

= Lynching of Jesse Washington =

Jesse Washington , a teenage black farmhand , was lynched in Waco , Texas , on May 15 , 1916 , in what became a well @-@ known example of racially motivated lynching . Washington was convicted of raping and murdering Lucy Fryer , the wife of his white employer in rural Robinson , Texas . There were no eyewitnesses to the crime , but during his interrogation by the McLennan County sheriff he signed a confession and described the location of the murder weapon .

Washington was tried for murder in Waco , in a courtroom filled with furious locals . He entered a guilty plea and was quickly sentenced to death . After his sentence was pronounced , he was dragged out of the court by observers and lynched in front of Waco 's city hall . Over 10 @,@ 000 spectators , including city officials and police , gathered to watch the attack . There was a celebratory atmosphere at the event , and many children attended during their lunch hour . Members of the mob castrated Washington , cut off his fingers , and hung him over a bonfire . He was repeatedly lowered and raised over the fire for about two hours . After the fire was extinguished , his charred torso was dragged through the town and parts of his body were sold as souvenirs . A professional photographer took pictures as the event unfolded , providing rare imagery of a lynching in progress . The pictures were printed and sold as postcards in Waco .

Although the lynching was supported by many Waco residents , it was condemned by newspapers around the United States . The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ( NAACP ) hired Elisabeth Freeman to investigate ; she conducted a detailed probe in Waco , despite the reluctance of many residents to speak about the event . After receiving Freeman 's report on the lynching , NAACP co @-@ founder and editor W. E. B. Du Bois published an in @-@ depth report featuring photographs of Washington 's charred body in *The Crisis* , and the NAACP featured his death in their anti @-@ lynching campaign . Although Waco had been regarded as a modern , progressive city , the lynching demonstrated that it still tolerated racial violence ; the event was nicknamed the " Waco horror " . The city subsequently gained a reputation for racism , but city leaders prevented violence on several occasions in subsequent decades . Historians have noted that Washington 's death helped alter the way that lynching was viewed ; the publicity it received curbed public support for the practice , which became viewed as barbarism rather than as an acceptable form of justice . In the 1990s and 2000s , some Waco residents lobbied for a monument to the lynching , an idea that has failed to garner wide support in the city .

= = Background = =

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries , a significant number of lynchings occurred in the Southern United States , primarily of African Americans in the states of Georgia , Mississippi , and Texas . Between 1890 and 1920 , about 3 @,@ 000 African Americans were killed by lynch mobs , usually after whites were the victims of crimes purportedly committed by blacks . Supporters of lynching justified the practice as a way to assert dominance over African Americans , to whom they attributed a criminal nature . Lynching also provided a sense of white solidarity in a culture with changing demographics and power structures . Although lynching was tolerated by much of southern society , opponents of the practice emerged , including some religious leaders and the nascent National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ( NAACP ) .

In 1916 , Waco , Texas , was a prosperous city with a population of more than 30 @,@ 000 . After it became associated with crime in the 19th century , community leaders sought to change its reputation , sending delegations across the U.S. to promote it as an idyllic locale . By the 1910s , Waco 's economy had become strong and the city had gained a pious reputation . A black middle class had emerged in the area , along with two black colleges . In the mid @-@ 1910s , blacks comprised about twenty percent of the Waco population . In her 2006 study of lynching , journalist Patricia Bernstein describes the city as then having a " thin veneer " of peace and respectability . Racial tension was present in the city : local newspapers often emphasized crimes committed by African Americans , and Sank Majors , a black man , was hanged from a bridge near downtown Waco in 1905 . A small number of anti @-@ lynching activists lived in the area , including the

president of Waco 's Baylor University . In 1916 , several factors led to an increase in local racism , including the screening of The Birth of a Nation , a movie that promoted white supremacy and glorified the Ku Klux Klan , and the sale of photographs of a recently lynched black man in Temple , Texas .

