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Walter Howard

University of South Florida

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“A BLOT ON TAMPA’S HISTORY”: 
THE 1934 LYNCHING OF ROBERT JOHNSON

by Walter Howard

During the first three decades of the twentieth century the city of Tampa was an area prone to lynching. In fact, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reported that six lynchings had taken place there between 1900 and 1930, the largest number for any Florida city or county at a time when Florida had the highest ratio of lynchings to minority population of any state in America.1 During the 1930s, however, only one black man fell victim to mob murder in Tampa.2 The series of events leading up to this incident began on January 28, 1934, when Robert Johnson, a forty-year-old black, was arrested by Tampa police. He was accused of the shocking crime of robbing and then raping a white woman in the Belmont Heights area. Tampa detectives subsequently investigated the matter thoroughly and then exonerated Johnson. Still, some white Tampans believed he was guilty of the most heinous crime a black man could commit, the rape of a white woman. The fact that no formal charges were ever filed against Johnson for this alleged act failed to change their minds. In spite of the evidence to the contrary, a group of white citizens remained convinced that he was getting away with sexually violating a white woman, an idea they found intolerable.3

Lynching-minded Tampans plotted Johnson’s execution. Police officials made it easier to plan the black man’s demise by the way they mishandled the case. The Tampa police department of the mid-1930s, plagued by corruption and inefficiency, apparently did not have its heart in the job of protecting the rights and safety of a black man accused of a lynchable offense.4 Indeed, there may have been officers on the force who sympathized with those who wished to punish the suspect in this case. In any event, the police refused to let Johnson walk away a free man after the detectives’ investigation, and issued a warrant accusing him of stealing chickens and turkeys. In light of this development, it became necessary to transfer him from the city jail to the county prison.5

The transfer, unfortunately, was fatally ill-timed. For some reason, Johnson was not moved by Tampa policemen or Hillsborough County deputies. Indeed, the person assigned to pick up and move the black prisoner was Deputy Constable Thomas Graves, who acted in this matter on the authority of his brother, Constable Hardy Graves. The deputy constable was on his way home from a routine evening shift when he decided, with his brother’s approval, to transport Johnson to the county facility. Graves called the police detective bureau shortly after midnight on January 30 to inform the city authorities that he was coming for the black man. Needless to say, it was not standard procedure to move a prisoner in the middle of the night. The Tampa police department and sheriff’s office could not later adequately explain why this was allowed to happen. Graves, however, would later explain his actions by stating, “I went to the police station to transfer [Johnson] to the county jail, thinking with that out of the way, I would not have to get up so early the next morning.”6
In the dead of the night, at about 2:30 a.m., detectives delivered Johnson to Graves at city hall. The deputy constable put his prisoner in the front seat of his automobile and drove toward the county jail. Suddenly, three cars appeared on the deserted downtown streets of Tampa and “hemmed” Graves in. “At first I thought it was a traffic jam and tried to drive out of it,” declared the deputy constable subsequently. Men in these cars proceeded to kidnap Johnson from his escort in a dramatic and somewhat acrobatic way, according to Graves:

By this time there was a car on either side of me, and before I realized what was happening a man got out of either car, jumped on the running board of my car and threw open the front doors at the same time. The man at my left caught me by the mouth and whirled me over the back seat of my car. This man and the other one then got in the back seat and forced me down on the floor board, one holding his foot on my neck.7

At this point, one of Graves’ assailants promptly disarmed him. They also forced him to lie on the floor of his own car for the entire twenty-minute death ride. Graves later reported that Johnson was resigned to his fate and never begged for mercy or broke down in any way. “I heard the Negro say only one thing,” stated the Deputy Constable. In response to one of the white kidnappers who said to Johnson, “you ____ you know you did it,” the latter supposedly replied, “yes, white folks, but I am sorry.”8 Finally, the vigilantes put Graves out of the car and drove off with Johnson to a wooded section of town.

