

Elizabeth Lawrence

Date: September 5th, 1933

Place: Birmingham

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During the last week of June 1933, Elizabeth Lawrence, an African-American mother and school teacher, was killed by a mob in her own home near Birmingham. Ms. Lawrence was walking along a country road about five miles from her home when a group of young white children began taunting and throwing rocks and dirt at her. Being a school teacher and mother herself, she reacted as many might. Ms. Lawrence verbally reprimanded the children without ever touching them. However, in the years post-slavery, all that was needed to justify violence against a black person was the word of a white person, even a child. Like so many other African Americans who were lynched based on these social norms, Ms. Lawrence was now at risk for violent retaliation because she committed a “social transgression.”

On July 5, Ms. Lawrence was alone in her home when the children’s parents surrounded her house. It is unknown if she exited the house in protest or if the mob stormed inside during the attack, but Ms. Lawrence was shot and her house burned to the ground, likely with her still inside.

Her son Alexander [last name and age unknown] was away when the mob murdered his mother. He returned and attempted to file a report with county law enforcement. A mob quickly re-gathered and threatened Alexander with the same fate. Like many other African Americans who left the South for threat of their lives, he fled to Boston, and reported his mother’s lynching. In July 1933, the International Labor Defense (ILD) opened an investigation, and three newspapers reported the incident, but no charges were ever brought against any members of the mob.

It is important to note that while white periodicals would occasionally report on lynchings, it was mainly black newspapers such as The Chicago Defender, or in this case, the Baltimore Afro-American Newspaper, that would report the witness accounts of these violent incidents. The research on Elizabeth Lawrence’s death is still ongoing, with the expectation that the ILD’s investigation report contains additional information.

Selected Sources

“Ala. Boy Tells of Mother’s Lynching,” Baltimore Afro-American Newspaper, July 22, 1933.

“Negro Woman Lynched in B’ham: Son Narrowly Escapes Same Fate,” Daily (name unreadable on the film), July 5, 1933, via Tuskegee Reel #228.

“The Blood of Lynching Victims is in this Soil,” National Geographic: The Race Issue, 2018.