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## The Rise of Jim Crow in Fort Myers, 1885-1930

by Jonathan Harrison

The power and opportunities of African Americans in Florida between the 1880s and 1920s fluctuated across time and location and were affected by variations in local economic structures, migration patterns and cultural histories. Black property ownership, political participation and social prestige were in flux, impacted by such factors as the availability of public land for cultivation by blacks, the cultures of the places from which new residents had migrated, and whether the area was a new settlement or one that was carrying forward a set of social relationships that had been formed during the slavery period. Each of these factors can be documented in the case of Fort Myers in a way that throws additional new light on the nuances involved in racial interactions during this era. The picture that emerges is one in which the path to segregation was not a straight line, nor were African Americans passive in their responses to the processes taking place.

Fort Myers grew from a town of only 400 people in 1885 to one of 2,463 in 1910.<sup>1</sup> The population of its parent county, named after Robert E. Lee, expanded from 1,414 persons in 1890 to 6,294 in

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1 "The Fort Myers Planning Board, 1925,6, <http://www.news-press.com/assets/pdf/A414971218.PDF> (accessed August15,2015). Originally a Civil War fortress situated in Monroe County, Fort Myers became a settlement in 1866 and was incorporated into Lee County when the latter was formed in 1887.

1910.<sup>2</sup> The small size of the community in 1885 had allowed African Americans to find niches in services that whites needed to employ because there was no white person offering the same service. This power waned when the white population increased and could run its own affairs in a way that relegated blacks to a segregated Jim Crow status. Moreover, whereas some African Americans in 1885 had been landowners, tradespersons and vendors, the arrival of the railroad in 1904 created a new industrial economy requiring heavy manual labor. As a result, the “Negro” population of Lee County multiplied by a factor of five between 1900 and 1910, from 188 to 937.<sup>3</sup> This led to a greater level of ‘proletarianization’ both in the economic roles of blacks and the ways they were depicted racially. Unskilled laborers were more likely to be viewed as uncivilized, brutish and physically menacing. On June 25, 1903, for example, the *Fort Myers Press* editorialized:

It should be remembered that great changes are to take place in Ft. Myers within the next twelve months. In a month or two large bodies of colored men will be brought here to work on the railroad. It will require vigilant officers to preserve order in the new conditions, and Messrs. Hendry and Stroup have shown that they will take no nonsense from any one. It will require a firm mayor and an equally firm marshal to handle the rough element that is sure to follow in the wake of the railroad.

This was a self-fulfilling prophecy because it anticipated the need for firm policing of a population that had not yet arrived. It also placed the long-term black residents in a quandary because they were vulnerable to being identified with these new arrivals and to losing their status of the prior period. The residential changes that occurred after 1904 provide strong evidence that these formerly, relatively middle-class blacks were gradually compelled to move into a segregated area, which became known as Safety Hill. The quality of housing and of the street surfaces in the area was often poor, as shown by contemporary photographs from the period.<sup>4</sup>

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2 “County-Level Results,” University of Virginia Historical Census Browser, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php> (accessed December 15, 2013).

3 Ibid.

4 “The Fort Myers Plan,” Fort Myers Planning Board, 1925, 81, <http://www.news-press.com/assets/pdf/A414971218.PDF> (accessed December 14, 2013).

Moreover, proletarianization probably had a more devastating effect on blacks psychologically in Lee County than in many other counties because, according to the 1910 census, the county had the lowest rate of illiteracy among "negro males of voting age"; the percentage in Lee was only 8.04 compared to a state average of 25.90.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that African Americans in Fort Myers had received comparatively more education, which created a greater gap between their mental abilities and the intellectual fulfillment offered by their work roles.

At the same time as this segregation was being established, a new generation of whites was arriving from areas where the harsh treatment of blacks was ingrained in the norms of the culture. From 1865 to 1887, Fort Myers had been located in Monroe County, whose county seat was Key West. The traditional southern influence on that county appears to have been mediated by its geographical remoteness, with the result that a cosmopolitan white population had arrived by sea instead of a traditional southern community evolving through arrival by land. In the 1880 census, Monroe's population was 10,940, but the total number born in Georgia, Alabama, or the Carolinas was only 297.<sup>6</sup> However, when routes to Fort Myers became more accessible, the town and its surrounding area disaffiliated from Monroe and began to become more traditional in outlook, as shown by its choice of Lee as its symbolic figure. Migrants from the ex-Confederate states were attracted to the county by its status as a cattle port and a base for hunting. The effect of such migration on Lee County can be inferred from the views of the first postmistress in Immokalee, Mary Burrell, who held the position from 1898 to 1919 before moving to Miami. Some members of her family had been slave-owners in Madison County, Florida, near the border with Georgia.<sup>7</sup> She was interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project in 1938 and offered these opinions (paraphrased by the interviewer) on Reconstruction:

Slaves were encouraged to go away from the land on which they had lived. Many went away only to become vagrants and were guilty of misdemeanors in other localities. As conditions grew more desperate, so the problem of the Negro became more serious. The carpetbagger stirred

5 "County-Level Results."

6 Ibid.

7 Originally known as Allen Place, Immokalee acquired its new name in 1897 and was part of Lee County until Collier County was formed in 1923.

them to lawlessness, and only the appearance of the Ku Klux Klan saved the women and children of the South, including the north Florida counties and the southern counties of Georgia, where the Burrell families and their connections had their properties.

Burrell claimed that “Negroes were accustomed to whipping as a punishment, and knew when they deserved it...To put a Negro in solitary confinement only let him enjoy leisure.”<sup>8</sup> Burrell thus exemplified the attitudes that were often brought to Lee County from elsewhere in the Deep South: the romanticizing of the Klan and the demonization of “carpetbaggers” for encouraging the “lawlessness” of “the Negro.”

However, there were some twists in the road that led to the institutionalization of these racist viewpoints in the formal segregation of the city. African Americans built organizations that attempted to maintain civic pride, and kept a presence on the electoral register even when their votes were rendered ineffective by the “white primary” system. Full segregation was not achieved until the property boom of the 1920s, a period marked by restrictive covenants and preceded by the brutal lynching of 1924. The Fort Myers lynching took place at a time when racial violence was being used across Florida, in such places as Ocoee and Rosewood, to exclude blacks from political and civic spaces.<sup>9</sup> This violence can be interpreted as a symptom of the fact that the rise of Jim Crow was facilitated by means that were sometimes extralegal and abrupt, not by smooth peaceful transition from one era to another.

### The Wider Context: Theoretical Issues and Relevant Secondary Literature

The term “proletarianization,” which originated in Marxist writing, has been applied to a process whereby African Americans who acquired land for farming after the Civil War were gradually coerced or persuaded to move instead to wage labor.<sup>10</sup> There is plentiful evidence that some blacks in Central and South Florida owned

8 Bertha R. Comstock, “The Story of Immokalee,” Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers’ Project Collection, 11, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html> (accessed August 6, 2012).

9 Robert Cassanello, *To Render Invisible: Jim Crow and Public Life in New South Jacksonville* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).

