

PERMISSION TO HATE

Delaware, Lynching, and the Culture of Violence in America

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On June 15, 1903, authorities in Wilmington, Delaware, apprehended a Black man named George White for the assault and rape of Helen S. Bishop, a White woman. The following afternoon, the charges against White were upgraded to murder after the victim expired due to injuries she sustained during the attack. White was found guilty the same day by a coroner's jury, which committed him to the newly erected state workhouse to await a formal trial in September. Despite demands that White face immediate sentencing, authorities decided that there was no need to call for a special session of the court. Over the next several days, a lynching hysteria began to build in the city. At the height of the tumult, on Sunday, June 21, the Reverend Robert A. Elwood of the Wilmington Olivet Presbyterian Church delivered an ominous sermon. Brandishing blood-stained leaves from the site of the Bishop assault, the reverend declared the city deficient in its responsibility to protect its citizens from such criminal atrocities and dilatory for not delivering speedy justice onto White. The next evening a mob stormed the workhouse. They marched White to the scene of his alleged crime, demanded a confession, and then lynched him by burning him alive.

The lynching of White in Wilmington, Delaware, was typical of such occurrences in the early 20th century. Between 1882 and 1921, the United States was the scene of more than 3,405 lynchings. Most of the victims were African American men, women, and children. Described alternatively as unofficial executions, the

Black victims of lynching were often identified by the White community as criminals who needed swift and public punishment. Despite the best efforts of the opponents of the crime, the federal government consistently refused to pass antilynching legislation, and the courts routinely refused to convict lynchers (Brown, 1969; Brundage, 1993; Cutler, 1905; Tolnay & Beck, 1995; Welles, 1892; White, 1938; Wiegman, 1993). The government, however, was not solely to blame for the prevalence of mob justice. Not only the actions but also the inactions of people helped to cultivate a climate of permissiveness with regard to African Americans, which ultimately fueled the work of the lynch mob. The circumstances surrounding White's death provide an intriguing case study of this communally sanctioned permission to hate. However, what is most curious about the lynching of White is not that it happened but how it has been interpreted by historians and sociologists as a commentary on racial relations in the state of Delaware.

In 1924, noted author and poet Alice Dunbar-Nelson was the first to comment on the significance of the lynching. In an article that was published in the *Messenger*, Nelson described the state of Delaware as a "jewel of inconsistencies." Acknowledging the desire for liberty that made Delaware the first state to ratify the Constitution, Dunbar-Nelson recognized the paradox of Delaware's acceptance of the institution of slavery. Despite that in 1865 Delaware refused to ratify the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, Dunbar-Nelson maintained that the state was generally welcoming of African Americans. And finally noting the meager economic, political, and social opportunities for Blacks in the first state, Dunbar-Nelson observed that at the very least Delawareans did not tolerate violence against Blacks. To illustrate her point, she recounted the fate of Reverend Elwood, who had preached the sermon in favor of lynching. As she explained,

There are few states where the relations between the two races is more amicable, and the commonwealth still shudders with horror when it recalls its one lynching, for which it punished the inciter of the deed, a Presbyterian clergyman, who suggested the lynching in a fiery sermon, by expelling him from its borders. (p. 278)

Since that time, this story has become the cornerstone of nearly all of the historical accounts of the lynching of White in Wilmington in 1903. In 1973, historian Harold Livesay citing Dunbar-Nelson as his source wrote,

The majority of Delaware's citizens were opposed to mob rule. They wanted the Negro kept in his inferior place, but they believed that this could be done without resort to brutality or violence. The incidents of violence that did occur were the work of a fanatical minority and were followed by editorial and public condemnation of those who disgraced the state by taking the law into their own hands. Wilmington newspapers were unanimous in denouncing the lynching of George White. *The Sunday Star* laid the blame for the affair squarely on Elwood's doorstep and an angry mob of counter-insurgents brought the episode to an ironic conclusion by running the racist minister out of town. (pp. 145-146).

As recently as 1998, University of Delaware professor James Newton repeated the story in an essay on African Americans in Delaware, in which he described the lynching as the climax of the period of intense frustration for Blacks, which followed Reconstruction. Like those before him, Newton highlighted that "the press was unanimous in denouncing the affair, and the racist minister was later driven out of town" (p. 21).

Historians' and sociologists' reliance on Dunbar-Nelson's (1924) account has led to the promulgation of three important myths with regard to the lynching of White. The first myth is that the lynching was the only such occurrence in Delaware. The second is that the White community was uniform in their denunciation of the attack. And the last is that the lynching was largely the result of the zeal of a racist minister who was subsequently run out of town. Dunbar-Nelson's study has also led to the dominant interpretation that the Wilmington lynching was largely an aberration and that race relations in the first state were generally good. Livesay (1973), for example, has concluded that although Delaware Blacks "lived in the shadow of potential violence . . . incidents of mob justice do not give a representative picture of public racial attitudes" (p. 146).

Despite the observations of Newton (1998), Livesay (1973), and Dunbar-Nelson (1924), violence against Blacks was a common feature of the social, economic, and political landscape in Delaware. And although the name Elwood will forever be linked with the lynching of White, in the critical days leading up to the storming of the workhouse, a lynching hysteria had been building in Wilmington. This hysteria was fueled by three important factors. The first was the almost daily assault on the Black character, implicit in the formulaic lynching accounts that were a regular feature of the Delaware press. Second was the sensational coverage of the Bishop assault, which was consistently described as the most heinous crime ever committed in the state. Third was the running commentary in the newspapers and on the streets about how to punish White. All of these factors helped to fuel a permissive environment that made the lynching possible.

