

Module 4: The Life and Lynching of James Pearsall

Introduction

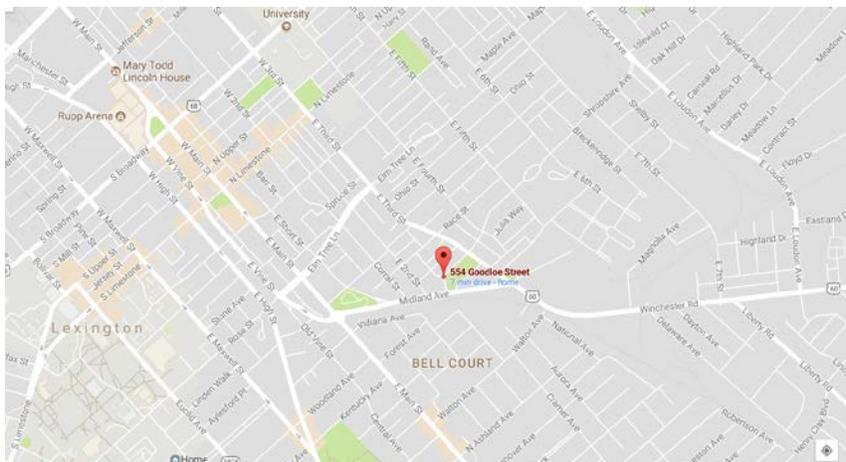
Lynching in the Southern states was a reoccurring phenomenon that claimed the lives of many men, women, and children, both black and white, in forms of mobs or even forms of executions i.e. legal lynching. In this essay, the focus of this atrocious act is directed towards lynching in Kentucky around the Lexington area. James Pearsall, a young black teen, was legally lynched within the bounds of Fayette County. The cause of the crime was criminal assault on a white woman and her husband. Through archival research, the short story of Mr. Pearsall is told from his occupation and early life to the crime that eventually lead to his death. While this may be a morbid and dark subject, I believe it is important to write this in memory of the African Americans who were never given a voice due to them being born in such an evil and malicious time. The act of lynching was an act driven out of hate and anger towards a particular person; most of these times being due to race. *What geographical and societal implications did Kentucky and the Deep South deal blacks in regards to lynching?* Let's now explore the life and death of James Pearsall.

Literature Review

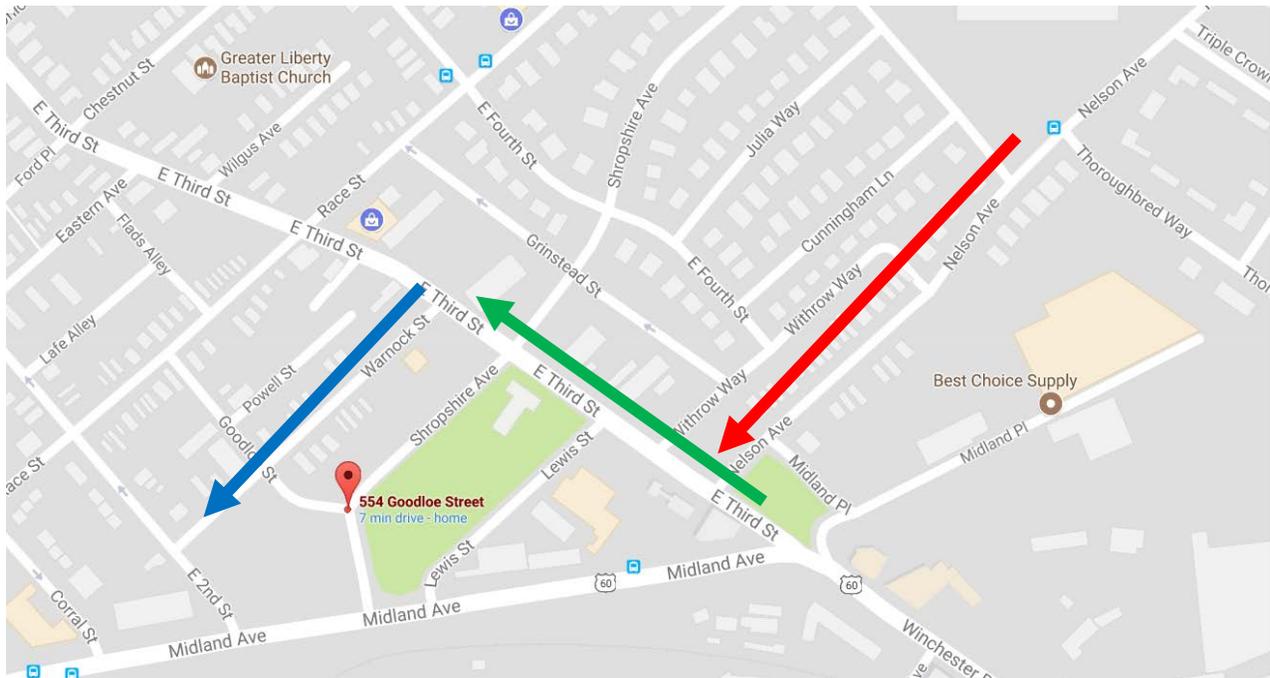
Reading or even hearing about lynching can be a very uncomfortable and unsettling thing to endure. The unfortunate fact is that lynching holds a very vital part of the African American history within the United States and the overall history of America. Within our reading *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, the horrors and disgusting truths are revealed about the acts committed on these generally hated people. Within the text, the people and places associated with the conduction of the ceremony are detailed out with highlights to the Deep South and white American men. Within this review, I want to focus on the geographical aspect of lynching instead of the reasons behind them. Since this is because our focus is specific to Fayette County, Kentucky, I want to discover the locational aspects of lynching in the 1905-1906 American South.