10 W.P. Jones, “Black Milwaukee, Proletarianization, and the Making of Black Working-Class History,” *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 4 (2007): 544-550.

significant property during and after Reconstruction. Michelle Denise Brown notes that “African Americans owned \$6,466,487 worth of farm property in Florida” in 1900, rising to \$15,365,896 in 1910. Some of this property dated back to the Spanish era, when freed blacks were treated better than they would be later, whilst some came from the Southern Homestead Act (1866), which facilitated land ownership by emancipated slaves by allocating 46 million acres of public lands that could be homesteaded by blacks or whites.<sup>11</sup> Katherine Parry has shown that in Ocoee, as of the 1920 census, “More than one-third of the African American families there owned their own homes and over twenty percent were working their own farms.”<sup>12</sup> Many of these properties were lost in the extralegal violence that soon followed. Similar patterns have been documented in Mount Dora, where a Redevelopment Project during the 1920s land boom resulted in blacks being moved by force from downtown to East Town.<sup>13</sup> In Tampa, a field report by Viola B. Muse in 1936 for the Federal Writers’ Project noted that ex-slave Dorcas Bryant had owned a sixty-acre tract that included the area that became Union Station, whilst the site of the First National Bank on Franklin Street had formerly been the property of ex-slave Kate Hendley. In addition, much of Tampa’s warehouse district had belonged to ex-slave Sol Stanley.<sup>14</sup>

Residential segregation often became formalized by restrictive covenants that were believed to have been rendered legal by the Supreme Court ruling in *Corrigan v. Buckley*, 271 U.S. 323 (1926).<sup>15</sup> Such covenants appeared in several Fort Myers deeds and subdivision restrictions in the 1920s, such as a deed granted by Huff

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- 11 Neil Canaday, Charles Reback, and Kristin Stowe, “Race and Local Knowledge: New Evidence from the Southern Homestead Act,” *The Review of Black Political Economy* (May 2015), <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12114-015-9212-7> (accessed August 15, 2015); Michelle Denise Brown, “African-American Property Owners in Florida, 1700-1900” (MA Thesis, Florida State University, 1993).
  - 12 Katherine K. Parry, “Constructing African American Histories in Central Florida” (MA Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2008): 12-13.
  - 13 Vivian W. Owens, *The Mount Dorans: African American History Notes of a Small Town* (Waynesboro, VA: Eschar Publications, 2001), 27-29. One female property owner, Vannie Monroe, was dragged, kicking and screaming, off her land as her house was taken on a flatbed to East Town.
  - 14 Viola B. Muse, “Negro History, Tampa, Florida, Federal Writers’ Project, American Guide, (Negro Writers’ Unit), Tampa, Florida,” June 2, 1936, 6-7. The University of Florida Digital Collections (UFDC), <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00055685/00001> (accessed June 14, 2015).
  - 15 Clement E Vose, *Caucasians Only: The Supreme Court, the NAACP, and the Restrictive Covenant Cases* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 17-19.

et al to Boggess, which stated that “the said premises shall not be leased or sold to any negro or person of African descent.”<sup>16</sup> However, these documents often codified older segregation patterns that had been emerging since the turn of the century.

The development of Jim Crow laws in Florida was summarized expertly by Jerrell Shofner, who showed how the laws owed much to the “black codes” of 1865-1866. Shofner also documented the disfranchisement created by the 1889 poll tax regulations, which resulted in the state-wide fall of the Republican vote from 26,000 in 1888 to 5,000 in 1892.<sup>17</sup>

Race relations depended also on the content of white discourses concerning race. Depictions of blacks in Florida can be understood more clearly by applying a distinction made by Oliver C. Cox, who argued that “The dominant group is intolerant of those whom it can define as anti-social, while it holds race prejudice against those whom it can define as subsocial.” He contrasted racism with antisemitism by noting that “the dominant group or ruling class does not like the Jew at all, but it likes the Negro in his place.”<sup>18</sup> Cox’s view enables Fort Myers to be categorized according to whether African Americans were viewed as content to accept their lowly position or depicted as potentially violent destroyers of white society. However, Cox was too hasty in placing African Americans solely in the former category, especially given that his own study devoted a lengthy section to lynching, which was predicated on an ideology that portrayed blacks in an anti-social framework of deviance, lasciviousness, sex crime and immorality. The secondary literature on Florida shows such attitudes prevailing during Jim Crow, such as when Governor Sidney J. Catts told the NAACP to “teach your people not to kill our white officers and disgrace our white women.”<sup>19</sup>

The case of Fort Myers demonstrates depictions of African Americans that were both subsocial and anti-social, but also shows a history in which the balance between those two depictions shifted over time in favor of the latter, thereby producing a more hostile

16 Lee County Deed Book 100 (May 17, 1926), 101-102, Lee County Clerk of Courts Official Records, <http://tinyurl.com/no6xcp4> (accessed June 17, 2015).

17 Jerrell H. Shofner, “Custom, Law, and History: The Enduring Influence of Florida’s ‘Black Code,’” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (January 1977): 287-290.

18 Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class & Race: A Study of Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959), 400.

19 Parry, “Constructing,” 16.

racist ideology in the first three decades after 1900 than had existed in the latter quarter of the previous century.

Responses of blacks to racism in this period were captured brilliantly by W.E.B. DuBois in his concept of “double consciousness,” which he defined as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>20</sup> This conception is dynamic because it enables race relations in a specific time and place to be viewed as an interaction between a shifting white attitude of “amused contempt and pity” and a black response that splits the self into, on the one hand, a deferential persona that is presented to the white world and, on the other hand, a proud identity that is maintained in the civic pride of the African American community.

It is also sensitive to historical context because contempt can take many forms, ranging from patronizing acceptance of African Americans as inferior but benign, to active malevolent hostility expressed in harassment and the threat of lynching. African American actions in white public spaces must then be studied by viewing those behaviors as continuous adaptations to white intentions, with African Americans looking for opportunities to improve one’s circumstances whilst being aware of threats and dangers.

Combining Cox and DuBois creates a dynamic model whereby racism and community are viewed as a set of potential relationships that can develop in unequal but calm co-existence or in an atmosphere of virulent racism and a framework of legal persecution and extralegal violence. This range of possibilities provides the historian with fertile ground on which to research the period, with the potential to produce a variety of results, not always easily predictable, depending on time and place.

The work of DuBois also connects to the history of African American activism in Florida, captured vividly by Nancy A. Hewitt. Blacks in Fort Myers had to steer a similar course to that documented by Hewitt between the “accommodationist” approach of Booker T. Washington and the more legally combative approach that DuBois and the NAACP adopted after the First World War. Women

20 W.E.B. DuBois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *Atlantic Monthly* 80, no. 478 (August 1897): 194; W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 2; Jonathan Harrison, “Double Consciousness in Lee Daniels’ *The Butler*,” *Sociological Images*, Sep 14, 2013, [www.thesocietypages.org/socimages/2013/09/14/double-consciousness-in-lee-daniels-the-butler/](http://www.thesocietypages.org/socimages/2013/09/14/double-consciousness-in-lee-daniels-the-butler/) (accessed August 11, 2015).



played a central role in working out a path through this dilemma by participating in such organizations as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which had racially segregated branches in Tampa and Fort Myers. Whilst the WCTU exemplified the racial tension between black and white female aims, it empowered its African American members because they had common cause with white women on moral issues such as alcohol abuse, domestic violence, sexual trafficking, the age of consent, and the vote. This led to activities in Fort Myers such as a revival meeting of the Hepzibah Rescue Mission, which campaigned for raising the age of consent and for the rescue of young girls from sexual trafficking.<sup>21</sup> Such activism remained a factor during the Jim Crow era, and created a platform from which black female teachers played key roles in the fight for desegregation in 1954-1971.<sup>22</sup>

Black female activism via the church in the South can be traced back to the immediate post-emancipation period of 1865-1866, as Elsa Barkely Brown has done in the case of the First African Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>23</sup> Barkley Brown argues that the activism that emerged after 1880 was a revival of those earlier processes. This raises the possibility that some of the women who came to Fort Myers after 1885 had a cultural memory of resistance from two decades earlier.

