted from jail, the facility was usually unguarded or significantly understaffed.<sup>63</sup> On this occasion, the performance of Luten and his staff walked the fine line between negligence of duty and human error. On one hand, Luten could be viewed as the ageing sheriff, overworked and understaffed, who was outwitted and outmaneuvered by the individuals who were determined to carry out Williams' murder. Conversely, he could have been indifferent to the situation, doing enough to appear to be protecting Williams, thereby preventing the need for state intervention. Nonetheless, blacks in Quincy, like other African Americans throughout the region and nation, had enough previous experience with racist law enforcement officers to recognize that no sincere effort was made to protect the prisoner. One Quincy native recalled, "just look like to me, he could have actually protect [sic] that boy if he had got enough help. But he didn't. He just put him in the ambulance Sunday morning. Wasn't nothin' but the folks' duty to take him."<sup>64</sup> Just the same, many whites in Quincy believed that Williams got what was coming to him.

Both before and after Williams was lynched, bias concerning his culpability was so pervasive that records, court transcripts, letters and newspaper articles assumed his guilt.

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<sup>62</sup> M.P. Luten to Governor Spessard L. Holland, 14 May 1941, Holland Collection; "Masked Men Slay an Accused Negro," *New York Times*, 14 May 1941, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Cox, 580.

<sup>64</sup> Dixie, interview.



Since Williams was murdered before he was officially charged or brought to trial, his version of the events that evening will never be known. In the absence of his testimony, legal defense, or thorough investigation, the void was filled by biased assumptions that implicated Williams as a rapist, thereby reinforcing his criminal image. Williams' guilt was unquestioned and, as a result, it seemed to be a foregone conclusion, in both the investigations and newspaper reports of the incident.

Despite questions raised by such prejudice, little information could be gathered about A. C. Williams, his personal life or his character. According to family members, he left his parent's home at an early age and went to live with relatives in East St. Louis, Illinois.<sup>65</sup> It is alleged that A. C. Williams was only visiting Quincy at the time of his death. If this was the case, it opens the possibility of other factors in his murder. If Williams lived in the North, it is possible that his death might have been caused by some breach of Southern tradition, much like the case of Emmett Till over a decade later in 1955. Till, a fourteen-year-old native of Chicago was killed by two white men in Money, Mississippi, for allegedly making inappropriate comments and gestures to a white woman.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The only other evidence discovered which supports this is the 1935 census report, in which Arthur Williams is not listed as a member of the Williams household. Flipper, interview.

<sup>66</sup> In Mississippi in 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American youth and Chicago native, was accused of whistling at a white woman. The woman's husband and brother-in-law kidnapped Till and brutally murdered the young boy. His murder is frequently cited as a catalyst of the civil rights movement. See Stephen J. Whitfield's *Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991).

## Media Attention

News of A. C. Williams' murder stimulated considerable reaction both within and outside the state of Florida. While it was far from a media frenzy, several newspapers across the nation printed articles detailing the lynching. Florida had the unpleasant distinction of recording the first lynching to occur in the United States during the decade of the 1940s, a fact of minimal significance considering the state witnessed several such incidents during the 1930s.<sup>67</sup> By the time of the Williams death, the overall frequency of lynchings appeared to be tapering off, in comparison to the numerous murders recorded in past years; by 1940, the number of reported lynchings decreased by half from the previous decade.<sup>68</sup> Because these types of murders occurred sporadically by this time, the few reported instances of lynching seemed more appalling and many Americans became increasingly sensitive to them.

Many southerners, however, pointed to the decreasing number of lynchings as evidence that the lynching problem would solve itself without the need for federal intervention and compulsory

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<sup>67</sup> Howard, *Lynchings*.

<sup>68</sup> Between 1921 and 1930, the ASWPL recorded 277 lynchings, compared with 114 between 1931 and 1940, a decrease of 59%. According to NAACP statistics, in the time periods previously indicated, the number of lynchings decreased from 290 to 130, showing a 45% decrease. Jessie Daniel Ames, *The Changing Character of Lynching* (Atlanta: Commission of Interracial Cooperation, Inc., 1942), 11. "Lynchings in the United States, 1921-1946," *NAACP Papers*.

laws insisting upon justice for blacks.<sup>69</sup> They believed that white Southerners would (eventually) experience enough compunction over the shameful legacy of extra-legal murder to change their ways.

