A Little More Freedom

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Migrants came to the Lower Midwest hoping to find a better life than they left behind in the former slave states. In light of northern whites’ sacrifices in the titanic struggle for freedom and the legal and constitutional changes migrants and their European American allies were able to bring about, their hopes seemed at first to be justified. But as the Civil War faded into an increasingly distant past, African Americans came to recognize that state capitals, where the new statutes were hammered out, could not serve as the forge on which European American attitudes were reshaped. Local communities were the true furnaces of racial interaction, and they were as capable of inflaming white prejudices as incinerating them, as efficacious at searing African American aspirations as fueling them.

ATTACK

Studies of racial violence in the United States typically focus upon lynch-
ings. At least part of the reason for this emphasis is that lynching has been thought to be easily defined, as an illegal group action causing the death of a person or persons under the pretext of service to justice or tradition. A recent comprehensive analysis of southern lynching has shown that the number of incidents of whites lynching blacks rose through the 1880s to a peak of nearly one hundred per year in the early 1890s, then declined irregularly over the subsequent third of a century. Nor was the North, including the Lower Midwest, free from vicious mob attacks upon its African American citizens.

How did African American migrants, prospective migrants, and community residents regard racially inspired mob violence? In his autobiographical *Black Boy*, Richard Wright testifies to the chilling effect that news of a lynching could produce:

> What I had heard altered the look of the world, induced in me a temporary paralysis of will and impulse. The penalty of death awaited me if I made a false move and I wondered if it was worth-while to make any move at all. The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness.

Similarly, Luther Wheeler, born in Cairo, Illinois, in 1914, recalled knowing the precise spot where a lynching had taken place five years before his birth. But a focus on lynching deaths defines too narrowly the threat of white violence to African Americans. For a migrant deciding whether and where to settle or resettle in the Lower Midwest, other forms of antiblack violence could produce an impact similar to that of a completed lynching. For example, a mob attack that failed to kill its victim because of forces beyond the mob’s control could signal local white attitudes just as clearly. The scope of an inquiry into European American violence should be broadened beyond lynching for another reason, too. An analysis of lynching that restricts itself to completed lynchings can leave an impression of African Americans only as victims. When prevented lynchings are included in the analysis, however, in particular those averted by African American action, a more rounded picture, one that is capable of incorporating African American agency, comes into view.

Antiblack collective violence in the Lower Midwest included twenty completed lynchings and at least six attempted lynchings, five nonfatal mob attacks, four fatal mob attacks, and five full-scale riots in which mobs took over a large portion of a city and were dispersed only by a significant military force (table A.4). At least one riot occurred in each of the three states:
Akron, Ohio (1900); Evansville, Indiana (1903); Springfield, Ohio (1904 and 1906); and Springfield, Illinois (1908). Chicago experienced recurrent strike-related violence, but in none of the region’s other cities that reached 100,000 population by 1910—Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Dayton, Toledo, and Indianapolis—were any violent incidents reported. Some attacks took place in rural areas, but small towns and small cities were the most common sites of antiblack collective violence.

Historian Fitzhugh Brundage, in an exhaustive study of Lynchings in Georgia and Virginia, uses a taxonomy incorporating four types of mob violence to illustrate the complex of actions and motives involved in lynchings. Small mobs of less than fifty participants were either terrorist mobs, which “made no pretense of upholding the law,” or private mobs, which “exacted vengeance for a wide variety of alleged offenses.” Posses, which could range widely in size, became mobs when they “overstepped their quasi-legal function.” Mass mobs, Brundage’s fourth category, numbered more than fifty and “punished alleged criminals with extraordinary ferocity and, on occasion, great ceremony.”10 Mass mobs clearly reflected community values in their bloody work, as they operated openly, making no attempt to conceal participants’ identity. Posses less clearly represented the will of their communities, and private and terrorist mobs, whose members often masked themselves or operated under cover of darkness, seem not to have considered themselves as unambiguous instruments of community wishes. Georgia represents a Deep South pattern, in which all four types of mobs were active. In Virginia few terrorist mobs or posses appeared, and mob violence was carried out primarily by private and mass mobs. But Virginia was not representative of the border states, for terrorist mobs were more common in Kentucky and Missouri than in the Old Dominion. Most southern lynchings involved whites killing blacks; some were white-on-white murders, and a few were black-on-black, but almost never did blacks participate in lynching whites.11

Antiblack violence in the Lower Midwest fits the border state pattern, in which private, terrorist, and mass mobs predominated, whether the attack culminated in a lynching or not. Only one posse-type mob appeared, in the murder of Eli Ladd in Blountsville, Indiana, in February 1890. But at the root of this deadly conflict lay a private feud between Ladd and a friend of the justice of the peace who deputized and led the posse that killed Ladd. Ladd’s killing illustrates the difficulty in applying categories to acts of violence, but it also demonstrates the variety of forms that Brundage’s categories are designed to convey.12

Terrorist violence in the Lower Midwest sometimes occurred for explicitly political reasons. The intertwining of race, politics, and violence is clearly evident in an incident that occurred in the Clinton County, Ohio, hamlet
of Sabina during the spring of 1889. Local Republicans were divided by the
contest for the party’s nomination for state representative. George Slater,
an African American, was an active and prominent supporter of one of the
candidates, Dr. M. Wilkerson. One night, a group of masked men seized
Slater, bound him and hanged him from a tree outside Wilkerson’s office.
Wilkerson awoke and came to Slater’s rescue before he strangled. The mob
dispersed when Wilkerson emerged. The masked men were unwilling to
attack a prominent European American professional, but they had no
scruples about lynching his vocal African American supporter, an act that
was clearly intended to intimidate Slater’s friends and Wilkerson’s backers
among the African American community.\textsuperscript{13}