In Delaware, as in the rest of the United States at the time, there was an ever-present climate of hate permeating throughout the White community, which made horrific acts of violence against African Americans possible. These acts of violence were often compounded by many persons in positions of authority condoning the violence. Contrary to the popular notion that only the dregs of society engaged in such violence, this culture of violence permeated all social strata. Discussing the same phenomena with regard to the anti-abolitionists riots of the 1840s, historian Leonard Richards (1970) argued in *Gentlemen of Property and Standing* that the so-called "best" elements in society were as supportive of the violence as the lowly, for they ultimately had the most to lose. After the deed was done, the voices of moderation appeared, but implicit in many of the denunciations of lynching were appeals for Blacks to stop encouraging the violence by engaging in criminal activity, especially the rape and murder of White women. Many antilynching diatribes also justified the actions of the mob based on the slow pace of justice. The debacle over Elwood serves to illustrate the nature of the permissive environment. Although Elwood found himself singled out for the violence, in actuality, he was one of many people in authority who paid lip service to the idea that the criminal justice system had proved inadequate in the White case.

Although Elwood did not directly participate in the lynching, his voice was one of many calling for White to face immediate execution.

There is an added ingredient of irony in that Delaware had one of the most efficient systems of capital punishment in the nation, especially with regard to African Americans. Although most accounts of the White lynching cite it as the nadir of the African American experience in Delaware, it was quite consistent with the administration of criminal justice in the state. Delaware was one of the last states in the union to abolish the pillory and as early as 1867 was coming under the national spotlight for its use of antiquated methods of punishment such as the pillory and the whipping post. In 1867, the governor of Delaware declared the state's opposition to the 13th Amendment predicated on the need to preserve the only form of punishment to which he claimed Blacks would respond, enslavement. After the lynching of a Black man suspected of arson in the burning of his employer's barn near Leipsic, Delaware in 1867, the governor declared that mob justice would not be tolerated. However, the state took few steps to investigate the incident, and no one was ever arrested for the murder.

Despite countless other examples similar to this one, Livesay (1973) classified the majority of the violence carried out against African Americans in Delaware as the result of a fanatical minority of Whites. As he explained,

Among a segment of the White population there was smoldering resentment of any Negro attempts to achieve equal status. Occasionally some demagogue fanned this smoldering resentment into a flame of violent action calculated to keep the Negro in his place.
(p. 145)

If one considers the execution of capital and corporal punishment in the state however, Livesay's observations do not hold. Like most states, Delaware maintained a dual system of justice for Blacks and Whites. Blacks routinely could expect to receive significantly more time and double the fines than Whites for the commission of the same crime. In addition, the use of corporal punishment against African Americans was extremely common. As early as 1819, an

editorial in the *American Watchman* celebrated the whipping post as a means of punishing Blacks (Ketch, 1819). In March of 1867, the state took the first steps toward trying to make the justice system more equitable, when the legislature passed a bill making the punishment of persons, irrespective of color, the same for commission of the same crime.

This measure was a bitter pill for the Democrats to swallow, but the demands of the advanced age and the example set by several of the legislatures of Southern States has caused them at last to put upon the statutes this important measure. (*The Smyrna Times* [Smyrna, Delaware], March 20, 1867, p. 2)

Despite this gesture, an editorial in *The New York Times* decried the state for the use of antiquated punishment on its residents, particularly those of a darker hue.

It is doubtful if any one of the extreme Southern or Southwestern States is so far behind the average civilization of the age as the little state of Delaware. In ordinarily respectable communities the beating of a horse is frowned upon, the striking of a child excites indignation, but the whipping of a woman is deemed a crime. In Delaware, however, the active and public use of the whipping post and lash is indulged under sanction of law. Black men and women are to this day publicly punished in the very capital of the State and within a stone's throw of the Legislative Halls of the Commonwealth. (*The Smyrna Times*, April 10, 1867, p. 2)

The use of the whipping post against Black defendants was so common that African Americans appropriately christened the device Red Hannah.

There was a brief period of increased optimism in 1880 after the U.S. Supreme Court rendered its decision in *Neal v. Delaware*. In that case, a Black man who had been sentenced to hang for the rape of a White woman was set free because of Delaware's practice of excluding African Americans from juries. The case set an important legal precedent but had little practical application for African Americans living in the state. It would be nearly two decades before the ruling was enforced with any consistency. In the interim, the

state dodged the ruling by conveniently not recording the race of the accused or those on the jury. But the case also had a psychological impact on many Whites who viewed it as another attempt by the federal government to molest the autonomy of the state. The case would be raised by advocates of the death penalty as an example of how the Black in Delaware escaped justice. It was this familiar argument with its prerequisite canon about the bestial nature of African Americans that Elwood would conjure up in his sermon on June 21, 1903.

The violence, furthermore, was not restricted to corporal and capital punishment meted out by the state. Long before the White lynching, there were numerous instances of assaults and vigilante justice carried out against African Americans in Delaware. Emphasis by scholars on White terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) produces the distorted notion that these organizations were responsible for the majority of the violence. The second KKK was revitalized decades after the advent of double-digit lynchings in the United States. The KKK never established a large following in Delaware, but in many ways it was unnecessary. Most of the evidence on lynching points to the atmosphere of hate permeating the White community. In Delaware, this was most evident in the daily accounts of lynchings in other states and the references to Blacks in derogatory terms. That there were no arrests and no strong condemnations of the violence further serves to support the argument that the violence was popularly accepted or that at least people were largely indifferent to it.