= = Murder and arrest = =

In Robinson , Texas , Lucy Fryer was murdered while alone at her house on May 8 , 1916 . She and her husband George were English immigrants , and had become well respected in the rural community where they operated a farm . News of the death quickly reached the McLennan County sheriff , Samuel Fleming , who immediately investigated with a team of law enforcement officers , a group of local men , and a doctor . The doctor determined that Fryer had been killed by blunt @-@ force trauma to the head . The local men suspected that Jesse Washington , a seventeen @-@ year @-@ old black man who had worked on the Fryers ' farm for five months , was responsible ; one of them stated that he had seen Washington near the Fryer house a few minutes before Lucy 's body was discovered . That night , sheriff 's deputies traveled to Washington 's home , finding him in front of the house wearing blood @-@ stained overalls . He attributed the stains to a nosebleed . Jesse , his brother William , and their parents were taken to nearby Waco to be questioned by the sheriff 's department ; although Jesse 's parents and brother were released after a short time , he was held for further interrogation . His questioners in Waco reported that he denied complicity in Fryer 's death , but offered contradictory details about his actions . Rumors spread after his arrest that he had been in an altercation with a white man a few days before the murder .

On May 9 , Fleming took Washington to Hill County to prevent vigilante action . The Hill County sheriff , Fred Long , questioned Washington with Fleming ; Washington told them he had killed Fryer following an argument about her mules , and described the murder weapon and its location . Long brought Washington to Dallas , Texas , while Fleming returned to Robinson . Fleming soon reported that he found a bloody hammer where Washington had indicated . In Dallas , Washington dictated and signed a statement that described the rape and murder of Fryer ; the confession was published the next day in Waco newspapers . Newspapers sensationalized the murder , describing Fryer 's attempts to resist Washington 's attack , although the doctor who had examined her body concluded that she was killed before she could resist . A lynch mob assembled in Waco that night to search the local jail , but dispersed after they did not find Washington . Nevertheless , a local paper praised their effort . That night , a small private funeral and burial were held for Lucy Fryer .

On May 11 , a grand jury was assembled in McLennan County and quickly returned an indictment against Washington ; the trial was scheduled for May 15 . The Times @-@ Herald of Waco published a notice on May 12 requesting that residents let the justice system determine Washington 's fate . Fleming traveled to Robinson on May 13 to ask residents to remain calm ; his address was well received . Washington was assigned several inexperienced lawyers . His lawyers prepared no defense , and noted that he appeared placid in the days before the trial .

= = Trial and lynching = =

On the morning of May 15 , Waco 's courthouse quickly filled to capacity in anticipation of the trial : the crowd nearly prevented some jurors from entering . Observers also filled the sidewalks around the courthouse ; over two thousand spectators were present . Attendees were almost entirely white , but a few quiet members of Waco 's black community were present . As Washington was led into the courtroom , one audience member pointed a gun at him , but was quickly overpowered . As the trial commenced , the judge attempted to keep order , insisting that the audience remain silent . Jury selection proceeded quickly : the defense did not challenge any selections of the prosecution . Bernstein states that the trial had a " kangaroo @-@ court atmosphere " . The judge asked Washington for a plea , and explained the potential sentences . Washington muttered a response , possibly " yes " , interpreted by the court as a guilty plea . The prosecution described the charges , and the court heard testimony from law enforcement officers and the doctor who examined Fryer 's

body . The doctor discussed how Fryer died , but did not mention rape . The prosecution rested , and Washington 's attorney asked him whether he had committed the offense . Washington replied , " That 's what I done [ sic ] " and quietly apologized . The lead prosecutor addressed the courtroom and declared that the trial had been conducted fairly , prompting an ovation from the crowd . The jury was then sent to deliberate .

After four minutes of deliberation , the jury 's foreman announced a guilty verdict and a sentence of death . The trial lasted about one hour . Court officers approached Washington to escort him away , but were pushed aside by a surge of spectators , who seized Washington and dragged him outside . Washington initially fought back , biting one man , but was soon beaten . A chain was placed around his neck and he was dragged toward city hall by a growing mob ; on the way downtown , he was stripped , stabbed , and repeatedly beaten with blunt objects . By the time he arrived at city hall , a group had prepared wood for a bonfire next to a tree in front of the building . Washington , semiconscious and covered in blood , was doused with oil , hung from the tree by a chain , and then lowered to the ground . Members of the crowd cut off his fingers , toes , and genitals . The fire was lit and Washington was repeatedly raised and lowered into the flames until he burned to death . German scholar Manfred Berg posits that the executioners attempted to keep him alive to increase his suffering . Washington attempted to climb the chain , but was unable to , owing to his lack of fingers . The fire was extinguished after two hours , allowing bystanders to collect souvenirs from the site of the lynching , including Washington 's bones and links of the chain . One attendee kept part of Washington 's genitalia ; a group of children snapped the teeth out of Washington 's head to sell as souvenirs . By the time that the fire was extinguished , parts of Washington 's arms and legs had been burned off and his torso and head were charred . His body was removed from the tree and dragged behind a horse throughout the town . Washington 's remains were transported to Robinson , where they were publicly displayed until a constable obtained the body late in the day and buried it .