Terrorist mobs usually appeared in the Lower Midwest during conflicts
between strikers and strikebreakers. One of the best-known examples is
the mob of largely immigrant coal miners who attacked a settlement of
African American miners and their families at Spring Valley, Illinois, on
August 4, 1895. Spring Valley, a company town owned by the Chicago and
Northwestern Railroad, had been the scene of struggles between miners
and owners since 1889. In that year the owners had locked out the miners,
eventually replacing them with Italian, Belgian, French, German, Polish,
and other European workers. The new workers went out in 1894 as part of a
national coal strike led by the United Mine Workers, but they were defeated.
The mine owners now brought in African American miners. The violence
in 1895 was provoked by an assault and robbery against an Italian worker.
City police arrested five African American suspects. When a mob began to
march on the jail, the suspects were freed. But the police then searched the
settlement, “the Location,” where the African American miners lived, and
confiscated weapons. The mob marched on the Location headed by a brass
band, stopping on the way to demand of the mine manager that he discharge
all the company’s black workers. He refused, and the mob then attacked
the settlement, driving men, women, and children out of their homes and
assaulting them as they fled. The Italian mayor of the town did his best to
prevent county officials from interfering with the onslaught. Fortunately, no
one was killed. The refugees regrouped in a nearby town, and during the next
few days they attempted to gather their belongings from the wrecked settle-
ment. Through the use of terror the mob had tried to achieve a political goal,
driving rival workers from their jobs. But the victims’ effective regroupment
gave the first indication that the mob’s goal was not to be achieved.\textsuperscript{14}

African American communities across Illinois rallied to the support of
the Spring Valley victims. From Peoria, Galesburg, Evanston, Elgin, East
St. Louis, Rockford, Moline, and Chicago came resolutions of indigna-
tion, angry telegrams to the governor, and offers of material support for the
refugees. “Black outrage,” concludes historian Caroline Waldron, “forced the state to act.” Governor John Peter Altgeld, initially reluctant to jeopardize his support among immigrants and workers, launched an inquiry and offered the use of state troops to county officials. Furthermore, the quick and furious response of the state’s African Americans “undermined Spring Valley officials’ tacit approval of the violence.” Facing the threat of state intervention, town officials were forced to protect black miners as they returned to work several days after the riot. A few days later, two women and a man who had been driven from the Location, accompanied by an African American legislator from Chicago and backed by a legal fund contributed by Chicago’s African American community, pressed charges against their attackers. As miners emerged from the mine the next day, ten victims waited with the sheriff to identify rioters. Two dozen were arrested. Eight were convicted of riot and criminal assault and sent to the state penitentiary or reformatory.

Waldron argues that the frustration of the rioters’ goal resulted from native whites’ prejudice against the unassimilated immigrant miners, and she shows that this outcome was possible because of African Americans’ rapid mobilization and effective deployment of the language of citizenship. “Many times,” stated the Afro-American League of Illinois, “African-American citizens who were bred and born in this country, and who are in every sentiment and action, thoroughly American, are denied the opportunity of earning daily bread while imported aliens are indiscriminately employed in their stead.” The African American press played a major role both in linking local communities together and in shaping black protest. Through these means African Americans overcame their initial handicap, the unwillingness of both local and state authorities to assist their cause, and succeeded in negating a well-organized terrorist campaign.

A terrorist purpose sometimes inhered in violence that was initiated and directed for private ends. This was the case in the lynching of Roscoe Parker in West Union, a tiny hamlet in Adams County in southern Ohio, in January 1894. Parker was suspected of the murder of an elderly farm couple. He was taken from jail, over opposition by the sheriff and his deputy, and lynched by a mob that included neighbors of the murdered couple. The lynching took place at a preselected site beside a path leading to an African American rural settlement, where he was hanged and shot. The mob was reported as hanging Parker at that particular spot “to teach the blacks a lesson.” Although no one was indicted for Parker’s murder, his lynching did have other results. It spurred Harry Smith, editor of the Cleveland Gazette and newly elected to the Ohio legislature, to propose an antilynching bill drafted with the help of white civil rights advocate Albion Tourgee. Smith’s bill passed two years later. It was the most comprehensive legal attack on lynching ever
enacted and eventually served as a model for laws in other states and in the NAACP’s campaign for federal legislation.  

A terrorist element was largely lacking, however, in the only case of a possible black-on-black lynching in the Lower Midwest during this period. The victim was Peter Betters, a livery stable worker in his late thirties who was believed to have assaulted a sixty-five-year-old African American widow, Martha Wallace Thomas. Betters had previously boarded at Thomas’s home in Jamestown, a village near Xenia, Ohio. Betters was jailed, but a small lynch mob of between seven and ten masked persons, said to have been composed of either all African Americans or both African Americans and European Americans, quietly gained entry to the jail through a window about midnight. The lynchers pried open Betters’s cell with a crowbar, threatened to shoot him if he gave an alarm, then marched him down the street to the fairground, where he was hanged. Martha Thomas belonged to a well-known local family. Her mother was still living in Xenia, as were her two brothers, and her son worked in nearby Springfield. This was clearly a private lynching carried out to wreak vengeance for a wrong done to a member of an established local African American network. Even so, the choice of such a public site as the fairground suggests that the lynchers intended Betters’s fate to serve as a warning to other potential assailants of women.