Contrary to Livesay's (1973) depiction of those who committed violence against African Americans, the mob that executed White was not a small group of fanatics. They were a highly organized and determined band of vigilantes emboldened by the weak stand taken by law enforcement. They also had reason to be encouraged by the tacit approval of lynching that seemed to be floating in the press. In the days after White's arrest, both of Wilmington's newspapers raised the specter of lynching and published reports and comments that suggested (a) public indignation and outrage was so high that it could not be satiated without White's blood, (b) the normal channels of punishment were not adequate to handle White's punish-

ment, and (c) the very means by which a mob could effectuate an assault on the prison to secure White.

The failure of public officials to take a strong position on lynching also fueled its existence. Historian C. Vann Woodward (1974) observed,

The South's adoption of extreme racism was due not so much to a conversion as it was to a relaxation of the opposition. All the elements of fear, jealousy, proscription, hatred, and fanaticism had long been present . . . What enabled them to rise to dominance was not so much cleverness or ingenuity as it was a general weakening and discrediting of the numerous forces that kept them in check. (p. 69)

For Woodward, those forces included northern liberal opposition, southern conservatives, and southern radicals. In Delaware, the public diatribes by community leaders and professional men such as Elwood against the justice system also fueled the lynching hysteria by offering a proper justification for the mob's actions. Despite Dunbar-Nelson's (1924) account, Elwood was not the only minister to suggest a lynching; on the Wednesday before his sermon, the newspapers reported that the pastor of another church had also expressed from the pulpit his indignation at the Bishop murder. In fact, in the days leading up to the lynching, there were few voices of moderation. The mayor, the chief of police, and the warden of the prison were all curiously silent about the prospects of mob violence even though they likely heard the many rumors circulating on the streets.

Even if authorities had been inclined to prevent the lynching, they would have faced a daunting task. In their determination to punish White, the leaders of the lynching party came ready to dispose of any obstacle. The Wilmington *Morning News*, for instance, reported that "before beginning its attack on the workhouse there was never a better organized body of men gotten up on short notice. Men were in the crowd suited to everything which might arise" (June 23, 1903, p. 1). In addition to blacksmiths there to handle the problems posed by the prison doors, the newspaper related that electricians were also in the crowd and had cut the telephone lines

to prevent the police from responding to calls for assistance. The newspaper further noted that

there was enough dynamite in possession of the mob to have blown the entire workhouse to atoms. Many people suppose that dynamite can be employed by anyone and all that is necessary is to throw it about. Such is not the case however and to be effective it must be in the hands of an expert. (June 23, 1903, p. 1)

Despite all of the preparation, however, the storming of the workhouse did not go entirely according to plan. Once the mob broke through the steel doors, Warden Meserve put up a token defense of the prisoner. He ordered his officers to spray the mob with water and, as some later claimed, ordered them to fire into the air to disperse the crowd. In the brief melee that ensued, some of the mob discharged their weapons. This would become a bitter bone of contention, because at some point during this exchange a 17-year-old boy, named Peter Smith, fell mortally wounded with a gunshot wound to the back.

Meanwhile, with the assistance of the other prisoners, the mob quickly located White's cell. With the blacksmiths directing the operation, the crowd was able to remove the door, and within minutes, they were standing face to face with their human prize. The mob promptly demanded a confession, which was published in the newspapers the following morning.

Given the circumstances surrounding his confession, White's account of his assault on Bishop was suspiciously clear and inflammatory.

I was sent by Mr. Woodward down to the cornfield to thin some corn, and I saw Mr. Woodward's daughter and intended to rape her, but a couple of men came along in a wagon and I didn't. Then I saw the Bishop girl and I followed her. I seized her and asked if she had any money she would give me to let her go. She gave me a half dollar and two five-cent pieces. Then I seized her and she cried, "Please don't hurt me." I choked [*sic*] her and accomplished my purpose. Then I asked her if she was going to tell on me, and she said she was. Then I gave her a hack in the throat with my knife and asked her again if she was going to tell on me. She said she was, and then I cut

her throat twice again and left her. Then I went back to Mr. Woodward and told him there was no good water down there to drink and he sent me somewhere else. I went back once but soon left. Then I went back to the house and put on a light hat instead of the cap I wore. You would not do this to me if I was a white man and did this. (*The Morning News*, June 23, 1903, p. 1)

After White had confessed, a noose was fitted around his neck, and he was dragged from the workhouse to the place where the assault had occurred. According to *The Morning News*,

The crowd was remarkable in many respects. It was composed of men from various workshops in the city, farmers from the surrounding country and a number of women. There was not a masked man in the entire crowd, and the men in it did not appear ashamed of the part which they took in the work of the night. They talked freely of the event and expressed satisfaction that they had taken part in it. The crowd was bent on wreaking vengeance on the man White and they did it about as orderly as it would have been possible for such an act to be performed. There was not a drunken man in the entire crowd. There was not so much as might be expected from such a gathering. It was largely a calm, determined crowd, the members of which declared that when the courts of the state failed to take the proper proceedings in order to give the man a speedy trial it was time for the people to arise to their might and take care of such cases. They were desirous of enforcing a useful lesson. (June 23, 1903, p. 1)

After being tied to the stake, White requested an opportunity to pray, which *The Morning News* reported, "touched the people who were thirsting for vengeance and there were a number of people crying" (June 23, 1903, p. 1). When his worship was finished, White reportedly cried out, "Now you ought to be satisfied. You have your vengeance. God help me" (p. 1). The fire was then set. White made one more desperate attempt to escape, injuring one of the lynching party in the process. In retaliation, one of the members of the mob struck him on the head with a pin maul, which finally incapacitated him.