Recent theoretical approaches to such resistance have adapted the idea of the "subaltern counterpublic," derived by Nancy Fraser from the work of Jürgen Habermas.<sup>24</sup> Robert Cassanello argues that a "Black counterpublic" was formed in Jacksonville around the Baptist church to resist the exclusion of African Americans from public spaces. Cassanello examines how this overlapped ambivalently with the counterpublics of labor and women. He then combines this with Ralph Ellison's concept of black invisibility.<sup>25</sup> The resultant

21 Nancy A. Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida 1880s-1920s* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 185.

22 Adam Christopher Molloy, "Black Agency: The African-American Fight to Integrate the Lee County, Florida, Public School System, 1954-1965" (MA Thesis, Florida Gulf Coast University, 2011).

23 Elsa Barkely Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, eds. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 28-66.

24 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1993), 109-142.

25 Cassanello, *To Render Invisible*, 1-5.

pattern is one in which the black counterpublic was continuously negotiating a space within the labor and gender struggle from which some gains, albeit very limited, could be achieved for African Americans as part of the extension of the franchise and labor rights, even though white women and laborers initially gained far more from these changes than did their black counterparts.

### **The Economic Opportunities of African Americans in Fort Myers before 1900**

Fort Myers was initially a promising area for African Americans after 1865, relative to other parts of the South. The smallness and intimacy of the town created racial interdependence and thus, in public spaces, moderated the level of overt racism in that initial period. There is evidence that, in the 1880s and 1890s, businesses operated by blacks were sometimes frequented by whites and praised in the local press. In addition, homesteads were acquired by some individuals, notably Nelson Tillis, the first African American to raise a family in Fort Myers, and his son-in-law, Wilson McCorpen. These homesteads enabled a core community to develop that could foster civic pride in the face of an ideology of white supremacy.

Nelson Tillis was a freed slave who had been born on the plantation of Willoughby Tillis in Fort Meade around 1844, and had lived in Key West during the Civil War before coming to Fort Myers by sea to look for land on which to settle.<sup>26</sup> He was perhaps assisted in his quest by having a good prior relationship with his co-travellers, the Danish captain Peter Nelson and the white southerners John Powell and W.S. Clay.<sup>27</sup> In 1869, he married a white woman named Ellen Summerall in a ceremony in Port Charlotte conducted by Nathan H. DeCoster, a former white officer of the colored infantry (Second U.S.C.I.), again suggesting that Tillis had some contacts from the 1860s that facilitated his transition to life in Fort Myers.<sup>28</sup> In 1872, he began to farm a homestead containing 111.32 acres

26 1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules [database on-line] Ancestry.com, <http://tinyurl.com/ob7utj6> (accessed August 4, 2012); Janet Snyder Matthews, "The African American Experience in Southwest Florida and the Origins of Dunbar High School in Fort Myers, 1841-1927" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1999), 129-132.

27 Their arrival was recounted in the *Fort Myers Press* on July 5, 1890. They were probably only the second group to arrive in the deserted fort following the Civil War, the first having been headed by Manuel A. Gonzales in 1866.

28 Matthews, "The African American Experience," 115.

on which he raised a family that eventually included eleven children, but his patent was not officially recognized until 1890, after Tillis had re-filed it; his original application had been mislaid, perhaps intentionally, by the authorities. Tillis was given Homestead Certificate 3184, attached to Application 1001, which stated that it was "pursuant to the Act of Congress approved 20th May, 1862, to secure Homesteads to actual settlers on the public domain, and the acts supplemental thereto."<sup>29</sup> Tillis's submission showed that the means of production which he owned included "planes, hoes, axes and all necessary farming implements," plus various farm animals.<sup>30</sup> McCorpin (sometimes spelled McCorpen or McCarpin) was born in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1863 and died in Fort Myers in 1915.<sup>31</sup> He was a farmer by occupation and his homestead covered 159.95 acres.<sup>32</sup> His activities attracted white newspaper coverage. In 1894, for example, the *Fort Myers Press* reported that "J.W. McCorpin has established a neat little stand on the upper wharf where he dispenses ice cream and cool drinks."<sup>33</sup> In 1898, the newspaper noted the death of his infant son, "Little Joe."<sup>34</sup> He also did ad-hoc work for the Lee County board: for example, he received 50 cents in 1901 for "moving a dead cow."<sup>35</sup> He was the only African American known to have received travel costs during this period from the school board for sending his children to the "colored school," his farm being located four miles away from the school.<sup>36</sup>

African Americans also enjoyed some success as restaurant owners and traders. In 1891, for example, the *Press* carried a news item referring to an advertisement in the same issue for the entrepreneurial African American Pink White's takeover of the "No. 1"

29 General Land Office Records, Accession Nr. FL0810\_\_010, 8.5.1890. Ancestry.com. *U.S. General Land Office Records, 1796-1907* [database on-line], <http://tinyurl.com/oc5ra6a> (accessed June 17th, 2015); U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, <http://tinyurl.com/ob8wzxy> (accessed June 15th, 2015).

30 Matthews, "The African American Experience," 129-132.

31 John Wilson Mccarpin," Florida, Deaths, 1877-1939," index, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/FPHJ-PXX> (accessed August 6, 1912).

32 General Land Office Records, Accession Nr. 171184, 1.16.1911. U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, <http://tinyurl.com/q8bfk68> (accessed June 15th, 2015).

33 *Fort Myers Press*, August 30, 1894.

34 *Ibid.*, January 6, 1898.

35 *Ibid.*, November 7, 1901.

36 Matthews, "The African American Experience," 182-183.

Restaurant. The article is particularly notable for the fact that a southern newspaper referred to a black man as "Mr.":

As will be seen from the advertisement, Mr. Pink White has taken charge of the "No.1" restaurant. Pink is one of our best colored men and possessed of good business qualifications and he will personally attend to the needs of the guests.<sup>37</sup>

White's profile was raised further in 1894 when he became "supervisor of Myers Public School (Colored)."<sup>38</sup> He received \$10 a month rent from the school board for use of the Methodist church as a schoolhouse.<sup>39</sup>

In 1897, the *Press* advised its readers that "Randall Mitchell, a colored man, will conduct a laundry in Fort Myers, and put up laundry work in first-class style. Leave orders in the old *Tropical News* building."<sup>40</sup> This converges with Hewitt's analysis of how laundry work provided a source of autonomy for African Americans in Tampa; men and women could retain control over their labor by doing the laundry work on their own premises, thereby resisting the proletarianization process occurring elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

### Depictions of African Americans in the Fort Myers Press

References from the *Fort Myers Press* suggest that the economic roles of these relatively successful African Americans had positive effects on the development of interactions between whites and African Americans between 1885 and 1900, but that these interactions deteriorated into a more hostile form thereafter. Up to 1900, when the newspaper assumed that an African American was personally known to its readership, it often referred to the person in one of two ways. The first was to use descriptions that did not refer to the 'race' of the subject at all. The second way was to use the term 'colored' as an adjective, either on its own (as in "Mr. and Mrs. Geo. W. Barker, colored") or before nouns such as 'citizen' or 'person.'<sup>42</sup> Although 'colored' was considered an offensive racial term in the USA after the 1960s, whites in the 1890s believed they were being

37 *Fort Myers Press*, October 1, 1891.

38 Matthews, "The African American Experience," 163.

39 *Fort Myers Press*, February 11, 1897.

40 *Ibid.*, August 7, 1897.