The lynchers of Peter Betters almost certainly included African Americans, if they did not make up the entire mob. There is no record of a mob composed entirely of whites organizing to avenge an assault against a black person. This and other examples indicate that African Americans were not immune from acting in a violent and illegal manner when they felt justified in doing so. Between 1882 and 1930, 148 African Americans were lynched in the South by mobs that were partially or entirely African American. Such incidents occurred from time to time in the Midwest as well. In 1892 an alleged murderer was lynched in Kansas. A Chicago mob was only prevented by the police from lynching a black informer who had turned in a respected local citizen who had escaped from a Tennessee penitentiary. Some citizens of the black town of Brooklyn, Illinois, were reported in 1903 as attempting to lynch an alleged assailant against an African American woman. Such incidents kindled debate among African Americans. Participants in these debates avoided the gender issues involved when men lynched other men, supposedly in defense of women, and the legitimacy of violence was not at issue either. Such questions did not figure in European American dialogue over lynching—everyone assumed that violence could be justified in certain cases, and no one questioned men’s right to act violently—and their absence from both discourses testifies to shared cultural assumptions. Instead, discussions among African Americans turned
on matters of race and legality. When they noticed such incidents, northern black newspaper editors sometimes censured African American participation in lynch mobs, pointing out that African Americans could hardly blame European Americans if they engaged in lynching themselves.26 A report from the grassroots at one site of a black-on-black lynching took a different tack. “Many of the colored people of this place,” the correspondent reported from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, “are in favor of heavy punishment being meted out to the guilty parties, while others think it a poor rule that will not work both ways. The whites are not punished for lynching and the colored people had as well go free for the same crime.”27

According to the NAACP’s compilation of newspaper reports, slightly more African Americans (twenty-nine) than European Americans (twenty-six) were lynched in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois between 1889 and 1918.28 Yet African Americans never comprised more than 3 percent of the population in any of these states during that period. And the judicial outcome in Spring Valley was infrequently repeated; even when their identities were well known, lynchers were rarely prosecuted and even more rarely convicted. African American participation in lynching indicates that mob violence perpetrated against African Americans did not always function as a means of racial repression, but it should not obscure the fact that mob violence usually was intended to achieve that end.

The ferocity of a European American mob after African American victims and white communities’ sanction for that frenzy appeared clearly in a triple lynching in southern Indiana in 1900. The first two lynchings took place in Rockport, a small Ohio River town in Spencer County, upstream from Evansville. In 1900 Rockport’s African American population of 564 represented 20 percent of the town’s total. On Sunday, December 16, the town was aroused by news of discovery of the body of a young white barber, Hollie Simons. Police suspected two local African Americans, Bud Roland and Jim Henderson. Roland had once worked in Simons’s shop as a bootblack, but had been discharged. Roland and Henderson had been seen together near where Simons was attacked, so they were arrested. The decision to arrest Roland and Henderson was taken at a mass meeting, at which, according to the local newspaper, “citizens pledged themselves to stand between the officers and danger of prosecution should any objection be made to searching houses without the legal formality of a writ from the court.”29 A mob gathered around the jail and, when the sheriff attempted to move the prisoners, armed men prevented it. Only the year before, provoked by a wave of lynchings of European Americans, Indiana had passed a law requiring a sheriff to request militia assistance if he had cause to believe that a lynching was afoot and providing for removal from office as a penalty.
Violence: Patterns of Attack and Riposte

The sheriff, however, made no appeal to the governor for military assistance despite the ring of armed men surrounding the jail. At 7:30 p.m. a prearranged signal launched an assault on the jail. The sheriff did not resist the mob, but he refused to relinquish the keys, so a telephone pole was used as a battering ram to open a hole in the wall. Roland was taken out first. With a noose around his neck, he confessed, implicated Henderson and, to everyone’s surprise, related that a third African American man, Joe Rolla, was involved. The mob hanged Roland, followed by Henderson, and then headed for the hotel where Rolla worked as a porter. They were met by the hotel staff, who had hidden Rolla upstairs, and who provided an alibi for their colleague.

By Monday morning, Rolla had been arrested, and about 11 A.M. he was taken to Boonville, in neighboring Warrick County. The two county sheriffs, sensing that another mob attack was in the offing, tried to drive the prisoner to Evansville. They were prevented from carrying out their plan, however, by a crowd of Boonville citizens, who insisted that Rolla remain. In midafternoon a mob, evidently made up of Rockportians, marched on the Boonville jail equipped with ropes, crowbars, and a telephone pole. The mob numbered between fifty and seventy-five men, and their progress was watched by “the whole of Boonville and hundreds of Warrick Countians and people from Spencer county.” Protesting his innocence, Rolla was taken from the jail and hanged. By this time the governor had ordered troops to Boonville, but Rolla was dead before they left Evansville.

In Rockport and Boonville mob law prevailed, as it did in the South. Bud Roland had no opportunity to defend himself, and his confession was forced, to put it mildly. The mob regarded Roland as debased enough to commit a premeditated brutal murder, yet they killed Henderson solely on his word, and then traveled fifteen miles to lynch Rolla on the same flimsy grounds. The sheriffs of two counties ignored Indiana’s newly minted antilynching law and made no serious effort to defend their prisoners. Nor did any European American in the two counties except Rolla’s fellow hotel workers attempt to interfere with the mobs’ work. In Brundage’s taxonomy, these were both mass mobs, operating with the full sanction of the white communities. The crowd of thousands cheered Rolla’s murder. The mobs did their work unmasked, yet no charges seem to have been lodged against any participant. A local marshal was quoted as saying that black residents had become “overbearing and lawless,” and white citizens were said to have approved the mob killings as a warning to their African American neighbors.