Some wanted to shoot at the negro, but those who appeared to be in charge of the proceedings objected to this and insisted that no pis-

tols be fired unless they were fired in the air. There were fully 8,000 people around the place The crowd cheered and yelled as the flames lighted up the scene and yells could be heard for a mile. (*The Morning News*, June 23, 1903, p. 1)

Despite a bit of resentment among some in the crowd that they did not get a good view of the burning, the newspapers reported that “there was the best of feeling between the members of the crowd” and that “about Price’s Corner it looked as though there had been a picnic of some kind” (*The Morning News*, June 23, 1903, p. 1). On the way to the lynching, women had cheered the mob. At the lynching scene, men were compelled to stand back to give the women folk a better view.

The scene where the burning took place was almost as animated as immediately in the field. The place was filled with people and carriages and a few countrymen on horseback were about. All of them interested in the event in the field The men in the carriages took turns attending them, however so that the other man might go and see the burning negro. (*The Morning News*, June 23, 1903, p. 1)

By dawn, the first of several waves of curiosity seekers had visited the scene of the burning. As the newspapermen arrived at the site, they reported passing hundreds of people on foot on their way back to the city. The throngs that had been so boisterous in their desire to punish White, according to *The Morning News*, now “walked silently along in the lanes and roads unless some one spoke to them. Then they replied, ‘Well, the job was done all right. There will be no more outrages here. Women will be safe now’ and similar remarks” (June 23, 1903, p. 1). During the initial assault on the workhouse, White’s shoes were taken from him and hacked into pieces as souvenirs. After the burning, relic hunters sifted through the ash to secure other mementos of his death. Officials would later obtain for the coroner’s inquest part of White’s body, his foot, from the cellar of one of the lynching party.

Morning also gave rise to the first wave of antilynching comments. These were generally restricted to the ill effect the lynching

would have on Delaware's good name. Delaware resident Thomas F. Bayard, for instance, declared,

The action of the mob last night is a disgrace to the State. This is, and always has been, a law abiding community, and there never has been any question in the minds of those who chose to stop and think that exact justice would be meted out to all lawbreakers no matter how heinous the crime. (*New York Tribune*, June 24, 1903, p. 1).

City solicitor David Reinhart, who had been present at the lynching, told authorities, "I was at the scene of the burning at the stake, but it sickened me and I quickly separated from the crowd and went home. It is a blot and a disgrace on the name of the state" (*The Evening Star* [Washington, D.C.], June 24, 1903, p. 1). Reinhart's sentiments were echoed by an editorial in *The Evening Journal* on the following day, which condemned the lynching as an embarrassment to the state. Ministers of the city, of all denominations, held a meeting and adopted resolutions denouncing the lynching (*The Evening Journal* [Wilmington, Delaware], June 25, 1903, p. 1).

At first, the newspapers made some effort to support the claim that Wilmington authorities had tried to prevent the lynching. In the days following the lynching, however, the actions of Warden Meserve and Police Chief Black would come under great scrutiny from the majority who approved of the lynching. Chief Black, in particular, challenged initial reports that his officers had fired on the mob. *The Morning News* seemed to sustain this defense when it suggested another motive for the inaction of the police. "It was because of the knowledge that this dynamite was on hand," the newspaper reported, "and would be used that the police and workhouse guards were not allowed to shoot down the crowd, as so many people think they should have done" (June 24, 1903, p. 1). The death of Peter Smith, however, made this a particularly thorny issue. An editorial in *The Evening Journal* made this point clear.

The Negro White is dead, but so is Peter Smith, the boy whose curiosity led him to watch the proceedings of the mob at the workhouse. Those who took part in the lynching of the negro may rejoice in their

grisly glory, but who must assume responsibility for the death of the boy. (*The Evening Journal*, June 25, 1903, p. 1)

Warden Meserve and Chief Black were not prepared to do so. They maintained that officers had been instructed not to fire to prevent the loss of human life. An editorial in *The Evening Journal* nevertheless came to a different conclusion:

We all doubtless feel that we should have held the prisoner at all hazards, but in that crowd were hundreds of men that the guards and the policemen knew. They could not bring themselves to shed the blood of their friends. They feared carnage, and they were probably aware that in the crowd were pounds of dynamite that eager hands were waiting to explode. So they practically did nothing while the doors were being battered down and the armed mob was surging the corridors. (June 23, 1903, p. 4)

Part of the praise for the police seemed to be a response to the steady assault Wilmington sustained in the national press. For the opponents of lynching, law enforcement and other public officials were largely to blame for not preventing the lynching in Delaware. An editorial in *The Evening Journal*, for instance, declared,

A week has passed yet any word of indignation on the part of the sworn officers of the law is yet to be heard. But we have heard words of commendation . . . The leaders of the mob have been glorified and feted, but there has been no intimation that the authorities even regret the violence, save that it has given them many hours of discomfort and uneasiness. (June 30, 1903, p. 4)

The newspapers did not escape their share of criticism. The coverage in *The Morning News* was particularly lenient toward the lynchers. A letter to the editor of *The Evening Journal*, for instance, observed,

I hope that somebody will tell the truth, and I look to the Journal to do it. Our morning paper in its news of the rioting and violence last night, glosses it over and fails to give a true impression of the affair. (June 25, 1903, p. 4)