The lynching drew a large crowd , including the mayor and the chief of police , although lynching was illegal in Texas . Sheriff Fleming told his deputies not to stop the lynching , and no one was arrested after the event . Bernstein speculates that his actions were motivated by a desire to harshly deal with crime to help his candidacy for re @-@ election that year . Mayor John Dollins may have also encouraged the mob owing to the belief that a lynching would be politically beneficial . The crowd numbered 15 @,@ 000 at its peak . Telephones helped spread word of the lynching , allowing spectators to gather more quickly than was previously possible . Local media reported that " shouts of delight " were heard as Washington burned , although they noted that some attendees disapproved . The Waco Semi @-@ Weekly Tribune maintained that a number of black Waco residents attended , a claim that historian Grace Hale of the University of Virginia sees as dubious . Waco residents , who likely had no connection with the rural Fryer family , comprised most of the crowd . Some people from nearby rural communities traveled to the city before the trial to witness the events . As the lynching occurred at midday , children from local schools walked downtown to observe , some climbing into trees for a better view . Many parents approved of their children 's attendance , hoping that the lynching would reinforce a belief in white supremacy . Some Texans saw participation in a lynching as a rite of passage for young men .

= = Aftermath = =

Fred Gildersleeve , a Waco @-@ based professional photographer , arrived at city hall shortly before the lynching , possibly at the mayor 's request , and photographed the event . His photographs provide rare depictions of a lynching in progress , rather than typical lynching photography , which only shows dead victims . Gildersleeve 's photographs include views of the crowd shot from a building and close images of Washington 's body ; some may have been taken by an assistant . Gildersleeve produced postcards featuring images of adolescents , some as young as twelve , gathered around Washington 's body . The individuals in the photographs made no attempts to hide their identities . Berg believes that their willingness to be photographed indicates that they knew that no one would be prosecuted for Washington 's death . Although some Waco residents

sent the cards to out @-@ of @-@ town relatives , several prominent local citizens persuaded Gildersleeve to stop selling them , fearing that the images would come to characterize the town .

In the days after the lynching , newspapers fiercely condemned the event . Within a week , news of the lynching was published as far away as London . A New York Times editorial opined that , " in no other land even pretending to be civilized could a man be burned to death in the streets of a considerable city amid the savage exultation of its inhabitants " . In the New York Age , James Weldon Johnson described the members of the lynch mob as " lower than any other people who at present inhabit the earth " . Although many southern newspapers had previously defended lynching as a defense of civilized society , after Washington 's death , they did not cast the practice in such terms . The Montgomery Advertiser wrote that , " no savage was ever more cruel ... than the men who participated in this horrible , almost unbelievable episode " . In Texas , the Houston Chronicle and the Austin American criticized the lynch mob , but spoke highly of Waco . The Morning News of Dallas reported the story , but did not publish an accompanying editorial . In Waco , the Times @-@ Herald refrained from editorializing about the lynching . The Waco Morning News briefly noted their disapproval of the lynching , focusing their criticism on papers they felt had attacked the city unfairly . They cast the condemnatory editorials in the aftermath of the lynching as " Holier than thou " remarks . A writer for the Waco Semi @-@ Weekly Tribune defended the lynching , stating that Washington deserved to die and that blacks should view Washington 's death as a warning against crime . The paper later carried an editorial from the Houston Post condemning the lynching , characterizing the column as part of an attack on the city .

Some Waco residents condemned the lynching , including local ministers and leaders of Baylor University . The judge who presided over Washington 's trial later stated that members of the lynch mob were " murderers " ; the jury 's foreman told the NAACP that he disapproved of their actions . Some people who witnessed the lynching recorded persistent nightmares and psychological trauma . A few citizens contemplated staging a protest against the lynching , but declined to do so owing to concerns about reprisals or the appearance of hypocrisy . After the lynching , town officials maintained that it was attended by a small group of malcontents . Although their claim is contradicted by photographic evidence , several histories of Waco have repeated this assertion . There were no negative repercussions for Dollins or Police Chief John McNamara : although they made no attempt to stop the mob , they remained well respected in Waco . As was common with such attacks , no one was prosecuted for the lynching .