The damage done by the Rockport and Boonville lynchers did not end with the deaths of Roland, Henderson, and Rolla. Instead, the triple lynching inspired civic authorities in other counties in southern Indiana
to take action against undesirable elements, who were invariably perceived as African American. Vigilance committees were reported to have formed in Grand View, Enterprise, Tell City, and Leavenworth to drive out “the worst element of negroes.” In Evansville, local officials instructed the police to arrest all “strange negroes.” If they could not satisfactorily explain their presence in the city, they were to be sentenced to imprisonment at hard labor. The purge was justified by the claim that the city held 2,000 African Americans who refused to work, spent their time in saloons, and sold their vote at election time. The tensions on both sides of the color line generated by such actions contributed to the outbreak of Evansville’s bloody race riot two years later.

The role of local white elites in antiblack violence comes into focus in the story of the foiled lynching in Washington Court House in 1894. The immediate sequence of events that produced the tragedy that unfolded there began with a report on October 9 by a fifty-one-year-old European American widow, Mary Parrett Boyd, that she had been raped in her rural home by an African American. Official suspicion turned to William Jasper Dolby, twenty, who lived with his grandmother in the nearby village of Jeffersonville. Dolby had been arrested during the previous summer for disorderly conduct, evidently as a result of an approach made to another European American woman, and had recently completed his sentence in the county jail. A description was circulated, and Dolby was apprehended near Columbus and returned to Washington Court House early on the morning of Tuesday, October 16. In midafternoon of the same day, Boyd came to the jail and, without a police lineup, identified Dolby as her assailant. By that evening, a large crowd had gathered around the jail with the evident intention of lynching Dolby. After darkness fell, Sheriff James F. Cook, a Republican Civil War veteran and longtime county sheriff, asked for military support, and the local militia unit, Company E of the 14th Regiment, Ohio National Guard, mobilized twenty-six men. Their commander ordered the crowd to disperse, and local officials three times declared the crowd to be a riotous assembly, but the mob only increased in size, so Cook telegraphed Governor William McKinley to request more troops. Before dawn on Wednesday, October 17, Companies B and C of the same regiment arrived on a train from Columbus under the regimental commander, Colonel A. B. Coit.

Attention now focused on the county jail and courthouse, the two buildings that occupied the courthouse square in the center of town. The jail, a single-story brick structure, occupied the northwest side of the square, its main door about 70 feet (21 meters) from the nearest entrance to the courthouse. Constructed only ten years before, the square sandstone courthouse stood three stories high, topped by a tower and cupola. Although there were
Figure 5.1 Ohio National Guardsmen form a gauntlet to convey William Dolby from the jail (left) to the courthouse door (center).

Photo credit: Ohio Historical Society
Chapter 5

entryways on the ground floor, the principal entrances, decorated with tall double oak doors, stood at the top of flights of stone steps and opened into the second story. Officials decided to hold Dolby's trial on Wednesday afternoon in the courtroom on the third floor. A grand jury was hastily empaneled and returned an indictment without the presence of either Mrs. Boyd or William Dolby. The problem now was to bring Dolby from the jail across those seventy feet to the courthouse through a crowd numbering somewhere between 300 and 2,500.

Curious bystanders no doubt made up part of the crowd. Its most active members, in contrast, had a powerful motive to destroy the accused rapist and in addition were accustomed to getting their way. Mary Boyd, as well as being highly regarded personally, was well connected in Fayette County society. She belonged to a family of prosperous farmers, although she herself was not well off, having been widowed during the Civil War decade. Her brother had served as a county commissioner, her son Elmer was an attorney, and one brother-in-law was a wealthy lumber merchant in Washington Court House. Also present, pacing back and forth before the courthouse and announcing to all and sundry what he intended to do with the revolver he carried, was another brother-in-law, Henry Kirk, also a wealthy farmer. During the afternoon, Sheriff Cook later testified, he was approached by “some of the oldest and best men in the county,” who inquired “what sort of resistance I would offer if a party would come to take the man from jail.” Cook replied that he would protect the prisoner “to the utmost and at all hazards,” even if it meant endangering himself. Colonel Coit reported a similar meeting, with the same result. The local Republican newspaper had already added its armload of fuel to the flames by announcing the rape in banner headlines: “SHOULD BE HUNG—MRS. KATE BOYD, AN ESTIMABLE WIDOW LADY—OF PARROTS STATION OUTRAGED BY A YOUNG COLORED FIEND.”

Coit tried to solve the problem of moving Dolby to the courthouse by creating a gauntlet formed by a double line of soldiers between the jail door and the courthouse, bayonets pointing outward (figure 5.1). The tactic very nearly failed, as the mob rushed forward when the deputies brought Dolby out of the jail, pushing the soldiers backward. Dolby and an accompanying deputy fell down, and Henry Kirk and other members of the mob seized the prisoner. Several militia officers fought back the would-be lynchers with pistols and sword butts and fists, aided by the bayonets and rifle butts of the troops, until Dolby could be rushed into the courthouse. Henry Kirk's nose was broken by a blow from a rifle butt. The waiting judge, Horatio B. Maynard, conducted a three-minute trial in which William Dolby pleaded guilty to the charge of rape and was sentenced to twenty years at hard labor.
in the state penitentiary, including an annual ten days in solitary confinement, the maximum legal penalty. Coit rushed downstairs to announce the outcome to the outraged mob in the hope of satisfying their demands. When angry shouts and curses and a volley of rocks met his announcement, he ordered the troops to load their weapons and proclaimed that further attacks would draw fire. Nevertheless, Coit and Cook abandoned their initial plan to convey Dolby to the penitentiary at Columbus on a late-afternoon train, deciding instead to hold out in the courthouse until the arrival of reinforcements.

