

## Lynching of Monroe Johnson

When you think black history what comes to mind? Is it slavery, The Civil rights movement, or Martin Luther King Jr? Do you think Jim Crow, Trayvon Martin or mass incarceration? Personally, I think about lynching. The brutality of the act has always been astounding to me. The emotions that fueled them and the outrageous “justifications” are something I have never understood. In addition, I feel America has worked to sweep the history of lynching under the rug. There were no amends made for these wrong doings. We only attempted to move on from them. However, in hopes of shedding light on this history, I would like to tell you the story of Monroe Johnson.

The year was 1887, Jefferson County was in full industrial bloom. Birmingham had just been founded years before because of iron ore discovered in Red Mountain. Furnaces and railroads being erected. Mountains being mined. People were flooding to the area looking for work, and a new start. An increasing number of these people were African American. They were looking to escape the rural South for bigger cities. For some of them it was just a stop on their journey to the north, while others came to call Birmingham home. The influx of people also brought an influx of crime. It was during this time that Jefferson County was known for its two M’s, minerals and murder.<sup>1</sup> The two largest harbors for crime were dives and mining camps. The most famous dives were, “Buzzards roost,” “Pigeon roost,” and “Scratch Ankle.” They were nestled in the “black district” and local newspapers were continuously reporting on the activity there. Whether or not Monroe Johnson was traveling through or settling in, Jefferson County is the place that his life was taken from him.

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<sup>1</sup> *Birmingham Biography of a City the New South*, Martha Carolyn Mitchell, August 1946.

There is not much information to offer in terms of his background. Details such as his age, occupation, and family have been lost through the years due to the manner in which records and documents were kept. Documentation such as a birth certificate might not have been recorded at all, seeing as birth records were not required until the 1900's. That being said, most of Monroe's story has been gathered through a collection of newspapers.

As I continue, I ask that you keep in mind who was writing these articles and what their bias might have been. The first account of Monroe was at Buzzards roost, where he supposedly shot at an African American woman in 1886. This act landed him a stay in the state penitentiary. Ultimately resulting in him serving six months in a mining camp, as a free laborer.<sup>2</sup> Because of the Convict-Lease system in place, it was not uncommon for prisoners to serve as free labor. Under this system, companies and individuals were allowed to pay fees to the state or county in return for free labor.<sup>3</sup> This is a part of the reason mining camps were also hubs of violence. Free laborers meant less need for paid labor. I feel it important to mention that majority of these prisoners were African American. Meaning, Monroe was one of many imprisoned African Americans serving as a free laborer. After his time was served he moved to Dunnivant's Camp to work on The Columbus & Western Railway. According to the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, it was in Dunnivant's camp's violent atmosphere that a white man, Boyd Fleming, shot a black man. Fleming then went into a camp with a loaded gun and threatened to shoot more black men. This act added to the racial tension that saturated the camp. Many African Americans in the camp were enraged by Fleming's act, including Monroe. Supposedly, Monroe made threats to kill Mr.

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<sup>2</sup> "In the Dark," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, 2 September 1887.

<sup>3</sup> Convict-lease system, *encyclopediaofalabama.org*, Mary Ellen Curtin, 27 June 2013.

Flemming, but no one paid him any mind.<sup>4</sup> Then on September 2, 1887, *The Birmingham Age-Herald* reads:

“Wednesday night, just after dark, Fleming was at the house of his sister, Mrs. Foster, and was talking with her and her husband, for some purpose Mrs. Foster Stepped out of the door into the darkness, and had gone only a few feet from the door, when the report of a gun fired close at hand was heard by those within, and at the same time Mrs. Foster fell to the ground dead. Not a word or a moan escaped her lips, as she was killed instantly.”<sup>5</sup>

Neither men saw her get shot, nor did they see her shooter, but it was assumed that Mr. Monroe Johnson was to blame because after that night he seemed to have disappeared. The story of a prominent white woman being shot by a “criminal negro” made headlines up and down the state of Alabama. It even appeared in Kentucky newspapers. Monroe was a man on the run.

Days after the shooting of Mrs. Jack Foster, Monroe was arrested in Atlanta. *The Troy Messenger* informs that Johnson was put on a train to Birmingham and on the train ride it is said that he confessed to the crime.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this is all hear-say because the train transporting Monroe never made it to Birmingham. Then on Monday, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1887, at four am the train transporting Monroe Johnson was stopped. A dozen or so men boarded the train, three of them wearing masks. Monroe, being chained to his seat, was helpless. *The Eufaula Daily Times* reports, “The mob did not wait to unchain him, but tore up the car seat to which he was fastened.”<sup>7</sup> *The Cullman Tribune* offers more insight by telling us,

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<sup>4</sup> “In the Dark,” Birmingham Age-Herald, 2 September 1887.

<sup>5</sup> “In the Dark,” Birmingham Age-Herald, 2 September 1887.

<sup>6</sup> The Troy Messenger, 29 Sep 1887, Thu, Page 8.

<sup>7</sup> *The Eufaula Daily Times*, 20 Sep 1887, Tue, Page 2.

“they carried the negro and all to a walnut tree nearby and hanged him to it. The mob then got on the railroad and perforated the swinging body with bullets.”<sup>8</sup>The men who lynched Monroe had no warrants put out for them. There was scant evidence of any reprimand, or disapproval. The only trace was found in *The Eufaula daily times*. When on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1887 they explained that Monroe had been arrested and lynched. And they stated, “The Birmingham Herald has a timely editorial condemning the work of the mob.”<sup>9</sup> Although, the week *The Birmingham Age-Herald* would have published the article condemning the lynching has been lost or damaged throughout time. Meaning, there is no sure way to know if Monroe received some justice.

As mentioned previously, the act of lynching was violent and usually motivated by strong feelings of anger. I wish that I had more to tell you about his family and the type of character he had. However, with what little is left of his memory I can’t help but feel more like I’m pleading his case to you. Lynching took away the right to trial and that is why it is so important to remember this part of history. By remembering it we can keep from repeating it and offer some sort of justice for men and woman like Monroe.

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<sup>8</sup> “Hanged and Shot,” *The Cullman Tribune*, 23 September 1887.

<sup>9</sup> *The Eufaula Daily Times*, 20 Sep 1887, Tue, Page 2.

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