The Evening Journal, in the meanwhile, declared that its ownership and staff had “always been opposed to mob violence and lynchings in any part of the country” (June 23, 1903, p. 4). Notwithstanding the journal’s position, another editorial published in both the *State Sentinel* and the *Union Republican* questioned the motives of the editor of the news journal,

If our information is correct, the very owners of the *Evening Journal* itself were divided at the time [of the lynching]—some stockholders advocating a policy of upholding the doings of the mob and others opposing it—the editor siding with the owner of the largest capital stocks a not very unexpected proceeding on his part. (*Union Republican* [Delaware], August 21, 1903, p. 4)

In the end, despite their criticism of the White lynching, both newspapers continued to print sensational accounts of lynchings in other states. They also continued to depict African Americans in a demeaning manner. And in the aftermath of the lynching, both newspapers resigned themselves and their readers to forgetting what had taken place.

Not surprisingly, the judicial system was also blamed for the outbreak. The failure of the courts to provide speedy punishment was the cornerstone of the lynching defense. One of the crime’s chief apologists, Thomas Nelson Page, best summarized this position when he declared that the sluggish criminal justice system was not a deterrent to Black crime. But Delaware Judge J. C. Grubb disagreed.

If our juries and courts had failed in the past in any degree to mete out prompt and sure justice to heinous criminals, there might have been some extenuation of this terrible assault upon the sanctity of law. But such is not the fact. On the contrary, during the last seventeen years, since I have been upon our bench, I can remember no case in which any one accused of atrocious crime and proved actually guilty—especially of this recent brutal and fiendish crime—has escaped prompt and sure punishment at the hands of our court and jury. (*New York Tribune*, June 24, 1903, p. 3)

After a lynching, it was common, for those so inclined, to try and pinpoint the leaders of the violence. More often than not, communities sought to distance themselves from the violence by blaming the lynching on outsiders or rebellious youth. In its initial reporting after the lynching, *The Morning News* described the role of a shadowy hero the newspaper dubbed the “Avenging Cowboy” (June 25, 1903, p. 1). Although the description of Delaware’s unknown benefactor made him seem like a comic book hero, according to reports, it was this man who had taken leadership over the mob and had guided their actions. He first appeared in the vicinity of Marshallton early on the evening of the lynching. “He was booted and spurred,” the newspaper reported, “and across his back he carried a Winchester rifle. That he knew how to use firearms was demonstrated later in the evening” (p. 1). In response to these stories, *The Evening Journal* declared,

Justice calls for the apprehension of that man and for his incarceration in that very workhouse whose doors he helped to batter down, for a long term of years. We feel certain that the Virginia authorities will cooperate with our own. (June 25, 1903, p. 4)

Although the initial actions taken by the police seemed to support the editorialist’s contention that those responsible for the lynching would be brought to justice, these efforts quickly collapsed under the weight of public pressure. After the police apprehended one of the key participants in the lynching, the *Washington Evening Star* proclaimed, “Delaware Law Opens Crusade Against Negro Lynchers.” But the newspaper also observed that additional arrests were not likely given the “general sentiment” that “lauds [the] work of the mob” (*The Evening Star*, June 24, 1903, p. 1).

This sentiment became very evident after word spread that the man police had detained was Arthur Cornell from Baltimore, Maryland, who was purported to be one of the main leaders of the mob. After his arrest, one of the city’s wealthiest citizens, Colonel James M. McComb, went to the police station and offered to pay \$5,000 in bail to secure Cornell’s discharge but was denied. Over

the next few hours, an angry crowd gathered at Wilmington City Hall to demand his release. What happened next would bring further disgrace on the city of Wilmington, as African Americans felt the brunt of their neighbors' hatred.

The violence began shortly after a mob estimated to be around 7,000 persons gathered between the two thoroughfares at the rear of city hall. The angry protestors called on the mayor to set Cornell free, but when there was no immediate response, the crowd became violent.

Every car that went by containing a negro passenger was jeered at, and the yells of the mob could be heard on the west side of the city as far out as Jackson street. Such a demonstration by the people was never before witnessed in Wilmington, and there was no telling what might have been the outcome had not Cornell been released. (*The Evening Journal*, June 27, 1903, p. 1)

Even after Cornell was freed on bail and whisked to a hotel by his faithful supporters in the mob, the masses did not disperse. Hostile words and silent ridicules quickly escalated into violence as crowds of what the newspapers described as "young men and boys" began to hunt down Black people in the streets. Dozens of people were badly injured as African American passengers were pulled from the trolley cars, beaten, and affronted. *The Evening Journal* reported that "every negro that chanced to get in their way was forced to fly to escape a possible beating" (June 27, 1903, p. 1). In one instance, a Black man, named James Gale, was severely beaten as he passed by Fifth and King streets. Describing a similar attack on an unidentified Black man near Front and Orange street, *The Evening Journal* declared, "Such disgraceful affairs is something that the better element will not stand for" (p. 1).