By state, Kentucky had the third lowest amount of lynching victims (170) from 1877-1950 in the American Deep South. Just within Kentucky, Fayette County is more near the bottom of this list unlike other counties that are situated on or near the Mississippi River (Fulton County). This is because the river was used to transport slaves to other locations that were on the river. This led to the counties surrounding the Mississippi River, in all southern states, to have a higher percentage of blacks inhabiting the area. So why is Fayette County/Lexington our priority location right now? Other than us all living in the area, Fayette County is the second most populous county within the state of Kentucky and held many important implications regarding Lexington and prior slave trading. The history of Lexington is full of African American history, some good and some bad. Lynching victims within the state were executed due to crimes of either murder or rape. This being said, the attentions gets geared towards the specific case regarding James Pearsall.

Study Area



Above are two pictures, one zoomed in and one zoomed out, of the location where James Pearsall lived with his sister (Hattie Hill) and her spouse (Charles Hill). As you can see now, the area is completely vacant meaning the house they once stood has been demolished at some point. After researching Goodloe St. in the Lexington City directory, I came across the knowledge that most of Goodloe St. was occupied by colored people. Now, not all of the houses have been demolished, but most of them around the intersection with Shropshire Ave. have been removed. The house was situated near where Charles Young Park and Thoroughbred Park now are.



Above is a map that explores the path James Pearsall presumably took on the night of July 5, 1905. As you can see, the location of his family home on Goodloe St. is centrally situated within the boundaries of the crime scene. Pearsall started on Nelson Ave, made his way to E. Third St, and then onto Warnock St. for his last suspected assault. Pearsall was later found in an area not very close to here in which details of the area are unknown. The specific house addresses were not found to match with the newspaper rendition of the event nor was there any information about any of the assaulted people in any of the early 1900's Lexington city directories. This area now has much less residential living space since space was opened up for new roads, parks, and commercial buildings.

Methods

To start, each of us in the class chose one black victim of lynching that died within Fayette County. I decided to select the young seventeen year old named James Pearsall. We each started our preliminary research by doing simple Google searches for city directories dated around the death year of our selected individual or even looking up newspaper archives to see if any news got spread to the public about the crime in which they committed. While using Google and the online University of Kentucky learning tools we gathered a good amount of information, but I did not receive the information I truly needed until we visited the archives located at the University.

The archives at the University were packed full of live text documents dating all the way back to before the 1850s. When I found the city directory for 1904, I quickly searched and found information relating to street address, occupation, and even sibling status. However, when dealing with archival materials from over a hundred years ago, it is often difficult to decipher the written words and faded text often displayed on the materials. Along with that, many of these old city directories are so fragile that turning one page could cause the binding of the book to fall apart (I know from personal experience). With these hindrances, it was more difficult for me to find all the data and more difficult to tell the real story of James Pearsall. Another bias that I should mention is the chance of false information being published in texts that are deemed factual or in community papers where people go to read about what is happening within the town. In 1905, if something negative about a black person was written in the day's paper, people would not second guess the author no matter how gruesome it may sound today. These were the main methods I endured while researching information about James Pearsall, now here is what I found.

Findings and Observations (The Story)

James Pearsall was a young black teen that lived a part of his in Fayette County. I was unsure after all of my research when he was born and if he was born in Lexington or not. The earliest record of his existence that I have found was from a 1904 Lexington city directory where I found the street address for Pearsall and his family: 554 Goodloe St. In the directory, it lists the other members of the household as Charles and Hattie Hill. Sources other than the directories such as newspaper clippings gave me the information that Pearsall had another sister who was named Pricilla McCann. She, however, was not as easy to find under any archival documents other than one newspaper story listing Pearsall's sisters as Hattie Hill and Pricilla McCann. Charles Hill is presumably his brother-in-law and Hattie's spouse. The listing has the residence as a boarding house where, I imagine, many blacks came and lived and created a "family". This then leads me to believe there is a chance that James, Hattie, and Pricilla may have never been blood-related siblings after all. This we will never know unless proper documentation is found and researched. The short time I had doing this research did not give me the ability to uncover such information.