However, as each year passed and more deaths were added to the lynching rolls, it became evident that whites in the South could not be trusted to come to reason on their own; liberals in both sections, it seemed, had placed too much hope in the saving graces of humanity and decency. The lynching of A. C. Williams confirmed what many African Americans already knew—that in the absence of legal restrictions, the white South would continue to perpetrate these murders. Lynching was yet another violent example that old traditions died hard.

The Williams lynching also received notoriety because of the slow but definite shift, most notably in the 1930s, in public opinion away from silent acceptance of extralegal violence to a cadre of individuals who publicly and loudly criticized lynching. The continued effort of groups such as the NAACP, CIC, and ASWPL, and their work in investigating, reporting, and publishing information about lynching seemed to be reaping benefits. Their reports made the savage injustice of lynching more difficult to ignore and helped to foster a new willingness on the part of many people, particularly white Americans, to speak out against the practice. Additionally, by documenting the brutality of these executions, they effectively

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<sup>69</sup> The ASWPL shared this sentiment. Although they campaigned vigorously throughout the 1930s for the end of lynching, the group refused to endorse federal anti-lynching legislation, citing its belief in the predominance of states' rights. See Hall, 244-248.

combated the justifications Southerners used when arguing for the necessity of lynching.

Because of the work of these groups and modern media, the news of the kidnapping and murder of A. C. Williams spread across the country. The Associated Press carried an account that was published by a number of newspapers throughout the state, as well as the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune*.<sup>70</sup> The *Tampa Tribune* published news of what they labeled a "double-barreled lynching."<sup>71</sup> Likewise, the *St. Petersburg Times* announced that "[l]ynch law has reared its ugly head once more in Florida, and as a result of this latest mob violence, a new stigma is attached to the state's reputation." While expressing skepticism, the editor pushed for investigation into the matter, so that the lynchers could be prosecuted.<sup>72</sup> In a significant contrast from the other state newspapers, the Tallahassee *Daily Democrat* editorial claimed that the incident was not a lynching but an occasion of private vengeance, something the author seems to suggest was a normal and acceptable display of retribution.<sup>73</sup>

Syndicated columnist Westbrook Pegler wrote what was by far the most notable and critical commentary on the Williams' lynching. A few days after the lynching, he dedicated his column

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<sup>70</sup> "Masked Men Slay an Accused Negro," *New York Times*, 14 May 1941, 12; "Negro Is Killed By Lynchers on Second Attempt," *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 May 1941, 38.

<sup>71</sup> "Wounded Negro Attack Suspect Seized, Killed," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 14 May 1941, 3.

<sup>72</sup> "Once Again, Lynch Law!," editorial, *St. Petersburg Times*, 14 May 1941, 6.

<sup>73</sup> "Westbrook Pegler Lynches a Community," *Daily Democrat*, 20 May 1941, 4.

to the lynching and severely condemned the city of Quincy and the state of Florida in general. Pegler wrote,

The section of the country in which this horror occurred is in the social and intellectual slum which, according to the hearsay historians of Florida, was populated by low whites who fled from the other southern states, notably Georgia and Alabama, to escape service in the War Between the States, and the white population is distinguished from the Negroes only in the matter of complexion and other racial characteristics....

It is not to scold the people or the state that such observations are made, but rather to indicate how it can be that white men, claiming to be members of a superior breed, can so degrade themselves and embarrass the race in which they hold technical membership in an effort to impress their superiority on their Negro neighbors. Ignorance and brutality die hard and slowly in certain strains of Florida Caucasians and resist such refinements as electric signs, the radio, plumbing and paving, even on the luxury coast of the Atlantic....

