

“No Painted Apache Ever Did Anything Half So Wanton,
or Cannibal in Darkest Africa Ever Acted Upon a More Fiendish Impulse’:
Newspaper Reactions to the 1898 Lynching of Postmaster Frazier Baker
in Lake City, South Carolina on the Eve of the Spanish-American War”

David Carter, Associate Professor of History, Auburn University

Imagine a small wooden frame building on the outskirts of the mostly-white hamlet of Lake City, South Carolina on a chilly night in February, 1898. Frazier and Lavinia Baker and their six children awoke shortly after 1:00 A.M. to discover flames devouring the rear wall of their home. Frazier Baker, an African American, knew well what the fire meant. Hailing from nearby Effingham, he had assumed the postmastership of Lake City as a patronage appointment engineered by the state Republican Party establishment several months before. Local whites, infuriated by the elevation of a black man — and an “outsider” to boot — to a position of authority, had burned down the first post office building Baker maintained, had shot at his black assistant, and had made repeated threats on his life.

As the smoke thickened that night, Baker’s eldest son Lincoln opened the front door to cry for help, only to retreat when several shots rang out. Unable to douse the blaze with what water was at hand, Baker cried out, “We might as well die running as . . . standing still.”¹ He attempted to lead his family to safety, but backlit by the flames he was an easy target for the

¹ *Charleston News and Courier*, 27 February 1898. For a broader discussion of the Lake City lynching and its aftermath, see David Carter, “Outraged Justice: The Lynching of Postmaster Frazier Baker in Lake City, South Carolina, 1897-1899,” Undergraduate History Honors Thesis (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1992). The narrative elements of this paper are drawn from that thesis.

See also Terence Finnegan, “Lynching and Political Power in Mississippi and South Carolina,” in Brundage, ed. *Under Sentence of Death*, 208-10; Roger K. Hux, “Lillian Clayton Jewett and the Rescue of the Baker Family, 1899-1900,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (Winter 1991): 13-23; George Brown Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes: 1877-1900* (Columbia, S.C., 1952), 255-56; G. Wayne King, *Rise Up So Early: A History of Florence County, South Carolina* (Spartanburg, S.C., 1981); and Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York, 1984), 190. A remarkable document that touches briefly on the Lake City lynching is the first person reminiscence of Elizabeth Singletary, “Way Back,” edited and compiled by Alice Ogden Bellis (privately printed, 1997).

well-armed whites arrayed around the front of the building who opened fire. The postmaster collapsed, fatally wounded in the barrage. Whites continued firing, inflicting serious gunshot injuries on the children Rosa, Cora, and Lincoln before the siblings could run from the building into the sheltering darkness. (Two other siblings Sarah and Willie, miraculously escaped harm.) Baker's wife Lavinia attempted to follow, holding their infant daughter Julia, but a bullet passed through her hand, killing the baby and tearing her from her mother's arms. Struck in the leg by a second bullet, Lavinia Baker collapsed beside the building as the flames consumed the wooden structure and the bodies of her husband Frazier and daughter Julia. As the mob quietly dispersed, local African Americans drawn by the gunfire offered sanctuary in their homes to the new widow and her five surviving children.

I imagine most if not all of you here know that while the word lynching conjures up images of victims killed by hanging, the term encompasses the taking of individual life by a mob under a depressingly wide variety of extralegal circumstances. In addition to the traditional noose, mobs riddled their victims with bullets, burned them to death, and mutilated their bodies. Whites in Tennessee in 1916 went so far as to hang a circus elephant named Mary from a railroad crane after the mistreated animal had fatally trampled an inexperienced trainer. And lynching was still alive and well in the modern civil rights era, with photos of 14-year-old Emmett Till's mutilated corpse in *Jet Magazine* riveting the nation just months before the Montgomery Bus Boycott was launched late in 1955. The victims of "lynching bees" in America were not always black, but over time most came to be, with the overwhelming majority of victims African-American males in the southern United States and the overwhelming majority of lynch mob participants whites. While many whites defended the grisly practices of mobs by

alleging that black men had unleashed an “epidemic of rape” on the South’s white women, pioneering African-American anti-lynching activists like Ida Wells-Barnett punctured this mythology as early as 1892, and went on to declare “Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women.”

