The Lynching of Mary Jackson in Harrison County, Texas, 1912.

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On approximately February 13, 1912, a mob of unknown persons in Harrison County, Texas lynched black residents Mary Jackson and George Sanders for a crime they did not commit.[[1]](#footnote-1) A few weeks before, approximately January 29, black resident Tennie Sneed shot and killed white resident Paul Strange over a personal dispute. The murder of a white man by a black man in East Texas at that time often led immediately to violent reprisals, so Harrison County law enforcement had taken the known perpetrator of the murder, Sneed, into custody and held him in what amounted to protective custody in another county. This attempt to prevent mob violence failed, however, as local citizens satisfied their bloodlust by lynching Jackson and Sanders, two black residents only tangentially related to the crime.[[2]](#footnote-2) Jackson and Sanders died after being hanged from the same tree branch by a mob and choking to death.

The hanging of Mary Jackson in Harrison County provides an excellent case study of the lynching of a woman, an uncommon and largely unstudied event among the all-too-common horrors of mob “justice.” Jackson’s death illuminates several of the unique ways in which the lynching of women differed from the lynching of men and at the same time provides an important perspective on lynching culture in general. One of these differences is that women tended to be lynched for a crime that a male relative or associate of theirs was accused of committing, rather than for their own actions. Women lynching victims also traditionally died alongside a close male friend or relative at the hands of a small mob. The lynching of Jackson and Sanders demonstrates the ways a lynch mob supported an eye-for-an-eye mentality without regard for the gender of the person who paid for the crime, so long as the person was black. In the mind of the mob, Sneed had taken a white life, and so they had to extinguish at least one black life in return. Although they surely would have preferred to lynch Sneed himself, the mob seemed content to lynch any person or persons related to the crime without regard to gender so long as they were black. Thus, the largely overlooked case of Mary Jackson provides an important window into the culture that supported lynching during the Progressive era.

The omission of cases involving women has been a major weakness in studies of lynchings.[[3]](#footnote-3) Often female lynching victims appear marginally in such works, relegated to being statistical fillers hidden in the appendices, while the far more frequent lynching of men claims the analytical spotlight. It is important, however, to understand that these instances of lynching of women have analytical value beyond their sheer frequency. It could be argued that the omission of female lynching victims from traditional history is due to the fact that so few women were lynched in the United States compared to the number of men lynched. For example, there are only twelve confirmed cases of lynching a woman in Texas according to the research compiled for this study, compared to hundreds of cases involving men.[[4]](#footnote-4) Rather than disrupting the accepted lynching historiography, however the study of female lynching victims contributes to and helps to strengthen lynching scholarship.

While a historiography of female lynching is lacking, it is not due to a lack of sources. Understandably sources on lynchings are difficult to locate, as the practice was not legal. This, however, does not mean they are unavailable. Records on lynchings are most commonly derived from newspapers across the nation, and they serve as the bulk of sources for this study. Surprisingly, stories and articles about the lynchings of women appear in newspapers across Texas as openly and candidly as the lynchings of men. It is difficult then to understand why these female victims that could help better understand the culture of lynching have been overlooked.

Born in 1874, Mary Jackson lived her entire life in Harrison County, Texas. Specifically, Jackson lived in Elysian Fields, a small town outside of Marshall near the Panola County line. Mary had two children: Cleveland Jackson, her oldest, born in 1894, and Nancy Jackson born in 1897. According to the census records, Mary never married, and thus raised her two children by herself.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The 1910 census lists Mary’s occupation as “farmer” but testimonies in the Tennie Sneed case claimed that she worked as a housekeeper and cook for Paul Strange.[[6]](#footnote-6) Around 1910 Mary moved into a small house on Strange’s land in Elysian Fields to work as his housekeeper.[[7]](#footnote-7) George Sanders and Tennie Sneed lived nearby and the three knew each other well. Little else is known about Mary, other than that she was about forty years of age when she died in 1912 and “protested all along” that she had nothing to do with Strange’s murder.[[8]](#footnote-8) Despite the limited surviving information about her personal life, Mary’s death is significant because the circumstances surrounding her lynching closely mirror those of the eleven other confirmed female lynching victims in Texas.

While little is known about Mary Jackson, but even less is known about Sneed and Sanders. Sanders also grew up in Harrison County and lived next door to Jackson for much of his life. Sanders worked as a farmer and according to newspapers was “always considered a good negro.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Tennie Sneed proved by far the most difficult to study, as his name is egregiously misspelled in almost every document concerning him. Sneed was born to Adaline Sneed and Valentine Sneed in about 1894 and grew up in Harrison County.[[10]](#footnote-10) By the age of sixteen Tennie worked as a farm laborer on his father’s farm and on March 5, 1911 Tennie, then aged eighteen, married Alice Dehays, who was seventeen years of age at the time.[[11]](#footnote-11) The two quickly moved in together and were married less than a year before Paul Strange’s murder.