Civilization can't be hurried in the Florida swamps and backwoods, on either the whites or Negroes. Each degrades the other, but the white man has moments when he can really show the Negro a very recognizable stump of the tail by which his not so remote ancestors swung from tangled vines amid the stunted trees.<sup>74</sup>

Pegler's stinging criticism offended the people of Quincy and individuals throughout the state, particularly his

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<sup>74</sup> Pegler's heated condemnation of the Quincy lynching was quite interesting, in that in 1933 he found himself in the midst of controversy after writing a column in support of lynching when two whites were lynched in California for kidnapping and murdering a college student. See Oliver Platt, *Pegler: Angry Man of the Press* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 119-123. Westbrook Pegler, "Fair Enough," *Tampa Tribune*, 19 May 1941, p. 9.

derogatory comments about the character and intelligence level of white Floridians. In response, Floridians picked up their pens and countered his attack. An editorial in Tallahassee's *Daily Democrat* entitled "Westbrook Pegler Lynches a Community," praised Quincy's "clean, shaded, paved streets, its well-kept homes and gardens, its air of culture and gentle living, its interest in the general welfare and in community progress, its ample income." In turn, the author charged Pegler as guilty "...of the charges he hurls with abandon at the community, the section and the state."<sup>75</sup> Another writer claimed that Pegler's "vigorous style of writing has led him into frequent controversies, but it is doubtful if he ever has aroused more resentment among persons familiar with the subject involved than in the present case."<sup>76</sup> Some accused Pegler of abusing the power of his journalistic authority. Harold Colee, executive vice-president of the Florida State Chamber of Commerce, believed "injustices, however, small should bring down the thunder of the strong muscled among journalists. This is not only their right, but their duty." However, Colee concluded that Pegler had "seized upon this Quincy incident... to display 'below the belt' shrapnel."<sup>77</sup>

Many of the attacks against Pegler became personal barrages, characterizing the journalist as yet another Northerner who had stuck his nose and pen where they did not belong. Others claimed that Pegler's article was "filled with

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<sup>75</sup> "Westbrook Pegler Lynches a Community," *Daily Democrat*, 20 May 1941, 4.

<sup>76</sup> "Holland Studies Williams Case Reports," *River Junction Tribune*, 23 May 1941, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Harold Colee, *River Junction Tribune*, 30 May 1941, 2.

inaccuracies as to fact and with what would be libel, if a community could sue for libel."<sup>78</sup> Some dismissed Pegler's comments as "perverted intelligence," that a "rational, sensible man would not raise an eyebrow."<sup>79</sup> By far, the most strenuous protest occurred when a group in Marianna went as far as to organize the Society for the Dissolution of the Westbrook Pegler Column.<sup>80</sup>

Quincy's white citizens were outraged that journalists targeted their city with criticism. T. R. Smith, President of the Quincy Junior Chamber of Commerce, wrote,

Robert Burton many years ago spoke of 'the Devil himself, which is the author of confusion and lies.' Substitute Westbrook Pegler for the Devil and Burton's saying is still appropriate.... First the decent people of Quincy and that includes all except a very few of your ilk with little respect for truth and order -- condemn lynchings or murder, just as we do gang warfare, labor outrages, and love nest escapades so common to your urban provincial centers.... You speak of lack of due process of law, and yet you would lynch the citizenry of a small city. We give you the words of Daniel Webster 'The law of the land hears before it condemns, proceeds upon inquiry and renders judgment only after trial.' Good newspapermen adhere to this in their code of ethics. We suggest you try this in your future preachments.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> LaMar Watts, "Here's a Letter From the Editor," *River Junction Tribune*, 23 May 1941, 2.

<sup>79</sup> W. Robert Hopkins, Madison, Tennessee, to *River Junction Tribune*, 30 May 1941, 2.

<sup>80</sup> W. Pooser, Marianna, Florida, *River Junction Tribune*, 30 May 1941, 2.

<sup>81</sup> T. R. Smith, *River Junction Tribune*, 23 May 1941, 1-2.