The troops withdrew inside the courthouse, closing and barricading all the doors but those at the northwest entrance. In early evening, a fire was set at a stable near the courthouse, where the sheriff’s horses were stabled, in an
attempt to draw the troops out, but Coit and Cook refused to be distracted. Shortly afterward, a group of men and boys began battering at the closed southeast doors with a 20-foot (6.1 meter), 260-pound (118 kilogram) oak timber. When the doors gave way, the guardsmen fired into the besiegers, the mob behind them, and the curious crowd that filled the square (figure 5.2). One teenage boy was killed instantly, four young men were fatally wounded, and more than a dozen other citizens were injured. The guardsmen’s volleys broke the spirit of the mob. When reinforcements arrived, Coit marched Dolby to the train behind a wall of troops and conveyed him directly to the penitentiary.

In the riot’s aftermath, citizens of Washington Court House clamored for legal retribution against Coit. They found themselves isolated, however, as newspapers across the state denounced the resort to mob law and defended the decision to fire. The local coroner, who was related to both the Boyd family and one of the victims of the shooting, produced a report blaming Coit for the deaths, and the colonel was indicted on three counts of manslaughter. Meanwhile, Coit requested a military court of inquiry, which cleared him of wrongdoing after a ten-day hearing that questioned 167 witnesses. A lengthy trial on the first manslaughter charge resulted in acquittal, after which the state legislature forced the remaining charges to be dropped and reimbursed Coit for his legal expenses. The entire process was extremely frustrating, humiliating, and painful to the local leadership in Washington Court House, especially the legislature’s decision to pay Coit’s legal bills.39

The discomfiture of the local elite was entirely warranted, because participation by some of their members ignited the mob attacks. Fayette County had been the scene of rapes and attempted rapes before October 1894 by both black and white men, yet never before had the crime provoked mob violence.40 That a lynch mob formed after William Dolby was apprehended seems to have been due primarily to the leadership and example provided by the men of Mary Boyd’s prominent family, who sought to turn a private grievance into a public injury, and to punish that injury in the most public possible way. In their plaintive and fulsome protests against the condemnation rained upon their community and the official backing given to Coit, local leaders conveniently ignored the role played by Boyd’s family during the afternoon assault. They focused instead upon the small number and rowdy behavior of the rioters who were involved in the evening attack on the southeast doors. Yet the evening’s attackers were doing no more than following the example of the consequential and wealthy men who had taken the lead a few hours earlier in attempting to lynch William Dolby. Although members of the local elite may not have been involved in the fatal action, they set in motion the process that led to that end.
Local elites in Washington Court House, however, were not united on the issues at stake. After Dolby’s sentencing and before the evening attack, the Presbyterian minister and Elmer Boyd both addressed the mob, beseeching them to disperse. So did Mills Gardner, a leading attorney, former state legislator, Republican presidential elector, and longtime supporter of the local African American community. The county turned on Sheriff Cook, who was trounced in the next election, and on Judge Maynard, who barely won reelection while the rest of the Republican ticket sailed to victory. Harry Daugherty (a local lawyer who was later to become Warren Harding’s presidential campaign manager and U.S. attorney general) defended Coit against the manslaughter charge, arousing the bitter opposition of his neighbors. Indeed, two years later Daugherty waged a rugged battle to control the delegation from the congressional district to the Republican national convention on behalf of William McKinley’s presidential aspirations, as many Fayette County Republicans still harbored resentment toward the governor who had not only sent the troops but also endorsed the court of inquiry’s acquittal of Coit from responsibility for the deaths.\(^4\)

The African American community of Washington Court House, too, may have been divided in its understanding of the meaning of the events of October 16 and 17, 1894. Was the lynch mob a response to a singular act and an attack upon a specific individual, or did it carry implications for all those of dark skin and African descent? Among the wounded from the guardsmen’s fusillade was African American Frank Jackson McBride, who was shot in the foot. Possibly a bystander, perhaps an onlooker as firemen doused the stable fire, McBride may have demonstrated by his presence that he did not regard this public area as an unsafe place for him at a time when a white mob was trying to batter down the courthouse doors and lynch another African American man. Or he may have recognized the rioters as a threat and was trying to show that he was not intimidated. The Washington Court House correspondent of the *Cleveland Gazette* completely ignored the violence, as if it had no relevance to the African American world.\(^5\) (In another column, Harry Smith was editorializing on the events in Washington Court House and the official response.)\(^6\) Eugene Chester remained in his hometown throughout the period encompassing the attempted lynching, and John Oatmeal decided to settle in Washington Court House in its immediate aftermath.