The Strange family, also longtime residents of Harrison County, lived just down the road from Sneed. The head of the household, Joseph F. Strange, enjoyed a fine reputation within the community and once ran as a candidate for superintendent of the local school.[[12]](#footnote-12) Joseph had four children, two boys and two girls. His oldest son, Paul Strange, helped run the family farm while his younger son, Jim, worked as a school teacher. At the time of his death, Paul was thirty-six years of age, significantly older than Tennie or Alice Sneed, who were both eighteen. Even though they lived on the poor side of town with mostly black residents, the Strange family held a reputable social standing and was considered “a very powerful and influential family.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Earlier on the night of January 29, 1912, Sneed “ate supper at his mother’s house… and then went on up to Mary Jackson’s home.”[[14]](#footnote-14) While there, Sneed claimed Jackson expressed her concern for his safety because of Strange’s attraction to Sneed’s wife, Alice. Sneed also claimed Jackson overheard Strange say he was going to kill Sneed earlier that morning. Furthermore Sneed argued that Jackson encouraged him to get Sanders’s gun for protection, and so he did. Once Sneed returned home, he found his wife frightened, and his brother-in-law, John Henry Jacobs, in the kitchen attempting to prevent Strange from entering Alice’s bedroom. When he realized Sneed had a gun, Strange became outraged and said that Jackson had warned him that Sneed would kill him.[[15]](#footnote-15) Sneed tried to calm him down, but Strange would hear none of it. After an extended argument that led both of the men out of the house and into the street, Sneed testified “I shot him [Strange] to keep him from killing me for he said that he had an automatic and 41 caliore [sic] revolver on him… I never threatened to kill Mr. Strange.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Once he realized Strange would not survive, Sneed fled. When later asked during the trial why he fled, he responded “because I was afraid.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Sneed’s fear is understandable, especially considering the history of racial violence, particularly lynchings, throughout Texas and in Harrison County.

The skirmish that led to Strange’s murder resulted from Strange’s unrequited affection for Sneed’s wife, Alice. In her testimony after the murder, Charity Jacobs, Alice’s mother, claimed that “Paul Strange, the deceased, made a number of overtures to her to the effect that if she would run [Sneed] off that he would support [Alice] and send her to school.”[[18]](#footnote-18) No evidence exists to support the notion that Alice might have entertained his affection; instead her own testimony suggests that she feared the man and repeatedly spurned his advances. Alice claimed that on the night of his murder, January 29, 1912, “Mr. Paul came around and knocked on my door and said that he wanted to warm his feet. I was in bed and would not get up and let him in. He went to another door and knocked and asked me to give him a drink of water and he would go on and not do anything to me… I would not let him in.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Word about the murder traveled quickly and white citizens of Harrison County became outraged. Many black citizens left town due to fear of retaliation. Sneed’s own father, Valentine Sneed, “through fear of mob violence, left Harrison County” and could not be located to testify in his son’s trial.[[20]](#footnote-20) A few days after the murder, on the night of February 4, 1912 a single man whipped Sneed’s brother-in-law, John Henry Jacobs. Before sunlight, Charity Jacobs and Alice Sneed also met with whipping parties. When recounting her experience in her testimony, Alice stated, “I was taken into a cotton patch and layed [sic] across a stump and they made me pull up my clothes and I was whipped with a rope from my waist to my feet and told to keep my mouth shut.”[[21]](#footnote-21) After the attacks, the family was “ordered to leave the neighborhood and left the next morning” for Jonesville where a family friend lived.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Once apprehended, Sneed spent the months before his trial moving around several county jails. Ultimately Sheriff Sanders (no relation to George Sanders) decided to take Sneed to Rusk Penitentiary, approximately 160 miles outside Harrison County to avoid any chance of mob violence.[[23]](#footnote-23) This turned out to be a very wise decision on behalf of the Sheriff, as a few days after Sneed’s apprehension, on February 12, a mob marched to the Harrison County Jail demanding the jailer and Sheriff Sanders release Sneed to them.