The timing of Frazier and Julia Baker’s deaths in 1898 places the Lake City lynching on the cusp between the peak in lynchings in the late-1880s and 1890s and the cementing of *de jure* segregation in the South. Four years of Civil War and a decade of Reconstruction had failed to remold the South along lines of racial equality. In the two decades following the “redemption” of the South by native white leadership, the door to equality wedged partially open by blacks and Union troops during Reconstruction was shut closed forcibly by a unified white South. Suffering under the stigma of regional, cultural, and political marginalization, many frustrated whites found an outlet in reaction. The most extreme of them targeted their rage against blacks, believing they sought to abandon their traditionally subservient place in their quest for equality. In this climate of reaction, whites lynched thousands of African Americans.

The widely-held assumption in the white South and the nation at large at the turn of the century was that the national government would do nothing to stop the lynching of blacks or to punish mob participants. Despite anti-lynching sentiment among the Republican party’s rank and file, successive presidential administrations were unwilling to challenge the South on the issue, and Congress and the federal courts typically followed the executive lead. Many in the national government excused their inactivity by arguing variations on the theme of “federalism” -- that it was the role of the states to control the lawlessness of white lynch mobs -- but in so doing they conveniently overlooked the constitutional precedents set by Reconstruction. White northerners were convinced that any attempt by federal authorities to interfere in the sadistic

customs of their white southern neighbors would subvert the ongoing process of sectional rapprochement (an altar on which the rights of African Americans were being sacrificed as the nineteenth century drew to a close).

The initial response to the lynching in Lake City was a telling exception to this pattern of unchecked violence. The brutality of the attack on the postmaster and his family elicited outraged protests from across the nation. Baker's status as a federally appointed postmaster heightened the stakes in the eyes of a national government ordinarily unmoved by the lynching of blacks. The timing of the Baker lynching on the eve of war with Spain also catalyzed African-American protest that had remained diffuse in earlier lynchings of lesser-known victims. Although systematic disfranchisement would ultimately rob many African Americans of the ballot, even as late as the 1890s blacks still remained an important constituency for the national Republican Party (their clout within the "Party of Lincoln" was in fact responsible for Frazier Baker having originally secured a patronage appointment as postmaster of Lake City in 1897). President McKinley and his political advisers wanted to preserve a politically united homefront as tensions over Cuba ultimately led to a U.S. declaration of war against Spain later in the spring of 1898, and both whites and African Americans rallied to the flag.

Whites in Lake City had telegraphed their awareness of a cultural script of "acceptable" lynchings when in the weeks before the fatal attack they appended to a list of grievances against the postmaster the loaded phrase: "He is impolite to ladies." The fact that some white women might be forced to enter the black-controlled post office to pick up mail made some view Baker as a sort of minotaur-like figure. But everything points to the fact that what most infuriated whites was simply Baker's race, and his elevation to a position of authority in the town. Whites in Lake City saw Frazier Baker as the embodiment of the stereotypical "uppity nigger" who

failed to respect the etiquette of “knowing one’s place” in the post-Reconstruction South. In having the temerity to accept the appointment as postmaster, they reasoned, Baker forfeited his right to live in a “white man’s country.”

But in the aftermath of the lynching many white southerners were troubled by their inability to saddle the postmaster with a “crime” that would “excuse” lynching according to the popular notions of the day. In a sense, whites were forced by circumstances to criticize the specific lynching in Lake City because it threatened to undermine the legitimacy they conferred on the broader lynching culture. By arguing that Lake City was a “bad” lynching, white southerners tacitly endorsed mob activity under different and purportedly “justifiable” circumstances. When many newspapers in the South accused the lynchers of “cowardice” for targeting an entire family in what some likened to a “turkey shoot,” they were ostensibly making an argument against lynching -- albeit one rooted in a gendered code of chivalry that allowed other lynchings to be seen by whites as a manly defense of female virtue. But the implicit corollary was that attacks carried out by the light of day directed against individual black men rather than entire families were perfectly acceptable.

The reluctance of most southern whites to condone the murders of Frazier and Julia Baker presented a chink in the armor of white supremacy through which early anti-lynching activists -- and ultimately the federal government -- might attack lynching. For once Washington replaced rhetorical equivocation with a forceful response. The reaction of the federal government grew less out of moral outrage, however, than in response to the political pressure skillfully applied by African Americans.

Images of martyrdom played particularly strongly among African-American audiences in the North. Blacks who had left the South in an ongoing exodus registered some of the most

heated protests against the Baker lynching. In a vein of creative excoriation, the African-American press indicted the lynchers as “human vampires” and “white fiends.” If blacks owed any debt to their former masters for the gift of civilization, one man wrote, they should give thanks that they had not been “sufficiently civilized . . . to commit such brutal and cold-blooded murders.”² One editorialist suggested that a new wave of missionaries head south to tend to the spiritual needs of depraved whites capable of murdering infants.

Anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett typified the rage that many northern blacks felt upon hearing of Baker’s lynching. In response to Baker’s death, she led a mass protest meeting in Chicago with over two thousand in attendance. The crime against the Bakers, she reminded her audience, had been committed by white men “whose proud boast is their chivalry toward womanhood.” In playing up the obvious paradox between their oft-touted claims of honor and the cowardly reality of the tragedy in Lake City, she attacked southern lynchers where they were most vulnerable.

Only days before the Lake City lynching the United States battleship *Maine* had exploded in Havana Harbor. The Baker “outrage” vied for column space with accounts of the growing crisis with Spain and lurid yellow journalism. War promised a healing of the nation’s festering sectional wounds. Years of lingering animosity seemed to dissolve overnight as ex-Confederates and ex-Unionists rallied under a single flag, part of what one historian has labeled “the romance of reunion.”³ Many blacks were struck by the incongruities raised by the coincidence of Baker’s lynching and the pell-mell rush toward war with Spain over Cuba. Why was America going to

² *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, Indiana, 5 March 1898; *The Colored Citizen*, Topeka, Kansas, 24 February, 3 March 1898; *Cleveland Gazette*, 2 April 1898, reprinted from *New York Independent*.

³ See Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

war to defend native peoples' liberties abroad, they asked, when her own black citizens were denied the free exercise of their rights in the nation's southern backyard?

At the same meeting where Ida B. Wells-Barnett had spoken, E.H. Morris, another of Chicago's African American activists, took the podium to declare: "We hear a good deal about Cuba just now, but when I read about this affair I thought to myself that it would be a good thing if Spain should send a battle-ship to South Carolina to put a stop to such barbarity." Newspaper accounts referred to "the more than Spanish barbarity of a number of white fiends at Lake City," with one editorialist indicting William McKinley: "we see the President demanding millions for the loss of lives on the Main [sic], but for the loss of the Negro officer of the government they but laugh." Another voice in a similar vein: "Does it not appear ludicrous for the U.S. Government to be waging a war in the interest of humanity and to bring about the cessation of Spanish outrages in Cuba, when it has such a record at home?" It is worth highlighting the cover of one professionally-printed petition to President McKinley, reading "not as *Supplicants* do we present our claims, *but as American citizens*."⁴

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who was held in high esteem by Chicago's prominent blacks and whites, was sent to Washington to present personally the resolutions of the mass meeting to President McKinley and Congress. Accompanied by members of the Illinois congressional delegation, she met with the President and reported that he gave her a favorable reception. But McKinley was distracted by preparations for war and terminated the meeting quickly after reassuring her that the government was vigorously pursuing an investigation into the Lake City affair. Wells-Barnett lingered in Washington and called for Congress to extend aid to the

⁴ For a discussion of the context of African American activism against the backdrop of the Spanish-American War see Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden: 1898-1903* (Urbana, Ill., 1975).

surviving victims of the lynching, but multiple bills died due to the opposition of white southern representatives.

Wells-Barnett's unsuccessful mission to the capital in the weeks after the Baker lynching highlighted deep divisions within the black community on the eve of American entrance into war. While she and a minority of her race argued for continued pressure on Washington to elicit concrete federal action against lynching, large numbers of blacks rushed to enlist in the effort against Spain. They were eager to demonstrate their patriotism and hoped that their voluntarism might compel greater respect after the war. To Wells-Barnett this approach reeked of gradualism. The unique opportunity to have the federal government so directly implicated in the issue of lynching might not arise again, but her admonitions to "Remember Lake City" went unheeded by blacks more eager to "Remember the *Maine*." Criticizing the short-lived memory of those who had abandoned her crusade for racial justice in their race to don federal uniforms, a dispirited Wells-Barnett returned to Chicago.⁵

How did whites and African Americans in South Carolina respond to the Lake City lynching? The reaction of the *Columbia State* was typical of the depth of protest from white Carolinians in the aftermath of the Baker lynching. "A negro postmaster!" exclaimed its editor. "Is that something to resent with assassination?" Whites had swallowed their "race pride" before and endured with patience the indignity of black office-holding both during and since Reconstruction, the editor reasoned, decrying the further shame the crime would visit on the state's already widespread reputation for lawlessness. Northerners would interpret Baker's death as ample proof of a benighted South Carolina.