In addition to individual expressions of condemnation, the protest against Pegler's column on Quincy spread to the state legislature. Two state senators, Amos Lewis of Marianna and Pat Whitaker of Tampa denounced Pegler's writings, referring to him as an "alley-bat news sniper" and a "blasphemer" and cursing him to "drink the dregs of the shame that must be his inevitable reward for his earthly existence."<sup>82</sup>

While many spent their energy trying to defend the reputation of Gadsden County, others spoke in terms of moderation and a changing of the order. One rather enlightened response appeared in an editorial in the *River Junction Tribune*, the local paper for Chattahoochee, a small town in Gadsden County. The column maintained,

Without traditions, life would not be worth living. Without customs to meet the special needs of individual communities, life could not be lived. But tradition and customs must change in a changing world, and nations or communities that do not stay awake to this fact are in a tough spot indeed.... Gadsden County developed as a sort of island community with a tradition of lusty ability to take care of its own affairs and a strong feeling that what the rest of the world thought about it didn't matter. It was a tradition that developed from the necessities imposed by isolation and population balance.... Pegler's attack on the community was a vicious, libelous diatribe with no sound excuse in journalism.... Once - - and not many years ago -- it was possible to dismiss such comments by saying, 'They're outsiders -- they don't understand.' But in this era of close integration between communities and nations, there are no outsiders in the sense of the possibility of isolationism. Anyone who thinks there is an 'outside' world which we can ignore might ask the sheriff how many long distance telephone calls he received the

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<sup>82</sup> "Upper House Flays Pegler For Writings," *Florida Times-Union*, 29 May 1941, 21.



first of last week, and where they came from...[recounted a conversation with an elderly citizen, who remarked] 'A few years ago, we would have handled this differently; but that period is gone forever.' We gather that he had no regrets for what had happened in the past, but was not sorry to see the change - a change that he fully understood, though some of his younger confreres, with far less excuse for traditionalism than he has, do not yet realize that community isolationism today is a hopeless myth.... There is increasing indication that Hitler's greatest help in conquering nations has not come from deliberate traitors; it has come from men who thought they were good citizens, but could not appreciate change.... Disciplined citizenship is the only way to meet the crisis of this decade. If that discipline is not self-imposed by us as individuals through obedience to law and to the principles of democracy, and through full respect for law enforcement agencies, it will be imposed upon us by dictatorship. Take your choice.<sup>83</sup>

The author of the editorial voiced the realization that times were changing. It is interesting that the author made a specific reference to the threat caused by Nazi Germany. News of lynching had the potential to besmirch America's international image as the "defenders of democracy." Such activity also fed German propaganda mills, paralleling discrimination against blacks in the South with prejudice against Jews in Germany.<sup>84</sup> The editor was not alone in his opinion; other well-known citizens of Quincy went one step further and called for the pursuit of the murderers. A businessman from one of the more prominent Quincy families,

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<sup>83</sup> "Attacks on Quincy Show That Community Isolation is a Relic of the Past," *River Junction Tribune*, 23 May 1941, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Johnpeter H. Gill and Robert L. Jenkins, "The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?" *Journal of Southern History* 58 (November 1992): 670-676.

Sanford May, wrote governor Holland urging that the guilty parties be brought to justice, "whether they be among our county officials or not." <sup>85</sup>

Others feared such barbarism would encourage the federal government to take action to prosecute members of the lynch mobs and protect blacks against these types of crimes, since Southern cities and states seemed unable or unwilling to do so. The threat of federal intervention was fresh on the mind of many southerners, especially since federal anti-lynching legislation had been brought before Congress in 1937 and 1940.<sup>86</sup> This latest occurrence of lynching could be used to bolster the argument for federal intervention. Bishop John D. Wing of the Episcopal Church encouraged the governor to remedy the violence in Quincy, "[o]therwise, the outrage will furnish ammunition to those seeking enactment by congress of federal anti-lynching legislation."<sup>87</sup>

Many thought that Governor Holland should push for an inquiry into the Quincy lynching, not only because of the political implications but for moral reasons as well. Among those agitating for action by the state were members of the ASWPL. The organization's executive director, Jesse Daniel Ames, sent Governor Holland a brief letter encouraging investigation into the matter. Various state coordinators of the ASWPL from Mississippi, Alabama, and Virginia wrote to the

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<sup>85</sup> Sanford May, Quincy, Florida, to Governor Spessard Holland, 15 May 1941, Holland Collection.

<sup>86</sup> Zangrando, 19.