Unfortunately after finding out Sneed was not present, the mob that found another way to satisfy their bloodlust. On either late February 12 or early February 13, a mob hung Jackson and Sanders from the same limb and left them for dead on a tree in Panola County, less than a mile beyond the Harrison County line, very close to the location where Strange’s murder took place. Since they could not get their hands on Sneed himself, the mob contented itself with the lynching of Jackson and Sanders. Substitution of the intended victim with another or multiple black surrogates was ordinary in cases where law enforcement protected the premeditated victim.[[24]](#footnote-24) Using a female victim as a surrogate, however, was quite rare. News of the lynching first came to town early on the morning of February 14 via J.H. Duetch, a music teacher and relatively new citizen of Harrison County.[[25]](#footnote-25) Public opinion sided with the lynch mob, as the county newspaper *The Marshall Messenger* reported that Jackson and Sanders knew what Sneed wanted with the gun, and thus could be considered accessories to the murder.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Despite being women, members of the very sex lynch mob participants so often claimed to act in defense of, black female lynching victims were seen acceptable victims in the eyes of vigilante justice. In short, black women were lynched because their race was more important than their gender to white mob participants. Once these women were considered guilty of a crime by the mob, their gender became irrelevant. According to Brandon Jett, the only historian to briefly write on the Jackson and Sanders lynchings in his wider analysis of violence in Harrison County, mobs “held no regard for black women. It did not matter to whites if their victims were innocent or guilty; a white man died at the hands of a black man and someone had to pay.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Even though women were not protected from the practice of lynching, lynch mobs generally made several accommodations when their practices involved killing women. These included removing the victims from the public eye, killing the victims in relative solitary, and generally mobs that lynched women were fewer in number. These slight alterations from “normal” mob practice suggest that the members of these mobs felt lynching a woman was somehow more wrong and indecorous than lynching a man, but they felt content to do so as long as they found it justified.

Sneed’s first trial lasted a little less than a week. Most of the trial relied on witness testimony, and Sneed’s case suffered from the loss of eyewitnesses Sanders and Jackson. After forty-one hours of deliberation, the jury could not reach a verdict. Due to the failure of the first trial, Sneed and his attorneys filed for a change of venue on the premise that he could not receive a fair trial in Harrison County. Shockingly, the court sided with Sneed, and agreed that he could not get a fair trial in Harrison County despite multiple prominent individuals, including Sheriff Sanders himself, arguing that no prejudice existed against Sneed.[[28]](#footnote-28) Following this decision, Sneed’s case was relocated to Anderson County, Texas.

Sneed’s second trial began July 7, 1913, in Anderson County and lasted only three days as after less than a full day of deliberation the jury again could not reach a verdict.[[29]](#footnote-29) The third and final trial concerning *The State of Texas vs. Tennie Sneed* began on January 12, 1914, almost a full two years after the murder of Paul Strange. After three days of court, a decision was finally reached. The Anderson County District Court convicted Sneed of manslaughter and sentenced him to three years at the Huntsville Penitentiary.[[30]](#footnote-30) The jury came to an agreement after compromising on three major points. For one, they believed that “the defendant would be killed if acquitted.” Second, they believed that “Anderson County would become a dumping ground for cases of a like character” if Sneed was acquitted. And finally, “the argument was also used that [Sneed] was a young nigger, it would not injure him to serve a short term in the penitentiary.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Despite an abundance of evidence that Sneed acted in self-defense when he killed Paul Strange, ultimately he was convicted due to Anderson County community members’ fear of becoming known as soft on black citizens, their fear of dealing with similar cases, and fear of mob violence in their county. In the end, Sneed’s trial proceedings took almost as long as his actual prison sentence.

Since Jackson and Sanders were denied both due process and the right to a long life, it seems right to provide a short summary of Sneed’s life after trial. Sneed arrived at Huntsville Penitentiary on February 11, 1914 and remained there until his early discharge on Oct 10, 1916.[[32]](#footnote-32) Sneed then settled nearby in Anderson, Grimes County, Texas where he married a woman named Effie. Effie and Sneed ultimately had five children and remained in Grimes County for several decades.[[33]](#footnote-33) Towards the end of his life, Sneed and his family moved to Lubbock, Texas, where he ultimately died of renal failure in 1972.[[34]](#footnote-34) The last of Sneed’s children, Eva Lee Cade née Sneed died recently in 2013.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Sneed received what an unknown mob denied Jackson and Sanders: the right to a fair trial. Had Jackson and Sanders gone to trial and received the worst conviction possible for their crime, accessory to manslaughter, they would have received at maximum one half of Sneed’s sentence, as was the typical punishment for that charge. After their time served, Jackson and Sanders likely would have lived their rest of their lives in relative peace. A mob, however, decided to take justice into their own hands, and stole this opportunity from Jackson and Sanders. The greatest injustice was that Sanders and Jackson did not kill anyone and did not deserve to die. The murder of a white man, however, proved too egregious for the citizens of Harrison County to allow without retribution, and thus Sanders and Jackson lost their lives due to the color of their skin and hearsay.