The lynching was a carefully planned and swiftly executed murder. The kidnappers carried the terrified Johnson to the lynching site along the Hillsborough River near Sligh Avenue, where a crowd of about thirty Tampa citizens had gathered to witness the victim’s execution. Ironically, the lynchers gunned down Johnson with Graves own .38 caliber pistol. The killers, making every round count, shot thehapless black men four times in the head and once in the body. Leaving the bloody remains by the side of the road, the crowd of men piled into about fifteen automobiles and drove off. Just about thirty minutes after being kidnapped, Johnson was dead.9

As soon as he could, Graves phoned the sheriffs office reporting the lynching. He then walked to the home of a nearby justice of the peace, and the two men searched with flashlights for Johnson’s body. At daybreak they found it. Later that morning a coroner’s jury examined the body, but the inquiry into this lynching would go much further than a coroner’s investigation.10

Florida Governor David Sholtz immediately involved himself in this case. He ordered Tampa officials to take substantial investigative steps to bring the lynchers to justice. The governor’s telegrams to State’s Attorney Rex Farrior and Sheriff Will Spencer were published in full in the Tampa Tribune for all to read. Florida’s chief executive ordered the state’s attorney “to use every agency and function of your office to detect and bring to speedy justice those guilty of the lynching which took place in your county today.”11 He wired the sheriff a similar message:

I have just been informed of the lynching of Robert Johnson, Negro, in your community today, but have no report from you. We don’t condone the crime of lynching in Florida. I am holding you responsible for immediate and diligent
investigation of this crime to the end that those persons guilty of this murder shall be brought to speedy justice under the laws of this state.\textsuperscript{12}

In response to Sholtz’s demand for a thorough investigation, Tampa officials fashioned their plans. Farrior and other local officials conferred briefly on January 31, and then announced that the Hillsborough County grand jury, already in session, would look into lynching at once. The state’s attorney declared that “lynching is as much a matter for investigation by the grand jury as murder and other capital crimes.” He added “We must not tolerate such a happening that spreads a blot on Tampa’s history.” In heading up the grand jury inquiry, Farrior expressed a determined attitude by stating, “We expect to dig to the bottom of it, and if the evidence is produced pointing to persons who had part in it, indictments will be returned.”\textsuperscript{13}

In a marathon all-day session the day after the lynching, Farrior and the grand jury grilled some twelve witnesses. The state’s attorney immediately ruled out the possibility that the work of the jury was to answer the “question of the guilt or innocence of the Negro as regards the attack on the woman.” Rather, he observed, “It is a question of stamping out lynching.”\textsuperscript{14}

The obvious possibility confronting jurors was that Tom and Hardy Graves had conspired with the lynchers. In a strenuous effort to ascertain this, the grand jury questioned Tom Graves for four and one-half hours. Under pointed questioning it was revealed that the deputy constable was wholly without authority in transferring the prisoner from the city jail and that he had no more right in that capacity than any private citizen. In fact, Graves was working as an assistant to his brother on a special police commission that had expired weeks earlier. Other parts of Graves’ testimony also dismayed the grand jury. For instance, he said that the vigilantes had manhandled and badly bruised him during the kidnapping. Yet, when jurors examined his body, they found no such bruises. Until 7:35 p.m. the grand jury put considerable pressure on the deputy constable, but failed to uncover evidence of any conspiracy involving Graves or his brother.\textsuperscript{15}

Governor Sholtz, outraged over the lynching, demanded that Tom and Hardy Graves be brought before him to explain their actions. He did not even want to wait a day for the Graves brothers to testify before the grand jury. When telephoned by Farrior, however, Sholtz relented saying, “All right, but have them here by Thursday.” And so the governor confronted the two suspected conspirators, but he failed to force them to change their story.\textsuperscript{16}
Sholtz’s indignation over the lynching was genuine. He fancied himself a New Deal liberal who abhorred such a gruesome custom as lynching. Indeed, his strong reaction to the Tampa incident earned him praise from unexpected quarters. Prominent blacks in the state openly expressed their appreciation to the governor. Mary McLeod Bethune wrote him that the "Negroes of Florida commend you for your stand in deplorable Tampa tragedy." "You give encouragement to my people by taking prompt and definite action," declared J.R.E. Lee, President of the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College for blacks. The Colored Citizens’ Committee of Jacksonville stated that it had “voted its unanimous approval of your attitude toward the lynching of Robert Johnson.” “The colored citizens wish to thank you for your fearless stand and hasty action in upholding the dignity of the law,” wired the Key West branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Several black clergymen also lavished Sholtz with praise, and one in particular observed that the governor “believes in Justice and fair play regardless of race or color.”

Not everyone, however, praised Sholtz for his words and deeds. Several whites wrote the governor criticizing him for his antilynching stance. One Tampa woman asserted that she could not understand Sholtz’s concern and the public stir over the lynching of Johnson when “nothing is done if white women are murdered by blacks.” A woman from Minneapolis, Minnesota, declared, “I must say that the Negroes are responsible for all things that happen to them.” And a Jacksonville woman observed:

I noticed through the daily press you seem to be much concerned over the recent lynching of that Negro rapist in our state, and that the sobsisters are urging you to hunt out and prosecute men who are only endeavoring to protect their children from these beasts in human form. . . . If they let our white girls alone there will be no lynching.