41 Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, 50.

42 *Fort Myers Press*, October 14, 1897.

neutral or even generous when using the term, which was also sometimes used by blacks themselves, such as in the name of the organization National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909. Its use by African Americans in Fort Myers can be documented in the example of when Reverend J.D. Bellamy invited “all the friends, both white and colored, to attend the meeting at the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church” to be held on January 10, 1898.<sup>43</sup>

Examples in which race was absent include an article in 1894 which noted the return of Welcome Baker, stating he was a “good worker” and “generally liked by our people.”<sup>44</sup> In 1896, it was reported that “R.J. Shepherd and Pink White” had put out a fire at “Taff O. Langford’s dwelling.” No reference was made to either man’s color.<sup>45</sup> Another story reported the health of Aaron Henderson, a black deliveryman for white businessman R.A. Henderson.<sup>46</sup> Aaron’s mother had been a slave of R.A. Henderson’s parents.<sup>47</sup> Nelson Tillis was not always referred to by his color. In 1894, for example, the *Press* reported that “Last Friday we saw a rutabaga, raised by Nelse Tillis, on his place across the river, which weighed twenty pounds and a quarter.”<sup>48</sup> No reference was made to his color in a report listing Tillis as a member of the special police employed for one day on the date of the town election, when he was paid \$1.50, the same rate as the white police and inspectors.<sup>49</sup>

The paper would accord respectability to blacks who were seen as possessing the appropriate manners, such as when the *Press* gave the correct marital titles to “Miss Virginia Cooper” and “Mrs. Laura Barker” [a daughter of Nelson Tillis].<sup>50</sup> The *Press* was also dignified in its reporting of black educational efforts up to 1900. It reported in 1885 that “J. Wesley Roberts is teaching a colored school on the north side of the river.”<sup>51</sup> The school board minutes of October 10, 1887 stated that “The colored patrons were granted a school north of Caloosa River and West of Handcock Creek.”<sup>52</sup> On May 7,

43 Ibid., January 6, 1898.

44 Ibid., January 25, 1894.

45 Ibid., March 5, 1896.

46 Ibid., October 5, 1893.

47 Gerri Reaves, *Legendary Locals of Fort Myers* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2012), 23.

48 *Fort Myers Press*, April 19, 1894.

49 Ibid., September 27, 1894.

50 Ibid., October 29, 1896.

51 Matthews, “The African American Experience,” 136.

52 Ibid., 141.

1891, the *Press* praised “the pupils of the colored school” for their “recitations, dialogue and singing” of a “very pure character.”<sup>53</sup>

The term “colored” was used for single blacks and for small groups. The *Press* sometimes referred to African Americans collectively as “colored citizens,” such as when “Our colored citizens, young and old, enjoyed a picnic excursion Tuesday to some point up the river on the *Athens*.”<sup>54</sup> It is notable, however, that the possessive pronoun “our” often appeared before such usages, indicating that the “colored people” were under the guardianship of the whites, such as in this report concerning the Christmas festivities of 1893:

Our colored people had a Christmas tree in their church Christmas night, and had an enjoyable time. Many good and durable presents were dispensed to old and young. Among others we heard of who were made happy by the occasion was Prof. Miller, the teacher of the colored school. His was a baby’s cap.<sup>55</sup>

There is also evidence that violence against African Americans was sometimes frowned upon if the black person was employed by a white person, especially if the perpetrator of the violence was of lower social rank than the employer of the African American victim. This can be illustrated by the reporting of an incident that occurred in 1900, when Dr. W.B. Winkler, a recent settler from Tennessee, shot and killed cowboy “Lump” Alford in an altercation caused by his belief that Alford and his friends were whipping “a colored man employed by the doctor.” The *Press* sympathized with the doctor, even though he had killed a white man in defence of a black man. It must therefore have believed that Winkler’s action was within his permitted code of honor, although it also begs the question as to whether Winkler was simply acting to protect a man whom he regarded as his personal property.

However, there was a category of African Americans at this time that could be characterized as anti-social by the *Press*. When Prince Robinson was shot and killed in 1892, the report stated that “While we denounce the manner of his taking off in the severest terms, such men as he sooner or later meet with a violent death.”<sup>56</sup>

53 Ibid., 151.

54 *Fort Myers Press*, May 24, 1894.

55 Ibid., January 5, 1894. It is unclear whether the term ‘professor’ was a customary title or a professional one.

56 Ibid., October 20, 1892.

Moreover, there was a limit to how high the newspaper was prepared to allow "colored" men to rise. In 1890, it protested against the appointment of a black preacher as postmaster in Punta Gorda: "this administration is making a great mistake in putting colored men in office in the South."<sup>57</sup> There was also a ceiling on the concessions that Pink White and others could receive from the authorities. White's church had held services in the court-room in 1894 but when White applied for permission for it to do the same in 1898, this request was refused:

Pink White appeared before the board, asking, in behalf of the colored Baptists, permission to use the court-room for the period of one year, as a place of public worship, and after due consideration, for various reasons, the Board declined to grant his request.<sup>58</sup>

Consequently, depictions of African Americans in the 1880s and 1890s involved a mixture of conditional acceptance, condescension and moral judgement in which blacks could be viewed as subsocial or anti-social in certain contexts. However, after the mid-1890s the balance between relatively positive and highly negative language used by the *Press* noticeably began to change, with an increasing use of the more offensive epithets "negro," "darkey," and "coon." This may be partially because the new editor, Philip Isaac, was inclined to take a more typical Deep South view on race than his predecessors, but another factor may simply be that the readership was changing as newcomers arrived from other parts of the South. Moreover, the state and national context had changed: Jim Crow was becoming institutionalized by state law and accepted by the Supreme Court. The arrival of rail in 1904 integrated Fort Myers more closely with the rest of the state, and led to large-scale migration of whites and blacks into the town from areas where segregation and violence had been the norm.

Interpreting the changing depictions of race in the *Press* requires a subtle understanding of the language of the period. The term 'negro' created and signalled greater social distance between whites and blacks than 'colored' had done. It was a preferred term for blacks who were assumed to have broken social norms, most notably in the case of the two teenagers who were lynched on May 25 and 26, 1924, events described in more detail below. By

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., April 17, 1890.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., July 26, 1894; January 6, 1898.

the 1920s, 'negro' was becoming the preferred term in almost all descriptions of blacks, because it could convey a pejorative meaning behind the mask of scientific racism, given that "negroid" had become an accepted term of racial classification in the literature of the period. However, "negro" was not used as regularly as "colored" by the *Press* prior to 1898, although there were some uses, such as a reference to "negro schoolhouses in Key West" as early as 1885.<sup>59</sup>

The term "darkey" was intended to be patronizing; however, unlike in some later usages elsewhere, it did not always have the same vicious intent as "nigger." In 1901, John Williams and Sarah Baylor, the mother of Ella Piper, were referred to as a "good, old-fashioned darkies" on the occasion of their marriage.<sup>60</sup> This usage suggested that whites had a fondness for blacks whose characters they could trivialize via stereotypes, creating a comedic effect, such as in the report that "A coffee colored darkey whose euphaneous cognomon is Willis Woods was arrested Xmas Day for boisterous conduct on our streets." Woods allegedly set a fire in his prison cell whereupon "the darkey was put in the county jail for safe keeping."<sup>61</sup>

The paper used arrests of blacks as an excuse to place "darkey" and "coon" into news headlines. The word "coon" was reserved for contempt, but could also be used in the context of musical burlesque, as in the ubiquity of "coon minstrels" across the South. The most notable use as a headline by the *Press* was "Got the Coon!" in the case of an arrest for theft.<sup>62</sup>