Raper (1969) observed that lynchings "seldom strike the same spot" because, after the first incident, "the best elements in the community are often shocked into a sense of responsibility for the prevention of further outbreaks; and thus a lynching tends to produce its immediate local immunity" (pp. 29-30). Throughout the entire lynching affair, the news media and persons in authority spoke not of a silent majority but of a silent minority of Whites who disap-

proved of the uncivilized actions of the lynch mob. But this better element, which the newspapers spoke of and which later historical accounts argued disavowed the lynching, never really materialized in Wilmington. Many of the very officials charged with the responsibility of bringing the leaders of the lynch mob to justice were sympathetic to the mob's cause. Reinhart, the city solicitor who had been present at the lynching, delivered the verdict of the coroner's inquest, which held that White had died at the hands of persons unknown, virtually guaranteeing no future prosecutions for the lynching. Wilmington authorities went through the motions perhaps to avoid the charge that the city had some complicity in the violence. An editorial in the *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, for instance, observed,

The element of the population of Delaware which Matthew Arnold would have styled the saving remnant is coming to the front for the moment at least. Chief of Police Black of Wilmington, estimates it at 10 percent of the entire community, leaving 90 percent, as approving of the barbarous action of the mob and adhering to the Gospel of Anarchy as preached by Robert A. Elwood. (*Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, reprinted in *The Evening Journal*, June 25, 1903, p. 4)

With a successful prosecution of those responsible for the lynching, the editorial postulated that the "saving remnant would accomplish something by separating itself, from the contamination of the God-defying, law contemning, blood-thirsty majority" (*The Evening Journal*, June 25, 1903, p. 4). But this law affirming minority remained conspicuous by its absence in the days following the lynching. In an editorial in *The Evening Journal* following the assault on Black, residents lamented the minority's lack of visibility: "Where were those respectable, those representative citizens, whose feelings have been so stirred that they have given the rioters all the comfort and support in their power?" (p. 4). The editor answered his own question:

They were hanging on the edge of the crowd, or slinking around the corners or in their homes, avoiding the possible danger to them-

selves. There isn't a grain of heroism in it. Our streets were surging all night long with drunken men and dissolute women. They were moving restlessly demanding new excitement. At a suggestion they would have followed any leader and committed any atrocity. Somebody has got to tell the truth and there it is. (p. 4)

The violence against African Americans, in the meanwhile, continued. Numerous confrontations were reported in the press. *The Morning News* blamed the conflict on "some white people, who like to talk, and who circulated rumors that an attack was to be made upon the colored people during the night" (June 27, 1903, p. 1). Given the violence of the night before, African Americans in the city assumed a defensive posture, and in the words of *The Morning News*, "in order to protect themselves they assembled at certain places, in bodies and stood together" (p. 1). *The Morning News* reported that when "the police ordered these crowds to disperse they did so . . . All they wanted was police protection and they were assured that they would get it if necessary" (p. 1).

The violence against Blacks demonstrates the depths of the permissive environment present in Wilmington. Whites made no distinction as to whom they attacked. African Americans who had no connection to the murder of Bishop were now being punished for the crime. And in a city of Wilmington's size, just more than 11,000 people in 1903, with approximately 30% of the population African Americans, a mob of 7,000 people was a strong indication of the general attitude of the people. On the Tuesday following the lynching, Frank Porter, a 16-year-old White boy, whom *The Evening Journal* described as "fired by the work of the mob," struck a 9-year-old Black boy in the head with a rock. Porter was fined \$10 and costs, but the best element of the community spoke largely in defense of the perpetrators of the attacks. The Reverend Dr. A. N. Kelgwin of the West Presbyterian Church, for example, declared, "Human nature would not have sunk to such a low ebb if the whole community had not sympathized with that sorely distressed family" (*The Evening Journal*, June 29, 1903, p. 1). Ironically, one of the persons most opposed to the lynching was the victim's father who in the days leading up to the lynching consistently appealed to

the people of Wilmington not to avenge his daughter's death by breaking the law.

The attitude of the police toward the violence was to crack down on the Black community. Chief Black, for instance, told the press that he based his decision to close the saloons on rumors that Black men in the bars had promised to "load up" and "hunt trouble" (*The Morning News*, June 27, 1903, p. 1). The main thrust was to prevent Blacks from retaliating. The speed with which the police force responded illustrates the duality of the justice system in Delaware at the turn of the century. The Whites who participated in the violence received relatively light treatment, whereas the courts were severe in their punishment of the Black rioters. Even *The New York Times* concluded that many of the Black defendants were "rail-roaded." Leander Moore, for instance, was sentenced to 1 year's imprisonment in the workhouse for being in a crowd of "rioters." Likewise was the case of Eugene Johnson whose bail was set at \$200 for carrying a concealed weapon. And Joseph Shockley was fined \$50 dollars for firing a pistol in a crowd that was menacing him. In the meantime, John Joyce, a White man accused of assaulting two Black women, the very crime that inaugurated the lynching and violence in Wilmington, received a comparatively light sentence of 6 months (*The New York Times*, June 28, 1903, p. 1).

The violence in Wilmington also demonstrates how African Americans took great steps to protect their lives and property. In some cases, Blacks were able to make a solid defense against the White raiders. However, this was rare, and in Wilmington, as in other places, a relatively small and disorganized number of Blacks sought to retaliate against the mobs. Their efforts were compounded by the Wilmington police. The same department that had proved impotent against the lynch mob, now found the vigor to clamp down on the lawless element in the Black community. In spite of the violence, on Friday, June 26, *The New York Times* reported that the police had denied permission to "several prominent Negroes" to carry revolvers for protection. "The police," they were told, "would be fully able to cope with the youngsters who were causing the trouble" (June 26, 1903, p. 1). Although this convinced *The New York Times* that "no race war was or is imminent,"

conditions remained tense and *The New York Times* reported that “the officials realize that if a colored man and a white man should engage in a fight even over a trifling matter their quarrel could under present conditions easily grown into a riot” (p. 1). On Saturday, June 27, Governor Hunn finally dispatched four companies of the national guard to the armory in Wilmington in anticipation of further outbreaks (*The New York Times*, June 27, 1903, p. 1).