The editor of the *Williamsburg County Record* published in Kingstree near Lake City called the lynching "the darkest blot upon South Carolina's history." Baker's lynching

⁵ See Carter, "Outraged Justice."

threatened to lay bare the hypocrisy in the state's proud boast of civilization. Like many whites across the state, the paper's editor was disturbed by the inclusion of Baker's family in the scope of the mob's attack. He suggested that the "mob could have done a much *neater* job . . . had a little common sense been used."⁶ Some whites in the South said the Republican Administration of William McKinley should share the blame with the mob for its policy of "thrusting venal negro henchmen into Southern offices of trust." Other whites, however, were justifiably concerned that projecting blame on the national government would weaken the sincerity behind southern condemnation of this particular lynching.

The horror of rape the "nameless crime" struck at the very root of white southern life, the family; alleged black rapists had long been perceived as "despoilers" of white homes. Ironically, whites throughout the country condemned Baker's lynchers with a rhetoric that closely paralleled that normally reserved for blacks accused – all too often falsely – of rape. "No painted Apache ever did anything half so wanton. No cannibal in Darkest Africa ever acted upon a more fiendish impulse," read an editorial in the *Washington Post* following the Lake City lynching. The *Columbia State* published in South Carolina's capital voiced similar contempt: the lynchers by their actions placed themselves "on the moral and religious level of the aboriginal African. . . . Where are the white man's characteristics in this deed? Where is his superiority shown?"⁷ White supremacists had often sounded the theme of black retrogression, alleging that African-Americans were slipping back into the perceived primal savagery of their mother Dark Continent. By attacking Baker's family and by failing to saddle the postmaster with a charge considered worthy of lynching, Baker's killers suddenly found themselves cast in the role of the "savage"; the white-written script of racial stereotypes suddenly turned against them.

⁶ *Williamsburg (S.C.) County Record*, 24 February 1898.

⁷ See *Washington Post*, 2 March 1898; *Columbia State*, 23 February 1898, reprinted in *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 2nd Sess., 2405.

The charge of cowardice dominated the popular castigation of the Lake City lynchers more than any other and transcended regional divides. It was the common thread that tied together protest from north and south, black and white. The lynchers had acted in secrecy and under cover of darkness. Applying the torch to the rear of the post office, they had forced the Bakers into what amounted to a turkey shoot. “Shot Down Like Dogs!” ran one South Carolina local paper’s headline. Another commentator from the Midwest likened the crime to a cowardly sport: “It was like smoking an animal out of a log, the way boys do in the woods.”⁸ In a southern culture where manliness was enshrined as a paramount value, Baker’s lynchers had failed the critical test.

Since the Baker lynching was absolutely free from the usual taint of alleged black on white rape, blacks throughout the South felt more emboldened than in many instances to offer resolutions calling on the federal and state authorities to punish the lynchers. In the typical language of the church-based mass meeting, blacks denounced Baker’s killers as the minions of “the incarnate army of his Satanic majesty.” Another petition urged that the President wage war on southern lynching and pursue justice for the white “fiends” who had killed Baker. The lynching of the postmaster, they contended, was “the Blackest deed the historian has had to hand posterity. . . . If there ever be a time when forbearance ceases to be a virtue We believe that time to be now.”⁹

And looming war with Spain also fueled southern responses to the Baker lynchings. “A Crime More Deplorable than the Loss of a 1000 Men in War,” read one headline. The *Columbia State* editorialized “we would have preferred to see [South Carolina] lose a thousand sons in battle than to have to record such a coward’s crime as that which stains her today. . . For

⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, 24 February 1898.

⁹ Petition of citizens of Winnsboro, Fairfield County, South Carolina, 5 March 1898, Department of Justice Files, Washington, D.C. Original capitalization and emphasis preserved.

years and decades it will be a taunt in the mouths of our enemies, and we must bow our heads under the lash of their scorn.”¹⁰

Another example of this linking of a human rights discourse abroad with the scourge of lynching in the American South runs: “We are rightly stirred by the heartrending sufferings of Armenia, by the woeful lamentations of Cuba, and by the oppressions of every distant land. But any system of religion that goes frantic over sin at a distance and palliates it at home cannot commend itself as the all-conquering religion of the Son of Man.”¹¹

Fourteen months later, after an extensive investigation, federal prosecutors arraigned thirteen white men in federal court in Charleston, South Carolina on charges of conspiracy to deprive Frazier Baker of his civil rights. Since South Carolina’s legal system had failed to take any effective action to apprehend the Bakers’ lynchers, the federal government relied on a series of Congressional statutes collectively known as the Enforcement Acts to prosecute mob members for felonies committed pursuant to a conspiracy against Baker. The Enforcement Acts, passed during Reconstruction in 1870 and 1871, were intended to protect African Americans’ civil rights as guaranteed by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments from infringement by southern whites.