Many others, however, chose differently. Migrants had been attracted to Washington Court House over the years since the outbreak of the Civil War, but the African American population ceased to grow during the 1890s. Possibly the town became an unattractive place for African Americans for the same reasons that the European American population stabilized, a
casualty of the hard times of a depression decade. Or perhaps the severely constricted opportunities for good jobs for black men and women painted the town a less appealing hue in African American eyes, counteracting the beckoning odds of gaining home ownership there. Indeed, during the 1880s the town’s African American population, while still growing through immigration, had expanded more slowly than its European American population. Perhaps the message of persistent official prosecution of African Americans now combined with recognition that the only lynch mob in the town’s history had formed to kill an African American—and not a transient African American, but a county resident. Meanwhile, equally serious crimes received routine treatment. There is no evidence that the 1894 mob represented a backlash against African American gains in wealth, status, or influence. Instead, the mob violence appears to have been cut from the same cloth as the day-to-day discrimination African American citizens faced in the job market, but shaped into its peculiar pattern by elite leadership. If a shared motive drove whites and blacks equally from Washington Court House during the 1890s, that stimulus no longer operated after 1900, when the European American population resumed its growth. That African American numbers shrank while white numbers expanded after 1900 indicates that forces operating only or primarily upon blacks were responsible for the exodus. Mob violence was only one of those forces. Because of foresight on the part of local officials and fortuitous circumstances, the Akron riot in August 1900, like the mob action in Washington Court House, did not include wholesale attacks upon members of the city’s small African American population. But it certainly was racially inspired. Its catalyst was the arrest of Louis Peck, an African American local resident, for the attempted rape of a six-year-old European American girl. Peck confessed and pleaded guilty. Anticipating a lynching attempt, Akron police took Peck to Cleveland, bringing along another African American prisoner, as the police expected that “the mob would probably not discriminate in selecting a colored man on whom to wreak their vengeance.” A mob gathered before the city hall, which contained the jail, and authorities allowed several impromptu committees drawn from the crowd to search the building. Despite the committees’ assurances that Peck was not inside, the mob refused to believe them and attacked the building. Police defended it by firing into the crowd, wounding some rioters and killing two children among the bystanders. The rioters obtained guns from a nearby hardware store and fired a barrage at the building. They then blasted the building with dynamite and set fire to it. Some members of the mob tried to turn its fury toward African Americans, but few were to be seen on the streets. When firemen came to
fight the fire in the city hall and an adjoining building, the rioters fired on them to prevent them from succeeding. By the time Ohio National Guard troops arrived (leaving behind their African American cooks), the city hall was gutted by the fire. Local newspapers claimed that the rioters were mostly teenaged boys, but when twenty-one rioters were eventually arrested and charged, the eighteen whose ages were reported averaged thirty-five years. The riot left two dead and at least twenty-five wounded or injured, including three police officers and six firefighters. Although no African Americans suffered from the mob, African Americans could plainly see that a mob that dynamited and burned its own city hall in an attempt to kill a black prisoner, fighting white police and firemen in the process, would not have dealt lightly with any African American who was believed to have transgressed social norms—or perhaps any African American it might have encountered.

The Evansville riot three years later followed Akron’s basic pattern, but with a significant twist. Street violence against individual blacks fired African American militancy, which in turn provoked an escalation of European American destructiveness. The result was a longer list of casualties than in Akron.

On July 3, 1903, a gun battle on an Evansville street left a longtime member of the police force, Louis Massey, dead, and his opponent, African American John Tinsley, aka Robert Lee, wounded. Tinsley was thirty-five years old, married, and employed on a street crew. Massey was not the first law officer he had shot; Tinsley had served five and one-half years in prison for shooting a deputy sheriff in Rockport in 1895. He had come to Evansville after being driven from Rockport two years earlier in the racial purge that followed the lynchings of Roland, Henderson, and Rolla. Tinsley was arrested the next day and imprisoned in the city jail. Early in the morning of July 5, a mob made two attempts to break into the jail to lynch Tinsley, but the building’s stout doors defeated them. Nevertheless, city officials, fearing further mob action, took Tinsley to Vincennes. No troops were sought, however; despite Akron’s example, local authorities no doubt believed that the threat of mob violence would be dissipated by removal of its target. During the afternoon, gangs of whites roamed the streets beating up blacks, and African American families began leaving town. A larger, armed mob attacked the jail that evening, believing that Tinsley was still inside. They were finally persuaded to leave by a committee that conducted a thorough search for Tinsley, when a rumor spread that armed African Americans had shot a European American man. No evidence was ever produced that the man was shot, but an armed detachment of about twenty-five African American men was indeed patrolling the streets. They exchanged fire with
the mob before retreating. But before that exchange the rumor of armed blacks was enough to set off the cry, “Let’s kill every nigger in town,” and the mob turned to Baptisttown, the principal African American neighborhood. Mob attacks on African American property were both random—they marched through Baptisttown firing right and left—and deliberate and selective. They attacked three saloons, which represented the most visible of the few African American businesses. The mob also chose to terrorize the residents of an integrated tenement building, attacked a barber shop, and wrecked a black-owned hotel—after thoughtfully clearing it of whites and crippled persons. Both blacks and whites pillaged hardware stores of their guns, and groups of both roamed the streets, trading shots.

Indiana National Guard troops were mobilized on July 6 to guard the jail, and this set the stage for the last act of the riot. Acting on a rumor that African Americans were sheltered in the jail building and aware that more troops were to arrive soon, the mob gathered again during the evening. The front ranks pressed the line of soldiers and deputies back to the jail walls, and then someone fired a shot. Believing themselves under fire, guardsmen and deputies outside the jail and deputies at the windows poured a devastating fire into the mob. This action finally broke the back of the riot, after nearly forty-eight hours. By the next morning, Evansville was occupied by more than a thousand troops and under martial law. Twelve European Americans had died, and more than thirty others were wounded or injured. African American casualties were not reported. A grand jury laid indictments for rioting or riotous conspiracy against sixty-four men, among whom African Americans were seriously overrepresented (31 percent of those traced in local records). Nine European Americans and four African Americans were convicted; the four blacks served prison terms, but only one white did. The grand jury, backed by local African American ministers, recommended revoking the licenses of African American saloon keepers; in the only policy change flowing from the riot, the Evansville city council hiked saloon license fees generally.48

For Evansville’s African Americans, the message of the riot was unmistakable. All African Americans were to be punished for the sins of one. The fruits of African American enterprise were to be destroyed, and breaches of the color line were to be closed. Resistance to attack was to be met by increased violence. If anyone failed to understand, the meaning was underlined throughout the rest of the summer by harassment of African Americans and vandalism of black property.49 No such reminders were necessary, however, as Evansville swiftly shifted in African American eyes from magnet to way station en route to other northern destinations. The African American population declined by one-sixth by 1910, while the
city’s European American population continued to grow. African American numbers did not regain their 1900 level for half a century.