Apart from the use of violence, African Americans were far from passive about lynching. In Wilmington, their efforts became a moratorium on the philosophy of accommodation preached by Booker T. Washington. Contrary to the then popular argument that the Black community condoned crime, Blacks routinely denounced rape when the allegations had been proven. Many African Americans, however, also felt a need to do so to distance themselves from the accused in hopes of avoiding additional violent attacks such as those that occurred in Wilmington. In Milford, Delaware, for example, the Black community responded to an inflammatory report that Blacks in northern Delaware had “organized a club in sympathy” with White by writing a letter to the local newspaper (*The Milford Chronicle* [Delaware], July 10, 1903, p. 4). “We wish to say for the benefit of the public,” the authors declared, “that the negroes of this town are not in sympathy with White and that not one has been known to give any expression of the character mentioned” (p. 4). White officials often attempted to use these expressions as evidence of Black support for lynching. Shortly after the lynching of White, on Monday, June 29, *The Morning News* ran a front-page story relating how Blacks in Elizabeth, New Jersey had held a meeting to mourn Bishop and condemn White. The article was titled “Negroes Approve Lynching,” but the text of the resolution by the meetings participants betrayed a larger purpose.

Resolved, That we, the colored citizens of Elizabeth, deeply deplore the acts committed by one of our color. We hope the public will not condemn us all for the deed of this man. We will gladly go hand in hand with all good citizens to prevent such occurrences. (June 29, 1903, p. 1)

If the White community seemed eager to welcome news of Black support for the lynch mob from outside the state, they seemed deathly afraid to let Blacks within the city and the surrounding area meet to discuss the crime. This would become very evident on the Sunday after the lynching when a Black minister proposed that Blacks adopt a defensive posture to prevent further violence.

The Sunday morning worship services at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the largest and oldest Black churches in Wilmington, began peaceably enough. Bishop M. B. Slater, a special guest visiting from South Carolina, rose to address the faithful. In his sermon, which *The Morning News* declared “applied equally to all people” and “was one of the best which has been heard here in some time” (June 29, 1903, p. 1), Slater echoed the sentiments of those calling for peace in Wilmington. He admonished the congregation to be sober and industrious and to avoid evil and evil companions. He also counseled patience and stressed humility as the keys to reconciliation. That evening, however, Bethel’s usual pastor, Montrose W. Thornton, delivered a fiery sermon against lynching. The well-respected clergyman, who was later described by his congregation as “able, energetic, zealous,” and “full of pep-an,” could not contain his indignation concerning the actions of the mob.

The white man in the face of his boasted civilization stands before my eyes the demon of the world’s races, a monster incarnate; and in so far as the Negro race is concerned seems to give no quarter. The white is a heathen, a fiend, a monstrosity before God, and is equal to any act in the category of crime. I would sooner trust myself in a den of hyenas as in his arms. With the courts of law and officers of law in his hands the despised Negro can expect no mercy, justice or protection. The Negro is made unsafe anywhere in this country. He is open prey at all times to barbarians who know no restraint and will not be restrained. There is but one part left for the persecuted negro when charged with a crime and when innocent. Be a law unto yourself. You are taught by this lesson of outrage to save yourself from torture at the hands of the blood-seeking-public. Save your race from insult and shame. Be your own sheriff, court and jury as was the outlaw Tracy. Die in your tracks, perhaps drinking the blood of your pursu-

ers. Booker T. Washington's charity, humanity, advice of forgiveness, love, industry and so on will never be reciprocated by the white men. (*The New York Times*, June 29, 1903, p. 1)

The Morning News proclaimed that the ministers words "did not appear to have a marked effect upon the colored people, as they were inclined to follow the bishop, though they agreed in the denunciation of the lynching and the insults offered to colored people" (June 29, 1903, p. 1). Thornton's sermon did however help to build support for the proposal of a mass meeting to discuss common issues relative to the Black community in Wilmington. Given the lynching and the riot, many Blacks responded favorably to the proposal, but the announcement of the assembly generated a great deal of animosity among White officials. They sought to ensure, by stripping the assembly of its political agenda, that Blacks would not use the assembly as an opportunity to organize. The newspapers published a chorus of letters from "Black leaders" denouncing Thornton and the meeting. Typical were the comments of one parishioner who observed,

The colored race has a reputation to uphold. Thank-God in all the disorder which has occurred no colored man has insulted a white woman, and there will not be. The colored people will retain their dignified composure and we will look to the proper authorities and to the white people to punish those who insulted us colored people on the streets. We believe the great majority of white people disapprove such actions. (*The Evening Journal*, June 30, 1903, p. 4)

Chief Black, in the meanwhile, met with the organizers and presented them with a set of terms under which the meeting could be held. There was to be no discussion of the riot or any of the recent violence against Blacks in Wilmington. On Monday, July 6, 1903, the proposed forum again made the front page of the *Wilmington Morning News*, which declared it no threat to the city. "Chief of Police George Black," *The Morning News* reported, "has been assured that only respectable colored people will be present and there will be no allusion made to the recent events which excited this city" (June 6, 1903, p. 1).

