

## **LYNCHING IN TENNESSEE IN THE 19TH CENTURY**

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Lynching was one of the most despicable, immoral practices in the United States after the Civil War. It was most common in the South, and it was practiced in Tennessee as well as other states. Between 1882 and 1968 about 4743 lynchings occurred in the nation, with 214 in 70 counties in Tennessee. Lynching was common before the Civil War, but it became more common after the war as a way to control the freed Negro. Prison populations among Negroes increased tremendously after the war for the same reason. Blacks accounted for 72.7 percent of the people lynched. Only 1297 whites were lynched. Lynching was not a legal form of justice and punishment in the United States, but research has discovered that it was used in 600 counties in the country. Even though not a legal practice, it was tolerated by state and federal officials, mostly in the South. Charges of rape was the third greatest excuse for lynching; murder or other crimes were the most common charges. Mississippi, Georgia, and Texas recorded the most lynchings. Tennessee was number six.

A museum recently opened in Montgomery, Alabama, dealing with the history of lynching in the United States. The authors have not seen the complete list, or even the list for Tennessee, but there were two lynchings listed for Putnam County. One was for a man named Thomas Robinson, about whom little is known. The other, about which we have more information from newspapers, was carried out against a black man named Charles, or Thomas, Washington.

Washington said that he was “born and raised” in Beaufort, S.C. He moved from there to Alabama, where he served time in prison for a burglary. Escaping after serving three months, he came to Tennessee and worked on the Cumberland River near Rome. Later leaving this job, he walked the railroad track toward Rockwood.

Entering Putnam County near Mine Lick Station on May 29, 1898, Washington stopped for food at the Jeff Ward home. Finding only Mrs. Ward and her infant at home, he demanded money and food at the point of a pistol. Mrs. Ward surrendered her cash; then Washington raped her and fled. He passed through the outskirts Cookeville on his way toward Rockwood.

Jeff Ward discovered the scene at his home after returning from a walk with his brother-in-law; a large posse organized to pursue Washington. The fugitive robbed a house at Bon Air in Cumberland County. While sitting beside the road eating his ill-gotten goods, Washington was arrested by a Cumberland County constable. The fugitive “jerked loose” from the constable and fled. From this time on, Washington wandered through the Cumberland Mountains with little sense of direction.

Sheriff G.W. Alcorn and Deputy Sheriff Robert L. Jared of Putnam County, along with the bloodhounds of Detective Campbell Morgan, led the search for Washington for three

weeks. They combed the highlands of Putnam, White, Cumberland, Rhea, Roane and Bledsoe counties searching for him. A posse finally apprehended him in Rhea County south of Dayton. About nine o'clock at night on June 20 some searchers spotted him along a roadway. When Washington started to run Detective Eddy fired his shotgun. Washington's left leg was mangled by the buckshot load. Authorities took the prisoner by railroad to Cookeville. Washington supposedly confessed his crime against Mrs. Ward, as well as other crimes, on the journey to Cookeville. Later, talking to Putnam deputies in the jail, he recounted his entire life.

About one pm after the prisoner arrival in Cookeville, a mob of approximately 200-300 approached the jail and demanded the keys to Washington's cell. Sheriff Alcorn illegally surrendered the keys and Washington was taken from the jail to Mine Lick. Some of the mob entertained an idea to burn the criminal alive, but others pitied him and called for hanging instead. Washington was not able to speak from the scaffold at Mine Lick, although he attempted to utter some last words. He had earlier supposedly said "he did not care what they did with him," although he preferred hanging.

The execution occurred at ten o'clock at Mine Lick. No one was ever prosecuted for killing Washington, and the practice of lynching continued in the United States until the middle of the twentieth century.

\*Read more Cumberland Tales at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>