However, there was a noticeable taboo concerning the term, "nigger." In the material unearthed for this study, the term never appeared in an editorial comment or in any quotes attributed to white adults. There was, however, one isolated occasion when the word was placed in a direct quote attributed to a person in a story. An anecdotal story was written by one of the newspaper's editors about a trip taken by fellow editor Philip Isaacs (a future Justice of the Peace) with Captain J.F. Menge on the steamer *Grey Eagle* in December 1897. The fact that the story was published on Christmas Eve, a date when normal barriers of behaviour were often relaxed, may have encouraged Isaacs and his co-editors to overlook their normal omission of "nigger" from the paper. The anecdote is

59 Ibid., October 31, 1885.

60 Ibid., July 4, 1901.

61 Ibid., December 31, 1896.

62 Ibid., April 16, 1908.



quoted at length here in order to indicate how DuBois' concept of "amused contempt" could be manifested in the folk tales and anecdotes that Florida newspapers published in this period:

We tied up for the Mace & Brake grove for the night and here it was we put up a job on our negro fireman. We had been telling him all the way up how the people had an intense dislike for colored men on the creek, and to make him feel comfortable and easy we would ask Capt. Fred [Menge] what had become of such a negro that had been wounded there previously. By the time night approached we had him so he would jump every time a night-hawk 'hollered' and about 10:30 the ball opened. One of the boys took a good supply of blank cartridges and slipped out across the stream and concealed himself in the bushes on the other side from that on which the boat lay. Capt. Fred called to the darkey to bring the lantern aft to him and when the poor ebony hued son of a Senegambian got there the man on the shore "pulled down" on him with both barrels. The darkey "hollered" and run and laid down behind the boiler and Capt. Menge and Bro. Isaacs grabbed their little guns, and for a few minutes a fusillade that would have caused the Cubans to turn green with envy was carried on. We'll bet the good people of Orange river turned over in their beds and thought Spain had declared war. One of the boys took his knife and jabbed himself three of four times in the breast, and then all went aboard and showed the blood to the trembling darkey and told what brave deeds they had done for his sake. That did settle it. That darkey crawled in behind the boiler and the wealth of the Incas would not have persuaded him to come out. He said if "de good Lawd ever let dis nigger back to Alabam' he done stay dar, dese people done bin oncibilized."<sup>63</sup>

The passage is telling in several ways. It slides from "negro" to "darkey" to "nigger" by placing the latter in the mouth of the victim of the prank. It parodies black speech in the "coon" tradition of the time, concluding with the unlikely scenario of the victim pronouncing "uncivilized" as "oncibilized." It is also ironic in context because Menge's brother, Connie, had given a "festival" to 'colored

63 Ibid., December 24, 1897

people' at his new store earlier that year.<sup>64</sup> Either one brother was more racist than the other or each brother was able to switch between different personas depending on his audience.

The *Press* also put the word "nigger" into the mouth of a five-year-old child. When a "black brute" allegedly invaded the house of N.G. Stout with intent to rape, the *Press* stated that his race was identified by "baby Olive, 5½ years old", who said he was a "nigger."<sup>65</sup>

In 1897, an article on the black residents of Nassau, in the Bahamas, had noted that "The first thing that impresses even a careless observer is the cleanliness of the town. This may perhaps appear surprising to persons acquainted with the manners of colored people in the United States." The paper deduced that this must be due to "the methods practiced by the English officials in charge." The writer was therefore implying that blacks were anti-social in matters of hygiene, cleanliness, and community upkeep.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Declining Economic and Residential Status of African Americans after 1900**

This shift to predominantly anti-social depictions of blacks reflected a decline of their economic status and the growth of residential segregation. One factor in the decline of black fortunes was the fact that the Homestead Act's success was short-lived in this region, as elsewhere in Florida. Only 8.9% of the homesteads that were registered in Florida between 1869 and 1873 eventually achieved certification.<sup>67</sup> One possible aggravating factor was the tendency of Hamilton Disston's land companies to exert political influence on the Land Office, which resulted in complaints in January 1889 from John Powell and Ruban Corbitt that they had been forced to resubmit proof of their homesteads due to pressures from Disston's agents.<sup>68</sup> The odds were stacked against homesteaders of all skin colors, but they affected blacks more acutely because the new industrialists required cheap black labor, so blacks deprived of land opportunities were driven into hyper-exploitative labor roles, which in Fort Myers included lumber work, truck farm labor, janitorial work and street work.

64 *Ibid.*, September 17, 1896.

65 *Ibid.*, February 24, 1910.

66 *Ibid.*, February 4, 1897.

67 Brown, "African-American Property Owners," 48.

68 *Fort Myers Press*, January 24, 1896.

The decline in black male economic and social status can be seen in the fortunes of Nelson Tillis and Pink White in the 1910 census, where Tillis was recorded as a laborer in a sawmill and White was a housekeeper for C.J. Stubbs.<sup>69</sup> It was also marked by the growth of segregation, with blacks confined to an area (Safety Hill), which was immediately east of the railway line that opened in 1904. The locality had originally been part of the homestead of James Evans, who had platted it as two connected subdivisions. Prior to 1900, land sales to blacks were mainly in areas outside these Evans subdivisions, and were west of the future railway line, indicating that segregation had not yet begun, but new deeds began to become concentrated on Evans' land in significant numbers following his death in 1901, which was just three years prior to the railroad's arrival. George Barker purchased Plot 14 in Block 4 in 1900; Welcome Baker purchased five plots in Block 6 in 1903; Pauldo Sutton also moved over in 1903; Solomon Louden moved into the area in 1905 and Bosen Hargrett in 1906.<sup>70</sup>

Later movement into Safety Hill by blacks can also be documented between 1915 and 1925 by comparing the City Directories. Examples include Joseph Brigham (who moved from Hough to Larmie), Evans H. Brown (also Hough to Larmie), John N. Cheney (Heitman to Washington), Eli Tillis (Cleveland to Price), Marion Tillis (Victoria to Anderson), and James Steele (Heitman to Orange).<sup>71</sup>

The movement of Eli and Marion Tillis was particularly significant, as they were the eldest sons of Nelson Tillis, having been born between 1869 and 1875, and had worked on the same land as their father. The Tillis families had moved to the south side of the river in the 1890s, apparently becoming neighbors of the Edisons, before moving again in the early 1900s to an area known as Pinetucky, which enjoyed relative prosperity. The subsequent movement of the Tillis families into the segregated and tightly policed Safety

69 Year: 1910; Census Place: Fort Myers, Lee, Florida; Roll: T624\_163; Page: 21B; Enumeration District: 0079; FHL microfilm: 1374176 Ancestry.com, <http://tinyurl.com/q2otmym> (accessed August 4, 2012).

70 *Lee County Deed Book 10* (June 12, 1900), 135; 15 (April 25, 1903), 183; 15 (September 28, 1903), 290; 19 (November 11, 1905), 265; 21 (September 24, 1906), 208. Lee County Clerk of Courts Official Records <http://apps.leeclerk.org/OR/Search.aspx> (accessed June 10, 2015).

71 Year 1910: Census Place: Fort Myers, Lee, Florida; Roll: T624\_163; Page: 21BZ; Enumeration District: 0079; FHL microfilm: 1274176; Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989*, <http://tinyurl.com/q20tmy> (accessed August 4, 2012).