These pejorative sentiments, however, were not shared by all whites in Tampa. Indeed, many Tampans knew all too well that lynchings were messy affairs that created a bad press for their community. The Kiwanis Club, for example, publicly “deplored” the crime because it was concerned about damage to their city’s and state’s good name. One of their spokesmen stated:

It was not a Negro lynched any more than it was the lynching of Tampa, Hillsborough County, and Florida. And the publicity going out over the country is the very worst kind we could get.

A Tribune editorial demanded, “There must be the fullest investigation of the lynching which occurred in this county.” And it added, “the Governor should order officers here to continue the inquiry until the responsibility for the act is definitely placed.”

Tampans who protested the lynching of Johnson said little in the press about its causes. However, almost everyone in the community, white or black, understood why Johnson was murdered by vigilantes. The extralegal execution of this black man was not merely punishment meted out to one individual. Rather, it was a device designed to warn blacks to stay in their “place.” To be sure, white Tampa was never uncertain about what place blacks should have in their city’s life. During the 1930s whites were determined to maintain the city’s large black
population of some 22,000 residents (about 21 percent of the total) in a socially inferior position. They forced this large minority to endure an existence of rigidly segregated life in which it faced continuous discrimination. The result was a sharply drawn color line that marked blacks off as a segregated group deemed undesirable for free association with white people in many types of relationships.

It was common at this time to see signs around town pointing “colored” here and “white” there. In the area of transportation, blacks had either to sit at the back or ride in separate street cars. Unlike the situation in many other southern cities, Tampa blacks did not attend any of the downtown movie houses and theaters because no balconies or other provisions were made for them. A separate waiting room was provided for them at the downtown railroad station. White objections kept blacks out of parks, beaches, and swimming areas in various sections of the city. In addition, blacks had to attend their own schools in their own neighborhoods. In amusement places such as Ballast Point and public dance halls there was a very rigid line. The city’s
restaurant and hotel managers, by general agreement, did not sanction the use of their facilities by blacks.30

The color line was very tightly drawn in Tampa in the area of employment. At no time during the 1930s were individual blacks permitted to compete on equal terms for jobs in the city. Custom relegated the majority of them to service occupations so that the bulk of the black population was concentrated in lower-paid menial and unpleasant jobs.31 The employment policies of Tampa companies and racial discrimination in training and promotion made it virtually impossible for them to find jobs in the skilled trades, in clerical and sales work, or as foremen or managers. Most Tampa industries had what might be described as a “lily-white” employment policy. This was especially true of the public utilities, and the city banks and offices.32 Moreover, certain Tampa trade unions constitutionally excluded blacks from membership and thus restricted black job opportunities.33

Tampa blacks were confined to certain residential areas of town. Not surprisingly, these regions were the most rundown and deteriorated areas of the city. Most blacks rented housing
from white property owners, and the poorest wood-frame quarters were crowded and lacked even indoor plumbing facilities.  

However, it was in the social realm that Tampa blacks were most completely segregated from whites. The web of social relationships among black people was sharply marked off from the corresponding world of white people. The typical white in Tampa did not believe in addressing a black as Mr., Mrs., or Miss. Above all, whites vehemently objected to interracial marriage, although they may have overlooked a white man’s occasional sexual excursion across the color line. 

Economic factors undoubtedly exacerbated racial tensions in Tampa. In 1934 this Florida community was struggling to recover from the Great Depression. In fact, the number of persons employed in wholesale and retail trade at this time was well below pre-depression levels. In this constricted local economy blacks and whites competed for low-income marginal jobs provided by the city’s numerous enterprises. Jobseeking whites, moreover, were naturally resentful when blacks found employment as laborers, janitors, filling station attendants, cooks, maids and dishwashers. In addition, unemployed whites were, in all probability, dismayed that some blacks found jobs on public works projects provided by New Deal agencies, and that other blacks received federal aid as victims of the Depression.

In spite of their subordinate social position blacks did not passively accept the Johnson execution. Black Tampa urged officials to fix responsibility for the lynching. One black minister declared that the vigilante murder was “particularly unfair because those who took the prisoner from the deputy did not know he was guilty.” He added that Johnson was “given no chance to establish his innocence.” The Tampa Urban League and local branch of the NAACP protested the lynching to the mayor, chief of police, state’s attorney, and the governor. The Tampa Negro Ministerial Alliance called on Sholtz and other it “officers of the law to use every means to fix
responsibility for the act,” and then urged white officials “to make life more secure for the Negro citizens of Tampa, Hillsborough County, and Florida.”