After a federal grand jury ruled there was sufficient evidence to try the accused lynchers, however, the government’s attorneys found their best efforts stymied by the resolve of the white Lake City community to protect its own. In the subsequent trial, friends and relatives of the accused perjured themselves repeatedly to provide alibis for the men. As closing arguments began, the U.S. District Court proceedings in Charleston degenerated into a grand political

¹⁰ *Washington Post*, 3 March 1898, quoting *Columbia (S.C.) State*.

¹¹ See Carter, “Outraged Justice.”

circus. Lawyers for the thirteen white defendants' largely ignored the government's well-constructed case and even glossed over the evidence they had presented in rebuttal; riddled with internal contradictions, it had been equally damning. Instead, they resorted to a naked appeal to the racist sensibilities of an all-white jury. (Three years after South Carolina's Constitutional Convention of 1895 stripped the state's African Americans of the ballot, blacks were already being systematically excluded from juries.) White supremacy, the lawyers argued, demanded acquittal of the defendants.

The government lawyers responded to the legal farce with lily-white protestations of their own. In effect, they agreed with the defendants that the Republicans' appointment of Baker to the postmastership of Lake City had been a grievous error, but they insisted mob rule was an affront to the civilization whites professed to be defending. On that basis, and with the overwhelming weight of the evidence, the jurors should convict those accused of lynching Frazier and Julia Baker. In his final appeal to the twelve impaneled white men, the chief prosecutor spoke eloquently of "outraged justice." Without true justice -- as opposed to the grisly sentences meted out by bloodthirsty lynch mobs -- southerners might just as well "shut the school houses, burn the books, tear down the churches and admit to the world that Anglo-Saxon civilization is a failure."¹²

After twenty-two hours of deliberation, an irreconcilably divided jury produced a mistrial; evidence suggested approximately half of the jurors had voted to convict the white men for the lynching of the Bakers. The federal government never resumed prosecution of the case. The proceedings in Charleston had been relatively unique in that whites were so rarely brought to trial at all for the crime of lynching. Within this context, the willingness of a federal grand jury made up of white southerners to indict the lynchers and the refusal of a second jury to grant

¹² *Charleston News and Courier*, 21 April 1899. See also Carter, "Outraged Justice."

outright acquittals in the trial might be considered evidence of progress. But any optimism in this respect should be tempered by the knowledge that the federal government rarely took such an aggressive stance against lynching following the Baker case, and the turn of the century saw ongoing lynchings joined by an even more deadly phenomenon: “race riots” in Phoenix, South Carolina, Wilmington, North Carolina, New Orleans, Atlanta, and other cities. These explosions of violence left scores of African Americans dead and were less “riots” than massacres, clearly illuminating the extent to which some southern whites were willing to go to perpetuate white supremacy.

What of the surviving members of the Baker family? After a roller coaster of publicity, where surviving members of the Baker family appeared at anti-lynching public meetings, with some concerned for their welfare arguing they were being exploited for “exhibition purposes,” treated like “monkeys in a cage and trotted around from place to place.” William Lloyd Garrison II, the son of the late abolitionist, raised twelve hundred dollars to provide a home for the Bakers near Boston. Glad to escape the notoriety that had followed them for nearly two years, the survivors of the Lake City lynching finally retired from the nation’s newspaper headlines. During the next twenty years, four of the Baker children fell victim to tuberculosis, a disease endemic among Boston’s poorer African Americans. When her last child passed away in 1942, Lavinia Baker returned to South Carolina. She died in 1947 in Florence County, less than twenty-five miles away from Lake City.¹³

For a brief moment in 1898, the assurance that white men could lynch with total impunity, provided their victims were black, had been threatened by organized African-

¹³ For a discussion of the aftermath of the Baker family in the aftermath of the case see Roger K. Hux, “Lillian Clayton Jewett and the Rescue of the Baker Family, 1899-1900,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (Winter 1991): 13-23.

American protest and a federal government prodded into action by the intensity of that protest. The flame flickered and died, however, as southern whites closed ranks to protect their own. Ultimately, the inability of the federal government to bring the Bakers' lynchers to justice reaffirmed its lack of political willpower where enforcement of the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution was concerned. After the miscarriage of justice in the Charleston trial, the national government slipped back into its former complacency. African Americans and a courageous minority of whites continued to wage a spirited public campaign against lynching, but in the ensuing decades they were all too often voices in the wilderness. In the aftermath of the lynching of Postmaster Frazier Baker and his daughter Julia, the pattern of color-conscious justice -- or injustice -- remained unchanged.