Hill therefore indicates a calamitous loss of status for the families, which had been the town's pioneering African American group.<sup>72</sup>

The hypothesis that racism caused this segregation can be supported by the subsequent growth of restrictive covenants on the grounds of race, which are documented in Lee County records from 1925 to 1941. Such covenants were, for example, a feature of a large number of deeds granted by Bartleson Huff Realty Co. between January 13, 1925 and August 3, 1927.<sup>73</sup> In 1926, the New Homes Development Corporation issued restrictions for the Edison Park subdivision which stated that "This subdivision is reserved for the White race and no deed shall be made or any ownership recognized to any person or persons of the Black, Yellow or Brown races." On February 7, 1925, restrictions for Altadena stated that "No part of property shall ever be sold, rented or otherwise disposed of to any person of African, Cuban, Mongolian or other brown, black or yellow race of people of any degree of consanguinity." The Tamiami Courts subdivision meanwhile had the restriction that "Lots can only be sold to persons of Caucasian Race." Similar restrictions were applied to Fairfield Terrace in 1926, Edison Manor in 1940, and in 1941 to Gulf Island Manor, Allen Park and Crescent Beach (the latter by the Fort Myers Beach Development Company).<sup>74</sup>

Although all the above covenants date from after the formation of Safety Hill, they indicate legal acceptance by the county of exclusion from parts of the city on grounds of race. Such exclusionary pressures are likely to have formed earlier than 1925, given that public schools in the city had always been segregated and that Safety Hill had been developing since the turn of the century.

Segregation also occurred in other public places. In 1915, an announcement by theater operator K.A. Bryant stated that:

After turning the balcony of the court theater over to the colored people and allowing them the privilege of occupying same for a little over a week, I find that it is injuring

<sup>72</sup> Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989* (accessed June 10, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> *Lee County Deed Book 76* (January 13, 1925), 197; *111* (August 3, 1927), 79. Lee County Clerk of Courts Official Records, <http://apps.leeclerk.org/OR/Search.aspx> (accessed June 10, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> *Lee County Misc Book 12* (March 16, 1926), 510; *8* (February 7, 1925), 494; *10* (August 22, 1925), 522; *13* (May 24, 1926), 208; *19* (March 27, 1940), 233; *19* (January 13, 1941), 351; *19* (April 3, 1941), 490; *20* (November 13, 1941), 30. Lee County Clerk of Courts Official Records Search, <http://apps.leeclerk.org/OR/Search.aspx> (accessed June 16, 2015).

my business to such an extent that it is impossible to continue allowing them this liberty. While the colored people that have been patronizing deserve to be complimented on their good conduct, there is not enough of them coming to recompense me for the loss in white people that are against allowing them the balcony.<sup>75</sup>

This announcement shows that even a segregated seat in a theater was a “privilege” that could be withdrawn from blacks if enough whites boycotted the theater. In the same announcement, Bryant also admitted that this was not a reflection of the behaviour of the blacks, who conducted themselves better than the “noisy and ill-mannered crowd of boys” from the white community that had occupied the balcony previously. Revealingly, Bryant acknowledged that he had to “please not only the home people but visitors as well,” so the racist pressures seem to have been coming from seasonal visitors as well as the year-round residents.<sup>76</sup>

### African-American Responses to Jim Crow in Fort Myers

By the 1910s, Jim Crow was firmly in place in Fort Myers. For example, whites expected blacks to partially fund their own public schooling, such as when the Board of Education asked the blacks to “defray one half of the expense” of installing electricity at Williams Academy in 1916. As Matthews noted, this requirement that blacks self-fund and self-administer their education was part of the separate but (un)equal double standard that had intensified across Florida, as elsewhere, since *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.<sup>77</sup>

African Americans had a long tradition of building communal strength through their churches, which enabled them to construct networks of information and community support, and maintain civic pride in the face of dehumanizing treatment. Such religious networks were crucial in helping the black community cope with segregation. By 1915, black churches in Fort Myers included the St John Missionary Baptist (802 Evans), the Friendship Missionary Baptist (106 Orange), the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) (102 Lime) and the Mt Olive African Methodist Episcopal [AME] (349 Hough) Churches. These institutions took responsibility for educating their parishioners’ children by working with the Lee

<sup>75</sup> *Fort Myers Press*, January 26, 1915.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Matthews, “The African American Experience,” 203.

County Board for Public Instruction, effectively as subordinate partners. For example, Pink White received \$10 a month from the Board on behalf of the Baptists in 1897.<sup>78</sup> In 1904, White arranged for the St John Missionary Baptist Church to sell its land to the LCBPI for \$50.00.<sup>79</sup> In 1900, the CME pastor, J.D. Bellamy, had written to the *Press* on behalf of the Committee to appeal for funding to fix up the schoolhouse in the church.<sup>80</sup> The CME members were trustees of the colored school that year.<sup>81</sup>

Black women also played key roles in this period. Whilst the men were organizing through the Colored Knights of Pythias,<sup>82</sup> the women had a colored branch of the WCTU, which advocated female suffrage, reductions in poverty and the prohibition of alcohol. A meeting of the WCTU chaired by Melissa Jones in 1910 included papers entitled "A Second Emancipation" and "Why Federal Relief is Sought."<sup>83</sup> Jones is a fascinating example of a black female activist in this period who passed on her political commitment to her daughters. A devout member of the AME. Church, she sent three of her nine daughters to the Emerson Memorial School in Ocala, and another daughter to study music at Boylan Home School in Jacksonville. A fifth daughter was president of the Epworth League, and her eldest daughter, Luna Price Jones, was a missionary in Liberia, Africa.<sup>84</sup> However, the opportunities Melissa Jones gave her daughters also indicate a drain of black talent away from Fort Myers, as only one daughter was living in Fort Myers when Melissa died in 1943 at the age of 92.<sup>85</sup>

Jones and her colleagues probably assisted black males in resisting disfranchisement in this period. No woman of any color

78 *Fort Myers Press*, February 11, 1897.

79 *Lee County Deed Book* 18, 217. Lee County Clerk of Courts Official Records Search, <http://apps.leeclerk.org/OR/Search.aspx> (accessed June 10, 2015).

80 Donald O. Stone and Beth W. Carter, *First 100 Years; Lee County Public Schools 1887-1987* (Fort Myers, FL: School Board of Lee County, 1987), 43.

81 Matthews, "The African American Experience," 174.

82 A secret organization offering mutual aid, but also intending to "destroy caste and color prejudices" in its pledge cited by Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 116. It was first listed in Polk's Fort Myers City Directory in 1927 as "Knights of Pythias Hall" at 132 Lemon Street. On its wider significance, see Ortiz, 116-118.

83 *Fort Myers Press*, June 30, 1910.

84 *Ibid.*, February 28, 1907.

85 *Fort Myers News-Press*, October 24, 1943. The article stated she had lived in Fort Myers for 42 years. Clara Jones had married John Session and was known as Clara S. Session; cf. R.L. Polk's Fort Myers City Directory, 1954.

could vote at this time, but the activism of the WCTU suggests that women were working behind the scenes to ensure their men registered. The voter registration records of Fort Myers and Lee County show the number of registered “colored” voters as follows: 13 in 1895, 25 in 1897, 26 in 1898, 34 in 1899, 40 in 1901, and 58 in 1904.<sup>86</sup> There were 45 black male heads of household in the county in the 1900 census, so it would seem that there was a successful registration drive targeting black adult males.<sup>87</sup> As was noted above, Lee County had the highest rate of African American male adult literacy in Florida in 1910, therefore attempts to use literacy tests to restrict voting would have been less effective had they been attempted.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, in 1904 the names Anderson Brown, J.H. Edwards, Bosen Hargrett, J.W. McCorpin, Austin Payne, C.F. Price, Eli Tillis and Pink White were restored to the electoral register, having previously been “illegally stricken from the registration books.”<sup>89</sup> This would presumably have required some organization on behalf of those names.