The 1934 Tampa lynching also disturbed the national black community. Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, wired Sholtz deploring the lynching and calling on the Governor to bring the lynchers to justice. The black press deplored the lynching. Black newspapers in Chicago, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Atlanta printed the bloody details of the crime on their front pages. The Pittsburgh Courier wrote that the Johnson lynching was a “death-dealing orgy” and “cold-blooded murder” that “aroused the ire of the entire nation.” The Courier also claimed that the Tampa lynching was certain to “help the antilynching bill cause” because it occurred “in the short space of a month since Costigan-Wagner [federal antilynching bill] was introduced” and showed how powerless state authorities “are to deal with lynch murders.” Along these same lines, the NAACP magazine, The Crisis, argued that the facts of the Johnson lynching and other similar crimes invalidated the argument of many southerners that a federal antilynching law was unnecessary because state leaders could control lynching.
The lynching of Johnson did indeed stir antilynching forces. The first antilynching organization to protest the Tampa episode was the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). In Florida, the ASWPL and its allied organizations were very well organized and active in the 1930s.46 By 1934, the Florida Council of the Association boasted a membership of about 750 women and 50 men.47 As soon as she heard about the Tampa affair, Jesse Daniel Ames, the national leader of the ASWPL, sternly lectured Governor Sholtz about

Anti-lynching cartoon indicting “Th’Law” in Florida.

From the Philadelphia Record, reprinted in The Crisis, January, 1935.
his committment to take action against lynchers. In a telegram she reminded him, “Last Thursday you assured a committee headed by Mrs. William P. Cornell, Chairman of Florida Council of ASWPL, that while you are governor of Florida there would be no lynching if you had two hours

A cartoon in support of the federal anti-lynching bill which never passed Congress.

From the Pittsburgh Courier, reprinted in The Crisis, February, 1935.
to get to the scene of the disturbance and that the law gives you sufficient power to apprehend
and punish lynchers which you would use to the utmost should a lynching occur in Florida
during your administration.”

In explaining his failure to take preventive measures, the governor pointed out, “the deplorable
lynching which took place in Tampa early this morning came out of the clear sky without prior
warning or knowledge of this office that it was anticipated.”

The NAACP also took a special interest in this case. During the 1930s this organization made
combating lynching its major goal, and its leaders adopted the strategy of exploiting emotional
revulsion over the brutality of lynching. They would, thus, publicize findings of their
investigations in newspapers and circulate them among liberal organizations. In this way, they
hoped to stir public opinion in favor of the need for passage of federal antilynching legislation.
In this particular instance, Walter White asked Governor Sholtz to support the Costigan-Wagner
antilynching bill in light of the Tampa tragedy. He also mailed the governor a copy of the
proposed legislation which defined a mob, provided for federal action through federal district
courts if states or local agents did not act against lynchers within thirty days, and proposed a fine
of $10,000 on counties where lynchings occurred. Sholtz had kept abreast of the antilynching
bill controversy and knew that in January, 1934, the NAACP’s bill, Costigan-Wagner, had been
introduced into Congress. In spite of the Tampa affair, however, the governor refused White's
invitation to support a federal antilynching law. Instead, taking a more moderate states’ rights
position, Sholtz had already thrown in his lot with the ASWPL and decided to work for
eradication of the lynching evil at the state level only.

Although the Tampa lynching failed to convince Sholtz to support the federal antilynching bill
pending in Congress, it did serve as an example of the tragedy of lynching in one Florida
community. Tampa lynchers kidnapped Johnson from a deputy constable, passed judgement on
his guilt, and summarily executed him on the banks of the Hillsborough River in the middle of
the night. They were determined that blacks in Tampa should remain socially subordinate and no
black man should escape even the accusation that he had had sexual relations with a white
woman.

The vigilantes, of course, were never brought to trial. Yet, from the beginning of the grand jury
investigation, the Hillsborough County sheriff and even the governor of Florida were certain that
Tom Graves knew “every man in the crowd,” and they believed he should have been indicted as
conspirator in the lynching. But the grand jury probe, which had initially promised so much,
failed to return any indictments. In March, 1934, State’s Attorney Farrior privately explained this
outcome to the governor contending, “I did everything in my power . . . to get an indictment”,
but the majority of the jurors were in “sympathy with the lynching” and voted by a large
majority against removing Tom Graves from office.