Although leaders of Waco 's black community gave public condolences to the Fryer family , they complained about Washington 's lynching only in private . One exception was the Paul Quinn Weekly newspaper , of Texas ' Paul Quinn College ? an all @-@ black institution ? which published several articles that criticized the lynch mob and city leadership . In one article , the author proclaimed that Jesse Washington was innocent and George Fryer was guilty . A. T. Smith , the paper 's editor , was subsequently convicted of libel . George Fryer also sued the college for libel ; his vehemence caused some Robinson residents to suspect that he played a part in his wife 's death . Bernstein states that it is " highly unlikely " that George Fryer played a role in Lucy 's murder , but notes that there is the " shadow of a possibility " that he bore some guilt .

= = NAACP investigation and campaign = =

The NAACP hired Elisabeth Freeman , a women 's suffrage activist from New York City , to investigate the lynching . She had traveled to Texas in late 1915 or early 1916 to help organize the suffrage movement there . After attending a suffrage convention in Dallas in early May , she began her assignment in Waco , posing as a journalist and attempting to interview people about the lynching . She found that almost all residents were reluctant to discuss the event . She spoke with town officials and obtained pictures of the lynching from Gildersleeve , who was initially reluctant to provide them . Although she feared for her safety , she enjoyed the challenge of the investigation . When speaking with city leaders , Freeman convinced them that she planned to defend Waco against criticism when she returned to the north . Some journalists soon grew suspicious of her presence and warned residents not to talk to outsiders . Local African Americans , however , gave

her a warm reception .

Fleming and the judge who presided over the trial each spoke with her ; both argued that they did not deserve blame for the lynching . A schoolteacher who had known Washington told Freeman that Washington was illiterate , and that all attempts to teach him to read had been futile . Freeman concluded that white residents were generally supportive of Washington 's lynching , although many disliked that his body was mutilated . She determined that the mob was led by a bricklayer , a saloonkeeper , and several employees of an ice company . The NAACP did not publicly identify them . Freeman concluded that Washington killed Fryer , and that he was motivated by her domineering attitude towards him .

W. E. B. Du Bois was incensed by news of the attack , saying " any talk of the triumph of Christianity , or the spread of human culture , is idle twaddle as long as the Waco lynching is possible in the United States " . After receiving Freeman 's report , he placed an image of Washington 's body on the cover of an issue of *The Crisis* , the NAACP 's newsletter , which discussed the event . The issue was titled " The Waco Horror " and was published as an eight @-@ page supplement to the July edition . Du Bois popularized " Waco Horror " as a name for Washington 's lynching ; the *Houston Chronicle* and the *New York Times* had previously used the word " horror " to describe the event . In 1916 , *The Crisis* had a circulation of about 30 @,@ 000 , three times the size of the NAACP 's membership . Although the paper had campaigned against lynching in the past , this issue was the first that contained images of an attack . The NAACP 's board was initially hesitant to publish such graphic content , but Du Bois insisted on doing so , arguing that uncensored coverage would push white Americans to support change . In addition to images , the issue included accounts of the lynching that Freeman obtained from Waco residents . Du Bois wrote *The Crisis* ' article on the lynching ; he edited and organized Freeman 's report for publication , although she was not named in the issue . The article concluded with a call to support the anti @-@ lynching movement . The NAACP distributed the report to hundreds of newspapers and politicians , a campaign that led to wide condemnation of the lynching . Many white observers were disturbed by the southerners who celebrated the lynching . *The Crisis* included more images of lynchings in subsequent issues . Washington 's death received continued discussion in *The Crisis* . Oswald Garrison Villard wrote in a later edition of the paper that " the crime at Waco is a challenge to our American civilization " .

Other black newspapers also carried significant coverage of the lynching , as did liberal papers such as *The New Republic* and *The Nation* . Freeman traveled around the U.S. to speak to audiences about her investigation , maintaining that a shift in public opinion could accomplish more than legislative actions . Although there were other lynchings as brutal as Washington 's , the availability of images and the setting of his death made it a cause célèbre . Leaders of the NAACP hoped to launch a legal battle against those responsible for Washington 's death , but abandoned the plan owing to the projected cost .

The NAACP had struggled financially around that time . Their anti @-@ lynching campaign saw some success in raising funds , but it was scaled back as the U.S. entered World War I. NAACP president Joel Elias Spingarn later stated that the group 's campaign placed " lynching into the public mind as something like a national problem " . In her 2006 study of lynching , Bernstein describes this anti @-@ lynching campaign as the " barest beginnings of a battle that would last many years " .