However, this vote was rendered powerless by the fact that only whites could vote in Florida primaries for the Democratic Party, which had a monopoly of power in the state. The Republican Party did not contest elections in Lee County at this time; the first ever opposition to the Democrats came from the Socialist Party in 1904.<sup>90</sup>

The year 1904 also provides evidence of activism towards economic self-organization of the type favored by Booker T. Washington. Evans H. Brown addressed a meeting aimed at setting up a joint stock company for blacks in Lee County. The *Press* began its report of this event with the derisory and insulting sentence “Ha ha ha!”<sup>91</sup> This is significant in indicating that black ‘self-improvement’ was now disdained or disbelieved by the editor of the *Press*, whereas

86 Lee County Genealogical Society, *Voter Registration Records: Town of Fort Myers and Lee County, Florida* (Fort Myers: Lee County Genealogical Society, Inc., 2010), 10-11, 20-22, 39-40, 50-51, 56-58, 68-70, <http://www.leecountygenealogy.org/cpage.php?pt+63> (accessed August 15, 2105).

87 Year: 1900; Census Place: *Fort Myers, Lee, Florida*; Roll: 172; Page: 3A; Enumeration District: 0077; FHL microfilm: 1240172Ancestry.com, <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=7602> (accessed August 4, 2012).

88 “County-Level Results.”

89 Lee County Genealogical Society, *Voter Registration Records*, 67.

90 Regulations for the Democrat primary, stipulating a whites-only voting rule, were published in the *Fort Myers Press* regularly in the early months of 1904. The Socialist Party’s challenge was mentioned in the paper throughout the Fall of that year.

91 *Fort Myers Press*, October 6, 1904.

reports before 1900 had indicated some willingness to applaud black "success" in business or community life.

Signs of black resistance were also counterbalanced by moments when letters from a black person appeared in the *Press* that expressed compliance with racist doctrine. In 1906, Reverend Marcellus D. Potter, who was also a teacher, had a long letter published including the phrases "We regard the white as the dominant race" and "We feel our dependency."<sup>92</sup> Potter, who subsequently moved to Tampa and founded a black newspaper, was taking the "accommodationist" approach favored by Booker T. Washington nationally, and which was also a feature of Tampa politics at this time (Washington visited Tampa in 1912).<sup>93</sup> This surfaced again in 1911 when eighteen blacks in Fort Myers submitted a statement expressing the view that "the lawless element of our race are doing too badly against the well being of our city."<sup>94</sup>

#### Law Enforcement and the Lynching of 1924

As Shofner's research, noted above, has highlighted, law enforcement norms concerning racial groups in Florida owed much to the 1865-1866 "black codes" and to the ways in which extralegal violence was used to quash Reconstruction in the 1870s. The legal parameters of race ensured that alleged violence by blacks would be punished far more severely than any violence by whites, and that this violence could be extralegal without any censure from the press or prosecution by the courts. In 1896, for example, the *Press* reported the likely fate of a "negro" who had allegedly attacked a young man in Marco with an axe, noting that "Our people are greatly excited over the affair and should the negro meet his just deserts, it would be a good thing and save the county a big expense." This report can be coupled with one from the same month stating that "Austin Williams, colored" was given "20 years hard labor in the penitentiary" for "assault with the intent to kill" whilst John Lock was given only a "fine of \$25 and costs" despite carving "a complete map of the Cuban war" on the "physiognomy" of his victim with his "razzer."<sup>95</sup> Florida was thus operating a combination of extralegal killing (lynching) and legal racism in sentencing, which also had the effect of providing unpaid black

92 Ibid., October 18, 1906.

93 Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, 160-165.

94 *Fort Myers Press*, July 6, 1911.

95 *Fort Myers Press*, November 5 and November 19, 1896.



labor to the state, although it is unclear from the sources whether this was connected to convict-leasing.

An article in 1914 stated that the mayor and police were sweeping Safety Hill for “a rounding up” of “wrong-doers” and that “in consequence nearly half of Safety Hill was in court, either in the capacity of defendants, witnesses or sympathizing friends.”<sup>96</sup> Such a large volume of arrests indicates a targeting of the area by police on racial grounds.

The lynching of 1924 reflects both a demonization of black males as perpetually violent and a deep paranoia concerning their sexual desires for white girls and women. These twin ideologies were so deep-rooted in the white psyche that lynching was often a latent threat in any Florida town in the period 1885-1930. No matter how kindly middle-class blacks were being treated, there were sexual norms applied to perceived interactions between blacks and whites that could be enforced with extralegal violence if they were believed to have been breached. These norms have been traced to the antebellum period by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, whose work claims that lynching was an extreme manifestation of medieval rituals of charivari, combined with the importance attached to white family honor, in which blacks were perceived to be threatening.<sup>97</sup> Such norms and mentalities were likely to have been reinforced by white migration into Fort Myers from states such as Georgia and the Carolinas as well as from northern and central Florida. For example, they were present in the views of Mary Burrell and Governor Sidney J. Catts cited above. However, the likelihood that these norms would lead to lynching depended also on the relative political power of the federal government and judiciary to influence southern states. Lynching declined when the Deep South could not isolate itself economically and politically from the national taboo on extralegal killing.<sup>98</sup>

These normative parameters influenced how the authorities dealt with the lynching of two black teenagers, aged just 16 and 14, in Fort Myers on May 25 and 26, 1924.<sup>99</sup> The two boys, Milton Williams and R.J. Johnson, were assumed to be guilty of assaulting two

96 Ibid., May 28, 1914.

97 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 187-213.

98 Walter Howard, *Lynchings: Extralegal Violence in Florida during the 1930s* (Lincoln, NE: Authors Choice Press, 1995), 133-144.

99 “Florida, Deaths, 1877-1939,” *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/FP93-HYL> (accessed August 6, 2012).

young "school girls," although no details of the assault or the ages of the victims were given. Johnson was captured by the lynch mob when it supposedly "over-powered" the sheriff, J.E. Albritton, who was holding him in the jail. Williams was found hiding in a rail car. The delay in finding Williams meant that the two boys were identified and lynched separately over the course of two days.<sup>100</sup>

The nature of the lynching suggests that the purpose was partly one of spectacle. The bodies of the victims were "riddled with bullets and dragged through the streets to the Safety Hill section."<sup>101</sup> This latter fact indicates the collusion of the authorities, given the unlikelihood that a mob could drag two bodies over considerable distances on public streets without police intervention. Both bodies were hanged.<sup>102</sup> The locations of the hangings were identified by witness Mary Primus Ware in an article published in the *News-Press* in 1976. Johnson was hung from a tree "where the [Dunbar] Recreation Center swimming pool is now"; Williams was shot at the same site and his body was then "dragged behind a truck full of celebratin' white people" up Cranford Avenue to the business district known as The Bottom, where it was hung outside a store.<sup>103</sup>

The County Judge, coroner ex-officio N.G. Stout, swore in six jurors on the same morning as the lynching: C.J. Stubbs, C.C. Pursley, Vernon Widerquist, Alvin Gorton, W.W. White and Thomas J. Evans. They reached a decision that the two youths met their deaths "By the hands of parties unknown, and we herewith wish to commend the Sheriff and his entire force for the earnest efforts made by them in their attempt to carry out the duties of their office."