By failing to apprehend and punish the Tampa lynchers, officials did nothing to discourage
other vigilantes. In fact, in the two years following the Johnson slaying, there were three
recorded lynchings in Florida. In late 1935, one of the most gruesome of southern lynchings
occurred in Tampa when, a white socialists, Joseph Shoemaker, was flogged to death. The crime
produced such an outcry that indictments soon followed. In the Johnson case, however, the
white citizens of Tampa, the state’s attorney, and the governor let the grand jury decision stand unchallenged. In the final analysis, the white citizenry of Tampa and Florida officials did not genuinely support vigorous prosecution of lynchers when the victim was black. Thus, the Johnson lynching stands as “a blot on Tampa's history.”


2 Records of blacks lynched in Florida during the 1930s can be found in the “Lynching by Counties,” Negro Collection, Files of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia. There are also records of these incidents in the “Lynching Files” of the Administrative Correspondence, Records of Florida Governors in the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida.

3 Tampa Tribune, January 31, 1934. The explosive issue of sex between black men and white women in the South of the 1930s has been thoroughly explored by John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town (New York, 1937), and James R. McGovern, Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal (Baton Rouge, 1982).

4 In 1935 Tampa policemen were indicted in the Shoemaker flogging case as actual participants in the lynching of this Tampa socialist. See Robert P. Ingalls, “The Tampa Flogging Case, Urban Vigilantism,” Florida Historical Quarterly 56 (July 1977):13-27.

5 Tampa Tribune, January 31, 1934.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.


10 Tampa Tribune, January 31, 1934.


12 Sholtz to Spencer, January 31, 1934, ibid.

13 Tampa Tribune, January 31, 1934.

14 Ibid., February 1, 1934.

15 Ibid.

16 Tallahassee Democrat, February 3, 1934.


19 J.R.E. Lee to Sholtz, January 31, 1934, ibid.
21 Key West branch of the NAACP to Sholtz, February 5, 1934, ibid.
22 M.M. White to Sholtz, February 2, 1934, ibid.
23 Mrs. E. S. Garnett to Sholtz, February 9, 1934, ibid.
24 Mrs. Martha Stallo to Sholtz, January 31, 1934, ibid.
25 Mrs. E. Elchleff to Sholtz, February 6, 1934, ibid.
26 *Tampa Tribune*, February 1, 1934.
27 Ibid.
29 The extent of segregated life in Tampa at this time was spelled out in detail by a study commissioned by the Tampa Welfare League and the Tampa Y.M.C.A. It was carried out by the representatives of the National Council of the Y.M.C.A. and the Interracial Commission. Arthur F. Raper, *A Study of Negro Life in Tampa* (Tampa, 1927), Florida Collection, University of South Florida Library, Tampa.
30 Ibid.
33 According to Raper, it was the unions of skilled workers, such as carpenters, painters, and paperhangers, that discriminated most thoroughly against black workers. Ibid., 48-49.
34 Black neighborhoods included West Hyde Park, “Scrubbs,” Robles Pond, Central Avenue, Garrison, and College Hill. Ibid., 4-5, 7-17.
35 Although it did not deal with social segregation in any great detail, the Raper study made it clear that “interracial contacts” were “limited to those of a business nature,” and that “orthodox southern traditions as to race relations prevail in Tampa.” Ibid., 1.
39 *Tampa Tribune*, February 1, 1934.
40 Tampa Urban League to Sholtz, February 3, 1934, and Tampa branch of the NAACP to Sholtz, February 1, 1934, Sholtz Records, “Lynching File.”

41 William M. Davis to Sholtz, February 3, 1934, ibid.

42 Walter White to Sholtz, February 2, 1934, ibid.

43 Chicago Defender, February 3, 1934; Baltimore Afro-American, February 3, 1934; Pittsburgh Courier, February 3, 1934; and Atlanta World, January 31, 1934.

44 Pittsburgh Courier, February 17, 1934.

45 The Crisis, 41 (February 1934): 7.


47 Ibid. See also Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Woman’s Crusade Against Lynching (New York, 1979).


49 Sholtz to Ames, February 1, 1934, ibid.


51 White to Sholtz, February 2, 1934, Sholtz Records, “Lynching File.”


54 Spencer to Sholtz, January 31, 1934, ibid.

55 Farrior to Sholtz, March 15, 1934, ibid.

56 In October, 1934, Claude Neal, a black man, was lynched in Jackson County. A black man named Reuben Stacey was murdered by vigilantes in Ft. Lauderdale, July, 1935. And Joseph Shoemaker, white, was flogged to death in Tampa in November, 1935. Jesse Daniel Ames, The Changing Character of Lynching (Atlanta, 1942), 56-58.

57 Ingalls, “Tampa Flogging Case.” 13-27.