

The Reporter's Bias: John Thomas

On April 25, 1909, John Thomas, a man born in 1884 in Bessemer, was lynched. Mr. Thomas was around the young age of 25 when this lynching took place in Bessemer. Mr. Thomas was accused of a crime against a woman named Ms. Patterson. Accounts exist in *The Lineville Headlight*, under a headline listed as "Death by Lynching," in the *Birmingham Republican*, and as part of "Happenings of the week" in the *Goodwater Enterprise*.

According to an article written by Walter S. Scott, Mr. Thomas was caught on a Saturday and was identified and confessed, which resulted in his lynching. Mr. Thomas was described as a brute. Authorities said they didn't want to submit Ms. Patterson to any public humiliation and ask her to testify on the stand. Instead, they were willing to lynch Mr. Thomas and so avoid due process. Walter S. Scott also wrote that it was better for people to take the law into their own hands because the law did not act quickly enough in punishing "brutes." He argued that the law should agree and quietly hang the accused in the jail yard. Scott felt this would be less shameful to their women, and they had a duty to protect their women.

Research into Mr. Scott shows the ways in which white newspapers and local law enforcement collaborated to enforce racial violence. Mr. Scott was the editor and proprietor of *The Lineville Headlight*, and also served as a solicitor or attorney. As in Jefferson County, one person would serve as a deputy, bailiff, jailer, and road patroller all in the same day. It was common for people in powerful positions to wear more than one hat while working in their daily duties.

It is impossible to know if Mr. Thomas committed a crime against Ms. Patterson or to determine what the outcome would have been if he had received a fair trial. One month before this lynching, the NAACP was created, perhaps an indicator of how critical this time was for blacks in the South.

John Thomas is someone to remember. He was loved by someone and his death should not be in vain. When society views individuals as a problem because of the color of their skin, that society has major work to do. He can be remembered as a black man at the age of 25 from Bessemer, Alabama. Listed as a laborer, he was accused of a crime, and the result of that accusation cost him his life. Learning more about what happened and imagining what we cannot know is one way to become stronger and create a better future.

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Selected Sources

"Death by Lynching," *The Lineville Headlight* (Lineville, Alabama), April 25 1909, page 1.

"Happenings of the week," *Birmingham Republican*, April 26, 1909, page 5.

"Untitled," *Goodwater Enterprise* (Goodwater, Alabama), April 25, 1909, page 3.