The coroner was the same man whose five-year-old daughter had used the word "nigger" in 1910.<sup>104</sup> The jurors were all white and had steady careers. For example, Widerquist was the President of the Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce; Stubbs was a real estate broker from South Carolina who was a partner in Bartleson Huff Realty Co., which granted the restrictive covenant deeds discussed above, and who had once employed Pink White as a housekeeper; Pursley was a cashier at the First National Bank; Thomas J. Evans

100 Steve Dougherty, "Terror of a Sunday," *Fort Myers News-Press*, April 25, 1976, 1D, 5D and 6D.

101 *Fort Myers Press*, May 26, 1924. Johnson was misidentified as "Bubbers Wilson" in all contemporary accounts; a fact which stemmed from the inquest jurors' verdict printed in the *Press*.

102 *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1924, 4. This fact was omitted by the *Press*.

103 Dougherty, "Terror of a Sunday."

104 *Fort Myers Press*, February 24, 1910.

was an agent for Standard Oil; Gorton was a county commissioner in two spells between 1929 and 1958.

The lynching of Williams and Johnson was defended by the *Press* with the headline, "Negroes pay penalty for horrible crime committed yesterday." The paper simply assumed that the boys had been guilty, despite supplying no evidence, and its headline clearly implied that the lynching was a fair "penalty."<sup>105</sup>

There is evidence that threats of lynching had earlier been used in Fort Myers to pressure circuit judges into speeding up cases. On October 6, 1911, the *Tampa Tribune* carried a story about "Albert Wright, the negro who shot Leo Ramirez." Sheriff Tippins of Fort Myers had apparently contacted Judge Whitney with hints that Wright would be lynched if a trial was not speedily conducted. Whitney had changed his schedule accordingly, leading the *Tribune* to note euphemistically that "This prompt action on the part of Judge Whitney has caused feeling to quiet down to a considerable extent" and that "it is generally admitted that it is due to the confidence the people of Fort Myers have in Judge Whitney's ability and integrity of purpose that the law will be permitted to take its course."<sup>106</sup>

This final phrase, "the law will be permitted to take its course," shows how lynchings were either averted or permitted. The sheriff would take the temperature of the mob and would then take action to placate it. The judges appear to have been pawns in this game, knowing that the defendant would be lynched if not found guilty. Such was justice in the Jim Crow South, and Fort Myers was no exception.

The culpability of Sheriff Albritton for this lynching was highlighted by a witness in 1976, who stated that the lynching would have been averted by regular sheriff, Frank Tippins, who was on a hiatus from that post in 1924.<sup>107</sup> A lynching two years later in nearby LaBelle did result in the disciplining of that city's sheriff. On May 11, 1926, a road worker named Henry Patterson was lynched in a particularly gruesome manner after approaching a white woman to request a drink of water. The motive of the lynchers was apparently aggravated by anger among local young white men due to the fact that the road jobs had been given to blacks

105 *Ibid.*, May 26, 1924.

106 *Tampa Tribune*, October 6, 1911.

107 Dougherty, "Terror of a Sunday."

instead of local whites.<sup>108</sup> Several men were arrested for the crime but the case was thrown out in December 1926 due to the refusal of intimidated witnesses to identify the culprits. However, the Grand Jury condemned the sheriff's handling of the case and this rebuke led to his removal.<sup>109</sup>

### Conclusion: After the Lynching

The process by which Safety Hill coped with the psychological scars of the lynching is difficult to document. It is known, however, that the area acquired a far better school in 1927, namely Dunbar High School on High Street. This was primarily due to the efforts of its first principal, James Robert Dixon, and the white educator, Superintendent J. Colin English.<sup>110</sup> We may therefore infer that blacks became even more committed to education at this point, motivated perhaps in part by a desire to move away, which many subsequently did.

Safety Hill had already opened a makeshift hospital by the time of the lynching. Jones-Walker Hospital, located on High Street, was named after the aforementioned Melissa Jones and her WCTU associate, Candis Walker, who had together helped raise funds for it at church gatherings. However, the hospital could not handle X-rays and specialized tests, which meant some patients were transferred to and from Lee Memorial Hospital by means of an "ambulance" adapted from a funeral car loaned from the funeral homes on Anderson Avenue.<sup>111</sup> There were also some success stories in Safety Hill, notably the beauty parlor of Ella Piper on Evans Avenue and the jazz concerts staged at McCollum Hall on Anderson Avenue. Ella Piper was also a social activist in Fort Myers in the 1930s, mirroring the role that beauticians played in female social activism in Tampa.<sup>112</sup>

There is evidence that the Edison family gave its patronage to Safety Hill; for example, Mina Edison visited Dunbar High School

108 *Baltimore Afro American*, May 22, 1926, 1. The *Lewiston Daily Sun*, December 1, 1926, reported that his "captors stamped [on] his face and cut his body with knives."

109 Jerrell H. Shofner, "Judge Herbert Rider and the Lynching at LaBelle," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 59, no. 3 (January 1981): 292-306.

110 Matthews, "The African American Experience," 249-250.

111 Roger D. Scott, "Jones-Walker Hospital – Part II," Lee County Medical Society, Inc., *Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (April 2009), 3, <http://tinyurl.com/pq35sx7> (accessed June 12th, 2013).

112 Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, 230.

and the Safety Hill Garden Club.<sup>113</sup> Her symbolic acts of white “tolerance” may seem to indicate that there was still a willingness by some whites to accept certain blacks who “knew their place,” but this “place” was nonetheless a firmly segregated one; Mina Edison was venturing into the black area of the city, but African Americans were not roaming freely in white spaces.

In the 1930s, the election of a progressive administration to the White House did not significantly reduce formal racial inequality in the South. The New Deal, intentionally or not, gave a boost to Jim Crow and racialized labor. When the Roosevelt administration pumped money into Fort Myers through the WPA to boost employment, the investment benefited mainly whites. For example, WPA money was spent on the Lee Memorial Hospital, at a cost of \$200,000, despite the fact that, as noted above, blacks were only allowed to visit the facility for specialized tests that were unavailable at the Jones-Walker Hospital.<sup>114</sup> The administration’s labor and welfare laws also excluded agricultural workers and domestics from its protections.<sup>115</sup>

In conclusion, white patronage did not alter the fact that race relations in Fort Myers, from the arrival of the railroad in 1904 up to the 1960s, were set by a Jim Crow culture that had much in common with racism elsewhere in the Deep South. The lynching of 1924 had both confirmed and symbolized the enforcement of the Deep South’s racial codes, despite the twisted journey that relations between blacks and whites experienced before and after the lynching. There were many different routes to Jim Crow, and that of Fort Myers was never straight or uncomplicated, but the result was no less difficult for many of its victims.

113 Tom Smoot, *The Edisons of Fort Myers: Discoveries of the Heart* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 2004), 277, 281.

114 Scott, “Jones-Walker Hospital – Part II,” 3. The original building had been named by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Prudy Taylor Board, *Remembering Fort Myers: The City of Palms* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2006), 58. This same organization later arranged for a statue of Robert E. Lee to be erected in Fort Myers. The statue still stood in 2015.

115 Juan F. Perea, “The Echoes of Slavery: Recognizing the Racist Origins of the Agricultural and Domestic Worker Exclusion from the National Labor Relations Act” (Social Science Research Network, July 19, 2010), [http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/students/groups/oslj/files/2012/04/72.1.perea\\_.pdf](http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/students/groups/oslj/files/2012/04/72.1.perea_.pdf) (accessed December 15, 2013).