According to the city directory, Pearsall's occupation was as a driver. This made sense to me since other sources listed him as a jockey. The directory is a reliable source so I choose to believe he was a driver or chauffeur of some sort. I do recognize the possibility of having false information within text such as a directory so I am not sure if it is true or not. The age at his time of death was listed as either being seventeen or eighteen years old so this type of occupation for such a young individual is sort of questionable if you ask me. From prior knowledge about the early 1900s South, I know that blacks were hardly sold cars at any age especially at such a young age like Pearsall. He was licensed from the day he could learn how to drive which leads me to believe he was maybe thought highly of in his community to have been given this responsibility. That is about all of the information I have acquired about James Pearsall's early life before his conviction and eventual lynching. Next, I would like to discuss his actions and what the court decided as "truth" during his trial.

James Pearsall, at the age of sixteen or seventeen years old, was charged with rape, robbery, and attempted murder due to the verdict he received from a jury of twelve men on April 27, 1906. The court case was labeled *Pearsall vs. Commonwealth*. First, the jury needed to

determine if the confession Pearsall gave as being “guilty” was voluntary and admissible i.e. they needed to make sure Pearsall was not swayed to say something he did not want to say by any means of persuasion. After he was arrested, Pearsall was transported to Louisville for his own safety against any angry mob members looking for a violent outcome. One officer told Pearsall to tell the truth since it was a means of forgiveness and it would be in his best interest. Another statement explained that a different officer approached not questioning his guilt in the situation. This officer did not put any fear nor did he try to persuade him with positive thinking to tell the truth. This led the jury to believe that the confession from the accused was in fact a voluntary act.

Pearson was charged with rape against a white woman, attempted robbery at three separate homes all inhabited by white folk, and attempted murder for shooting the rape victim’s husband who was trying to protect his wife. During this time period and in the court’s eyes, the act that Pearsall committed was considered “one of the foulest black crimes in society”. He was in prison for nearly seventeen months before his hanging that was held at the Fayette County Jail Yard. On the days leading up to his hanging, reporters were describing Pearsall as having little care for his upcoming death and spent a lot of time reading the Bible and smoking. His sisters came to say goodbye to their brother (this is where I pull another sister Pricilla). Other colored preachers were present to read the Bible and pray with him especially Rev. Oglesby who was the one that asked him for his final words and confessions. Pearsall had a hard time speaking at this point, but managed to thank all the officers who had been so nice to him up to that point. He also wished to see everyone in heaven because he was truly going home. The following are the author’s thoughts to the answers Pearsall gave to Rev. Oglesby:

“What truths there may be in the expressed thoughts of the culprit above? There is but one interference. The interference is that the surest and safest passport through the Pearly Gates is by the gallows route. It is better and your chances for heaven are greater to be born a negro rape-fiend than to be born. The Blades editor was presented with a free ticket to a front seat near the throne with the understanding that if eternity had to be spent in the company of such a bestial brute it would be declined with thanks and a preference expressed for more congenial society even though the climatic conditions be unfavorable. Here was a man convicted by a jury of twelve men for the foulest and blackest crime known to human society actually confessing to believe that he is a fit subject for heaven. If

his confession was true, why hang him if he is fit to associate with the angels in highest heaven and sing ‘Hosanna’ about the throne of the Most High, is he not also a fit companion for men? Did the mere fact of hanging him transform him from a vile sinner to a virtuous creature unfit for Earth or fit for heaven? Saved and redeemed and yet unfit to associate with human beings? What a farce. What a travesty on all moral influences. Going home now indeed far better for the unfortunate victim with his rapacious lust had he gone home before committing his awful deed. Further comment is unnecessary. It need only be added that the culprit was reported to have been a faithful Sunday school scholar.”

I found this to be significantly important to shed light on the fact that these people were not equals and any information that I researched could have been falsified. If these were the thoughts of the reporter, imagine the thoughts of the people who were excited to see the lynching and bought tickets to see the lynching themselves. Cold chills.

Analysis, Interpretation, and Conclusion

There was not much of a conclusion or final answer on the life of James Pearsall that I was able to recover. I was able to piece together bits and parts of his story throughout his short life. I now see the hate that people were expressing and the fear many blacks had during these changing times. I believe it is important to do in-depth research when focusing on an individual, especially when that individual was in a lower hierarchical social group. This focus is needed because the information about these people might have been conveyed as a lie since many of the people who were the authors and writers of the sources I used were predominantly white and could have had the same bias, ugly opinions about blacks that most of their fellow community members also expressed.

Pearsall lived in a much different time than we live in today. He lived in a time, regardless of what you actually did or not, where if you were black you were going to get the upmost worst punishment thinkable just for being accused of a crime. If a white man did not like the way you looked at his wife, he could gain moral and spread lies about attempted rape and get the black man lynched. It was a messed up, failing, and unrecognizable American society. This was a very hard subject to write about and even more hard to write about the vulgar text that described the brutal times. The positive of this educational experience was to give light to a very

sensitive and overlooked topic. Lynching should be recognized by all as a part of African American history and people should practice respectful research since they are not only dealing with history, but the tragic ends to a lot of innocent lives.

References

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