<sup>87</sup> "Churchman Asks Ouster of Sheriff in Lynching Case," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 15 May 1941, 6.

governor as well.<sup>88</sup> Typical of their reserved approach, characterized by a combination of moral suasion and feminine charm, their letters expressed regret that the state's reputation had been besmirched by the tragedy of lynching; this strategy was frequently employed by the ladies to tap into the Southern sense of honor and reputation, thereby persuading officials to investigate these murders.<sup>89</sup>

Jane Haven, chairperson of the Florida council of the ASWPL, contacted Governor Holland, urging him to take action. She asserted that "...law and order as enforced by the state and counties can protect our whole society. When this process is taken away from the state and county by unscrupulous persons then an injustice is done to the people of the state and those who are responsible for law and order should be removed from office."<sup>90</sup> The regional heads of other Florida ASWPL chapters in Madison, Tampa, Miami, and Vero Beach, each forwarded similar sentiments lamenting that Florida would be one of the first states to record a lynching for that year.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Jessie Daniel Ames to Governor Spessard L. Holland, 29 May 1941; Mrs. L. W. Alford, Chairman of the Mississippi Council of the ASWPL, to Governor Spessard Holland, 2 June 1941; Alma L. Richardson, Virginia Council of the ASWPL, to Governor Spessard Holland, 23 May 1941; Mrs. T. W. Koster, Alabama Conference of the Woman's Society of Christian Service, 24 May 1941, Holland Collection.

<sup>89</sup> Ames, *Revolt Against Chivalry*.

<sup>90</sup> Jane Havens, Chairman of the Florida Council of ASWPL, to Governor Spessard Holland, 26 May 1941, Holland Collection.

<sup>91</sup> Julia Barnwell, Madison, Florida, to Governor Spessard Holland, 18 May 1941; Alice Cramer, Tampa, Florida, to Holland, 16 May 1941; Mrs. J. T. Feaster, Miami, Florida, to Governor Spessard Holland, 15 May 1941; Dorothy Zeuch, Vero Beach, Florida, to Holland, 19 May 1941, Holland Collection.

African Americans, individually and collectively, voiced their vexation over the failure of justice in Quincy. In nearby Tallahassee, a group of black citizens drafted a petition, warning that some African Americans were "seriously considering refusal to pay taxes without adequate protection of life, liberty and property," being insured by the state. Among the petitioners was noted African American educator and community leader John G. Riley.<sup>92</sup> The Miami Negro Youth Council drew up a proclamation denouncing the tragedy, pointing out that Williams was indeed "a prospective draftee." Among the voices of protest that rose from northern blacks were the Harlem's People Club of New York, who pointed out Sheriff Luten's "...criminal failure...to provide guard for the ambulance," and demanded his immediate suspension.<sup>93</sup>

The NAACP made good use of the publicity surrounding the Williams lynching. Instead of writing to Governor Holland, the group appealed directly to President Franklin Roosevelt, urging him to make a statement condemning the events in Quincy. Playing heavily upon the wartime ideologies of democracy being championed by the American government, the NAACP related that,

[w]e are concerned with lynching as it relates to the aims in our national defense effort, to our aid to the democracies of the world, and to our declared opposition to the philosophy and practices of the dictator nations... You have pictured this struggle as one to preserve the democratic freedoms against the assault of the forces of oppression, brutality, and

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<sup>92</sup> Signed petition to Governor Spessard Holland, 23 May 1941, Holland Collection.

<sup>93</sup> Miami Negro Youth Council to Governor Spessard Holland, 29 May 1941; Peter Landon, Harlem Peoples Club, to Governor Spessard Holland, 17 May 1941, Holland Collection.

death. In this immense effort our country is weakened morally and physically by the lynchers who kill at their whim, and by officers of the law who make no effort to protect their prisoners or to arrest lynchers.<sup>94</sup>

While pointing out the brutality of the murder, the group emphasized commonality between the struggle overseas and the plight of blacks in America, a strategic argument that they hoped would compel the country's leaders to take action to correct injustices. NAACP officials also used the Williams' lynching to argue for federal anti-lynching legislation, which the agency continued to fight for in Congress.<sup>95</sup>

The black press also used reports on the Williams' lynching to draw parallels between racism in America and fascism in Europe, comparing the Nazis and the men who carried out the murder in Quincy. The Baltimore *Afro-American* proclaimed the Williams lynching "a story of bestiality and stupidity that rivals the crimes of Hitler."<sup>96</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* in an article entitled "Warlike Florida," portrayed the state as a domestic war zone, in which blacks fought, however unsuccessfully, for democracy.<sup>97</sup>

Governor Holland responded to the crisis by calling for an investigation into the matter. He assigned Maurice Tripp as a special investigator, to further explore A. C. Williams' death.