In the meanwhile, African Americans throughout the state continued to suffer from the fallout of the lynching. In Dover, a Black man accused of assaulting a White woman had to be removed from the jail for fear of another lynching. And even the “respectable Blacks” who the newspapers celebrated for not offering any physical resistance were victimized. Random attacks continued for nearly a week after the lynching. As late as July 1, *The Morning News* reported on the stoning of a “respectable colored man” by a group of youngsters (p. 4).

In the days following the violence, there was a discernible change in the way the local news covered the event. The national press was hardly kind to Wilmington, and this caused many to close ranks in condemning the violence because of its negative effect on the city’s reputation. The best element seemed most concerned with quieting the criticism of the city. As early as June 26, an editorial in *The Morning News* advised “Let us Forget.”

It is not to call those who believe that they had done right hard names, rather it is to reason with them, in the hope that never again will this state have its record for peace and good order so horribly marred. (p. 4)

In contrast to its earlier coverage, which noted the diversity in age and occupation of the mob, the newspaper now joined with the mayor in blaming the city’s youth for the violence. In an appeal printed on Saturday, June 27, Mayor George Fisher, for instance, faulted the continuing restlessness on the city’s youth, who he proclaimed “did not feel the gravity of what they were doing” (1903, p. 1).

It was in this climate of denial and reconciliation that attention once again turned to the Olivet Presbyterian Church and Reverend Elwood. Despite the reports of Elwood being run out of town, he remained in Wilmington for more than 2 years after the lynching. And, notwithstanding a slew of negative editorials in the aftermath of the lynching, Elwood was generally applauded for his “courageous” stance. The pastor was inundated with telegrams from all over the nation, and his congregation grew substantially. In the fall

of 1903, he began holding services in the city opera house to accommodate the throngs that flocked to hear his sermons.

Given the hullabaloo surrounding the minister, the presbytery decided to inquire into the nature of the sermon that he had delivered on the eve of the violence. Most of his critics would have been satisfied with a simple apology, but in light of the overwhelming expressions of support for his position, the reverend remained steadfast. On July 16, *The Morning News*, predicted a "lively session" of the presbytery if any "attempt is made to punish him" (p. 1). Numerous individuals and groups offered to go to the hearing with the minister to show their support, but this proved unnecessary. The next day the newspaper confirmed what many already expected, "No Condemnation for Pastor Elwood" (July 17, 1903, p. 1).

In February of 1904, however, the presbytery held another inquest into Elwood's sermon. This time, Elwood was found guilty of conduct unbecoming of a minister; however, the presbytery simply admonished him to be more careful in the future. It was later reported that the presbytery feared punishing the minister because "it would [have] disrupt[ed] the Presbyterian Church in this city" (*The Morning News*, February 3, 1903, p. 1). Elwood, in the meanwhile, celebrated his victory.

My view of the finding is embodied in the sentiment expressed to me by a prominent member of the Presbytery: "This is a complete vindication Elwood, for Presbytery did not dare punish you in any way, because you are too useful a man." (*The Morning News*, February 3, 1903, p. 1)

When Elwood finally did leave Wilmington in October of 1905, it was to take over the pulpit of the Leavenworth, Kansas, First Presbyterian Church. The move out west was certainly not a banishment by the presbytery, because the First Presbyterian Church of Leavenworth, Kansas, according to *The Morning News*, was one of "the wealthiest and most influential in the West" (October 9, 1905, p. 1). The Olivet Church held a goodbye reception for the minister, which was so well attended that scores of well-wishers had to be turned away. At the festivity, many of the men who had criticized

the pastor now sang his praises as a man of truth and honor. The Reverend Dr. W.F.D. Lewis, for example, “declared that there were no two men in the Presbytery who differed more on some matters than he and Mr. Elwood, but declared that no two men were dearer friends” (*The Morning News*, October 9, 1905, p. 1). The departing pastor also received letters of regret from Mayor Horace Wilson and the moderator of the presbytery, Reverend Boundinot Seely.

In the preface to their publication *Racial and Religious Violence in America, A Chronology*, Newton and Newton (1991) proclaimed, “Only when a nation has come to terms with the truth of the past and the trends of its present can citizens and leaders then chart a viable direction for the future” (p. xiv). Coming to terms with the violence that occurred in Wilmington, Delaware demonstrates the depth of hate against African Americans present throughout the United States in that period. The violence that occurred in Wilmington in 1903 was the product of an atmosphere of hate present at all levels of society. It was not just antirape or antirape, it was anti-Black, which explains how the city could witness such brutality and then banish it from the public record.

Although it is unclear what sources Dunbar-Nelson (1924) was drawing from to come to her conclusions about the lynching of White, the impact of her analysis is clear. That few researchers have sought to look beyond her version of events is a testament to her prestige as a writer. At the same time, it raises important issues about the importance of history and memory. Although it seems inconceivable that Dunbar-Nelson, who lived in Wilmington at the time of the lynching, would have intentionally distorted her account of the event, given her high-profile activities on behalf of Black civil rights, it seems equally impossible that she would have been unaware of the true fate of Elwood. The African American press hotly pursued the story of the minister, and an article published in 1904 in *The Voice of the Negro* told about how the presbytery of New Castle County had failed to punish him. However, Dunbar-Nelson published her account in 1924, nearly 21 years after the event; so it is possible that her memory of what transpired may have lapsed. Perhaps, in her intent to demonstrate an apparent paradox, she missed an important grain of consistency running

throughout Delaware history. The violence that struck Wilmington in 1903 was entirely consistent with violence manifested toward African Americans in Delaware and the nation. It was the end product of a permissive environment that justified all manner of brutality toward African Americans.

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