The number of lynchings in the U.S. increased in the late 1910s . Additional lynchings occurred in Waco in the 1920s , partially owing to the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan . By the late 1920s , however , Waco authorities had begun to protect blacks from lynching , as in the case of Roy Mitchell . Authorities feared that negative publicity generated by lynchings ? such as the NAACP 's campaign following Washington 's death ? would hinder their efforts to attract investors . The NAACP fought to portray lynching as a savage , barbaric practice , an idea which eventually gained traction in the public mind . Bernstein credits the group 's efforts with helping to end " the worst public atrocities of the racist system " in the Waco region .

= = Analysis and legacy = =

In 2011 , Berg concluded that Washington probably murdered Fryer , but doubted that he raped her . The same year , Julie Armstrong of the University of South Florida argued that Washington was probably innocent of both charges . Bernstein notes that Washington 's motives have never been established . She also states that his confession could have been coerced , and that the murder weapon ? perhaps the strongest evidence against him ? could have been planted by authorities .

Bernstein states that Washington 's lynching was a unique event because it occurred in a city with a reputation for progressiveness , but was attended by thousands of people who were excited by the brutal torture . Similar acts of mob violence typically occurred in smaller towns with fewer spectators . William Carrigan of Rowan University argues that the culture of central Texas had glorified retributive mob violence for decades before Washington 's lynching , maintaining that this culture of violence explains how such a brutal attack could be publicly celebrated . Hale posits that Washington 's death signaled a transition in the practice of lynching , demonstrating its acceptance in modernized , 20th @-@ century cities . She notes that Washington 's lynching illustrates how technological innovations , such as telephones and inexpensive photographs , could empower lynch mobs but also increase society 's condemnation of their actions .

In their 2004 study of lynching , Peter Ehrenhaus and A. Susan Owen compare the lynching to a blood sacrifice , arguing Waco residents felt a sense of collective righteousness after Washington 's death , as they saw him as the presence of evil in the community . Bernstein compares the public brutality of the lynch mob to the medieval English practice of hanging , drawing , and quartering people convicted of high treason .

Amy Louise Wood of Illinois State University writes that the event was " a defining moment in the history of lynching , " arguing that with Washington 's death , " lynching began to sow the seeds of its own collapse . " Although the spectacle of violent mob attacks had previously benefited white supremacists , Wood contends that after Washington 's death was publicized , the anti @-@ lynching movement included images of racially motivated brutality in their campaigns . Carrigan notes that Washington 's death may have received more public attention than any other lynching in the United States , and sees the event as a " turning point in the history of mob violence in Central Texas " . Although the outcry it provoked did not end the practice , it helped bring an end to public support of such attacks by city leaders . Carrigan states that the lynching was " the most infamous day in the history of central Texas " until the Waco siege of 1993 .

After the practice of lynching was suppressed in central Texas , it received little attention from local historians . However , Waco developed a reputation for racism ? propagated in part by American history textbooks ? to the vexation of the city 's white residents . In the years following the lynching , African Americans often held Waco in disdain , and some viewed the 1953 Waco tornado outbreak as divine retribution . White leaders of Waco took a non @-@ violent approach in response to demonstrations during the Civil Rights Movement , possibly owing to a desire to avoid stigmatizing the city again .

Blues musician Sammy Price recorded a version of " Hesitation Blues " that referenced Washington 's lynching . Price lived in Waco as a child , possibly at the time of Washington 's death . Waco @-@ based novelist Madison Cooper featured a lynching , thought to be based on Washington 's death , as a key event in his 1952 novel Sironia , Texas .

In the 1990s , Lawrence Johnson , a member of Waco 's city council , viewed pictures of the Washington lynching at the National Civil Rights Museum , and began to lobby for a monument to the lynching . In 2002 , Lester Gibson , another member of the city council , proposed that a plaque be installed at the courthouse where Washington was lynched . He further stated that the plaque should carry an apology from the city . The ideas were discussed , but proved unfruitful . In the 2000s , the idea of a memorial was revived by a McLennan County commissioner and the Waco Chamber of Commerce ; the Waco Herald Tribune has editorialized in support of a historical marker on the site of the lynching . Some descendants of Fryer objected to the proposed memorial .

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