Relying on simple tallies of incidents, historians of antiblack violence emphasize differences between the North and the South, where most incidents occurred. In addition to absolute numbers, antiblack violence in the Lower Midwest diverged from southern patterns in three ways. While southern lynchings peaked during the summer months, in the Lower Midwest both lynchings and antiblack violence in general surged in both winter and summer (table A.4). Possibly this was because many racial conflicts in the South were sparked by disputes over agricultural work, while most violence in the Lower Midwest took place in towns and cities. Second, a special kind of southern occasion, the “spectacle lynching,” was absent from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Spectacle lynchings were “blatantly public, actively promoted” affairs, including “the specially chartered excursion train, the publicly sold photograph, and the widely circulated, unabashed retelling of the event by one of the lynchers.” Such affairs evidently constituted too blatant an exhibition of disregard for law for northern state authorities to tolerate. Third, while the number of southern lynchings declined after the early 1890s, there was no letup in the pace of antiblack violence in the Lower Midwest, as the number of incidents during the twentieth century’s first decade equaled those of the nineteenth century’s last.

Similarities, however, deserve greater emphasis than divergences in regional experience. First, nearly every form of antiblack violence that
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appeared in the South—indeed, in the Deep South—also broke out in the Lower Midwest: private, posse, terrorist and mass lynch mobs, as well as full-scale race riots. In addition, violence against African Americans was most likely in communities with relatively large African American populations. Although not all differences are statistically significant, the pattern is consistent across all three states (table 5.1).

In the South, the incidence of lynchings increased from county to county along with the proportion of population that was African American, but only up to a point. Southern black-majority counties (54 percent and over) showed the opposite pattern, as the number of lynchings declined as the proportion of African American rose. This relationship is consistent with a view of lynching as a white response to “threats of black competition for greater access to economic, political, or status resources.”

In the Lower Midwest, no town except Brooklyn contained an African American majority. In nearly all midwestern urban communities African American numbers were so small, and racial prejudice so pervasive, that the possibility of effective economic competition between blacks and whites seems remote. To be sure, African Americans did make progress in wealth and home ownership, albeit slowly. But while such forms of self-improvement may have diluted stereotypes of inferiority, they hardly threatened the dominant position of whites as a group. The readiness of African American workers to break strikes certainly made them unwelcome in many communities, especially coal-mining towns, but the access to jobs thus gained was often temporary and fell far short of constituting a level playing field for job competition.

African American numbers, however, could support other kinds of behaviors capable of forming a perception among at least some whites that their town held “too many blacks,” or that the African Americans it held were too disorderly. Political contestation is the most obvious. As we have seen in the previous chapter, African American political maneuvers alienated Republicans and Democrats alike, while African American aggressiveness in launching court challenges to discriminatory practices troubled the waters in various communities. This is not to say that the size of a community’s African American population was automatically translated into black political power or influence. Effective mobilization depended upon a combination of various factors, such as leadership and the local balance between parties. But if African American numbers provided a base for struggle among generally voteless black Southerners, they were even more likely to do so for voting black Midwesterners.

Other forms of rivalry that may have played a part in stimulating anti-black violence are sexual competition, and, more broadly, a kind of “forbidden fruit” effect, in which white men announced in riot their disdain
for both African Americans and manifestations of an African American culture that they and their fellow white men found all too attractive. Such complex motivations seem to have been at work in the pair of full-scale race riots in Springfield, Ohio, in March 1904 and February 1906. Both riots featured mob attacks on a downtown block of saloons run mostly by African Americans and known as “the Levee.” The mob turned to attacking African American homes during the second riot only after authorities had frustrated their attack on the saloons. After the first riot, Springfield officials, like the grand jury in Evansville, sought to close specifically African American-operated saloons, ignoring the city’s “white dives,” which, as a local newspaper noted, were “equal in viciousness to any the mob’s wrath destroyed in the Levee precincts.” Both blacks and whites had patronized the Levee saloons before the riot, probably attracted by forms of African American music and dance that seemed exotic in contrast to respectable Victorian culture.

Springfield’s riots in 1904 and 1906 made manifest a dimension of antiblack violence that was only latent in Washington Court House. When African Americans entered midwestern towns, they stepped into the midst of an ongoing cultural clash between respectable and disreputable classes. African Americans who found rare opportunity in the vice business—such as King David Anderson and Martha Lawson in Washington Court House—also placed themselves, willingly or not, on the disreputable side. In part, this was a class war, as black elites joined white elites in anathematizing working-class cultural expression. But it was just as much a cultural struggle, since some upper-class and middle-class white men, and a few women of the same classes as well, crossed the lines into enemy territory by patronizing “dives” or finding sexual companions across the color line.

By the analysis presented above, antiblack violence in the Lower Midwest is overdetermined. That is, the factors cited could well have existed generally throughout the region, but the evidence indicates that incidents of antiblack collective violence flared only in some, indeed, in a minority of communities. Some communities avoided violence because the number of African Americans was simply too insignificant to be a threat. (But also the threat or the reality of white violence kept African American numbers small or nonexistent in more communities than has been generally recognized.) As we have seen, a relatively large African American proportion characterized communities where recorded outbreaks of antiblack violence occurred. In those places, “too many blacks” could refer to any or all of a variety of complaints. Too many workers competing for the available jobs. Too many saloonkeepers harboring gamblers and prostitutes and musicians playing crazy music. Too many voters supporting the wrong party. Too many
black men gaining access to white women. Too many black men limiting white men’s access to black women. Too many white women gaining sexual access to black men. Too many black men and women having fun. Too many white men and women having fun in their company. The combination of complaints varied in breadth and intensity from community to community, and even in places where grievances were broad and deep, lack of leadership or absence of a precipitating incident may have forestalled violence. An uncommon event, violence required the coming together in precise though varying combinations of a variety of favorable conditions and propelling forces.