One of the many hopes of this research is to uncover the full story of Jackson’s death.[[36]](#footnote-36) Jackson’s lynching is one of many that have gone unrecorded and unexamined despite copious amounts of information readily available to historians. The decision of scholars to avoid analyzing the lynching of women is possibly because it has been assumed that such cases, being so few in number, would be much harder to document and analyze. But this theory has been disproven, as the lynchings of women are often recorded as candidly as those of men. Furthermore, many of the circumstances surrounding Jackson’s case mirror other lynchings in Harrison County as well as Texas and the wider South, and thus contribute to the lynching historiography, and provide new conclusions for the widely accepted lynching mythos. There is further important work to be done in this field, and plenty of unexamined cases of female lynching victims to be addressed by scholars.

1. “Two Negroes Were Hung,” *The Marshall Messenger,* February 20, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Sneed Here For Trial,” *The Marshall Messenger,* February 26, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. No reference to a female lynching victim is found in Arthur F. Raper’s *The Tragedy of Lynching* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003),and Walter White’s *Rope and Faggot* (Notre Dame: University of Notre

   Dame Press, 2001*)* only contains a brief two-sentence mention of a woman lynched*.* Additionally, the major text on lynching in Texas, William D. Carrigan’s *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004)only briefly references two female lynching victims past 1865, Mary and Hannah Phillips killed in 1895, and the rest are located only in the appendix at the end of the work. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this case confirmed cases of lynching are understood as substantiated by evidence compiled from various newspapers. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1910 United States Census, Elysian Fields, Harrison County, Texas, “Mary Jackson,” *Ancestry.com.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Augment of Mary Jackson and George Sanders, February 16, 1912, Case No. 13026, Harrison County District Clerk, Marshall, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Two Negroes Were Hung,” *The Marshall Messenger*, February 20, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Two Negroes Lynched In Panola County,” *The Marshall Messenger*, February 15, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 1900 United States Census, Elysian Fields, Harrison County, Texas, “Tennie Fields,” *Ancestry.com.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 1910 United States Census, Elysian Fields, Harrison County, Texas, “Alice Dehay,” *Ancestry.com.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Petition for Change of Venue, February 29, 1912, Case No. 13026, Harrison County District Clerk, Marshall, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Petition for Continuance, January 29, 1913, Case No. 5097, Anderson County District Clerk, Palestine, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Petition for Continuance, February 29, 1912, Case No. 13026, Harrison County District Clerk, Marshall, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Defended Himself,” *The Marshall Messenger*, March 2, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “Tennie Sneed Safe In Prison,” *The Marshall Messenger*, February 9, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “Sneed Lived With Them,” *The Marshall Messenger*, February 15, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “Two Negroes Were Hung,” *The Marshall Messenger*, February 20, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Brandon Jett, “‘Let Us Be Law Abiding Citizens’ Mob Violence and the Local Response in Harrison County, Texas, 1890-1925,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 54, no. 2 (2016): 34; Even though Jett recognizes this in his article on Harrison County, he does not discuss Jackson’s death in terms of her gender in any further detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. “Prejudice Alleged,” *The Marshall Messenger*, February 29, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. “Murder Trial Is Called In Court,” *The Palestine Daily Herald*, July 7, 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *The State of Texas vs. Tennie Sneed* Returning Verdict, January 28, 1914, Case no. 5097, Anderson County District Clerk, Palestine, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *The State of Texas vs. Tennie Sneed* Jury Decision, January 14, 1914, Case no. 5097, Anderson County District Clerk, Palestine, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Texas Convict and Conduct Registers, “Tennie Sneed,” Texas State Archives, *Ancestry.com.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 1940 United States Census, Anderson, Grimes County, Texas, “Tennie Sneed,” *Ancestry.com.* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Death Certificate for Tennie Sneed, September 14, 1972, Lubbock, Texas, *Ancestry.com.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Death Certificate for Eva Lee Sneed Cade, January 28, 2013, Lubbock, Texas, *Ancestry.com.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Brandon Jett is the only historian to discuss Jackson, but he is incorrect in several of his assertions. Namely, that Jackson, Sanders and Sneed lived together, which he likely accepted unquestioned as that same assertion appeared in many Harrison County newspapers. Additionally he claims it is unclear what happened to Sneed after his first trial in Marshall, which is also incorrect. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)