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<sup>94</sup> Roy Wilkins, Assistant Secretary of the NAACP, to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 16 May 1942, *NAACP Papers*.

<sup>95</sup> "Year's Fifth Lynch Case Stirs Action," *Chicago Defender*, 24 May 1941, 8.

<sup>96</sup> *Baltimore Afro-American*, 24 May 1941.

<sup>97</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, 24 May 1941.

Within two weeks, Tripp reported his findings. He informed Holland, that

I have discussed this case with many people of prominence in Quincy and I find no mob sentiment. The largest number ever involved was only four persons. There has been no crowd or gathering of any great number of people. The sentiment of the general public is they feel that the officers did their duty.<sup>98</sup>

The Tripp report suggested that the community supported their local law officers and did not want the sheriff to be the state's scapegoat. Williams was dead and life in Quincy returned to normal; there was little support for further investigation. Still, the governor's office passed its finding on to the U. S. Department of Justice.

Unfortunately, this was about the extent of Holland's activity and he made no promises to take further action. When asked when the governor would announce his plan of action for dealing with the Quincy situation, a spokesperson claimed that Governor Holland did not know when he "would be able to reach a decision on whether any action by him against Quincy law enforcement authorities was justified. The pressure of legislative business on the governor was heavy, and the inquest transcript is long."<sup>99</sup> This was a very effective maneuver by which the governor, who, by employing the tactic of stalling, could appear to be taking action while shifting the responsibility of investigation.

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<sup>98</sup> Tripp report, 6.

<sup>99</sup> "Holland Studies Williams Case Reports," *River Junction Tribune*, 23 May 1941, 1.

Details of the investigation of the murder of A. C. Williams were not turned over to the United States Department of Justice until July 1942, a full year later. After reviewing the evidence, the U.S. Attorney Wendell Berge concluded that,

When the boy was placed in the ambulance for transportation to the hospital at Tallahassee, no armed guard or deputy sheriff was placed over him. The failure of the sheriff to take the necessary precaution to protect this negro from further violence merits criticism and any feeling on his part that the wrath of this small group of men had been spent, would hardly be an excuse. The situation was one that really justified and required an armed guard and protective custody in its best sense. The sheriff's failure to do this is perhaps directly responsible for the second episode in this unfortunate affair.<sup>100</sup>

Department officials admitted that Gadsden County officials were guilty of "ineptitude and negligence," but concluded that they did not "intentionally refuse" to protect the prisoner in their custody. Therefore, the department decided to close the case because of the amount of time that had passed since the incident occurred.<sup>101</sup> After a year, the inconclusive investigation uncovered no suspects, so there was no one to indict. The identity of A. C. Williams' murderers remained a mystery.

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<sup>100</sup> George F. Hoffman, U. S. Attorney, Pensacola, Florida, to the Office of the Attorney General, Washington, D.C., 14 July 1942, Holland Collection.

<sup>101</sup> Wendell Berge, Assistant Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice, to George Earl Hoffman, U.S. Attorney, 23 July 1942, Holland Collection.

## Reaction

The lynching produced fear not only in the victim's family; the black community as a whole suffered its repercussions as well. They were angry, but like other blacks in the South, they had learned to suppress their outrage as a matter of survival. Blacks in Quincy feared retaliation so much that they refrained from publicly discussing the lynching, dreading that doing so would invite the rage of Williams' attackers upon them and their families. As one resident remembered, "people was scared but you didn't hear them talk about it."<sup>102</sup> And even though blacks were "absolutely afraid...[,] no one ever did anything about it," most likely because they acknowledged the futility of protest. Aside from the anguish suffered by other blacks in Quincy, the Williams family bore the brunt of the tribulation. Within two weeks of her son's murder, a heartbroken Hattie Williams took her young children and fled North to live with her sister, partly from grief and partly because she feared the lynchers who killed her son "probably would have killed all of us."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Kelley, interview.

<sup>103</sup> Flipper, interview.