Whatever the motives of its perpetrators, antiblack violence in the Lower Midwest flared more commonly than has generally been recognized, and it certainly occurred often enough to loom large in the eyes of its intended targets. Such violence is normally measured by counting the

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<th>African American Population, 1890</th>
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absolute number of incidents or victims. Although historians have always recognized that the great difference in the size of northern and southern African American populations makes this comparison suspect, no one has yet produced a better yardstick. A more precise comparison is presented in table 5.2, using the only available comparative statistics, those for lynchings in Georgia, Virginia, and Kentucky during the 1890s and 1900s.

Kentucky’s numbers are higher than those in any other state because they are derived from an unusually thorough search in local newspapers and county histories. George Wright argues that tallies for other southern states would increase if an equally diligent search were conducted, and his point holds as well for the midwestern states.

During the 1890s the lynching rate in the Lower Midwest fell well behind that in Georgia, and even further behind the rate in Kentucky. Ohio’s rate of lynchings per 100,000 African American population, however, exceeded that in Virginia, and Illinois’s was not far behind. Even more striking, during the first decade of the twentieth century both Illinois and Indiana lynched African Americans at a pace exceeding Virginia’s. And Indiana, with 8.7 lynching victims per 100,000 black population, nearly equaled the rate in Georgia (9.6). An important conclusion may be drawn from these comparisons. The incidence of lynching in the states of the Lower Midwest was comparable to rates in some southern states when controlled for size of African American populations. In other words, the smaller absolute number of lynchings is explained by the fact that the Lower Midwest had fewer African Americans to attack. Or, to put the matter another way, white Midwesterners lynched their black neighbors at a rate that would have ranked them comfortably among the states of the South.

The appearance in the urban Lower Midwest of a relatively high level of antiblack collective violence points directly to the unsettled nature of race relations there during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A society in which relationships of domination and subordination are well entrenched does not require spontaneous extralegal outbursts of violence against the dominated in order to maintain the control of the dominant. Instead, the normal institutions of society do the job, justified in their operation by the society’s ruling ideology. Lynchings were virtually unknown, for example, in South Africa under apartheid. In the North after emancipation, however, the institutions that had maintained European American domination over African Americans before the Civil War generally lost their power to do so. Meanwhile, the numbers of African Americans were growing, and they were settling in communities where blacks had hardly been a presence before. No law prevented African Americans from living where they wished, taking any job they were capable of performing, or (except in
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Indiana and Nebraska) marrying whomever they pleased. Formally, they stood as equals to every other American. By the 1890s, southern racist ideologues were busy crafting an ideology of black primitivism to rationalize renewed subordination, but the flourishing violence in both the South and the North shows how little they had achieved. Normal measures may have slowed black progress and inhibited black assertiveness, but they had not succeeded in preventing either. As Paul Dunbar wrote in the midst of the Lower Midwest’s wave of antiblack violence, African Americans refused to accept that they were less than full citizens.

RIPOSTE

African American responses to European American violence varied over a wide spectrum from place to place, across time, and within African American communities. If Martha Thomas’s family and friends took part in hanging Peter Betters, their behavior demonstrates that no universal repugnance to lynching existed among Afro-Midwesterners. All public African American voices, however, unequivocally denounced mob law. The most vocal were the newspaper editors. Their editorials expressed surprise and disgust at the outbreaks of antiblack violence in the Midwest; demanded respect for law; and castigated local, state, and federal officials for failing to protect prisoners and punish rioters. Their sentiments were echoed by ministers, church congregations, and mass meetings, where money was raised to succor victims’ families and to support legal action. Sunday school conferences demonstrated the convergence of religious, benevolent, and political activity by publicly censuring mob violence, as did the founding convention of the Indiana State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. As in other forms of political activity, African Americans were unequivocal in demanding their rights be respected, especially after particularly blatant transgressions. In Illinois, the Spring Valley riot provoked reactions in African American communities across the state. A lynching in Urbana in 1897 had a similar impact in Ohio.

Some editors tried to limit the damage done by white violence to their state’s image as a haven for blacks. Harry Smith of the Cleveland Gazette consistently attempted to find reasons to distinguish lynching communities invidiously from the rest of Ohio. In a similar vein, George Knox of the Freeman and George Stewart of the Indianapolis Recorder distanced themselves and other law-abiding African Americans from victims of antiblack violence. The murder of which one lynching victim was accused, wrote Knox, “is a foul blot on the Negro race that only years of atonement and contrition
can undo.” The lynching of an accused rapist moved Knox to denounce rape and to conclude that the accused man “received his just deserts, but at unauthorized hands.” After the Evansville riot, the Freeman editor feared that John Tinsley’s killing of officer Massey would bias white Indianaans against their African American fellow citizens. Stewart responded to the Evansville riot in similar fashion, noting with approval that “Indiana cities and towns are systematically cleaning out the objectionable and indolent negroes.”

The general cry is to “get busy” or move on. We welcome this municipal house-cleaning and feel confident that in the end, the race will be greatly benefited.

The race problem is nothing more or less than a condition in which the better class of whites must unite with the better class of blacks, against the mob-ruling anarchistic class of poor whites and “Jim Crow” negroes. Government for the people and by the people, demands that this latter element should be improved or subdued.

No editor condoned African American participation in lynching, but editors generally regarded defensive violence in a different light. The Chicago Defender is often held up as an exemplar of militant rhetoric in favor of armed self-defense. Long before the Defender began publishing in 1905, however, other midwestern editors had established this journalistic tradition. In 1879 one of the first African American papers in the Lower Midwest, the Indianapolis Leader, praised African Americans in Bloomington, Indiana, who armed themselves and defied white terrorists. African Americans possessed all the rights of American citizens, the editor emphasized: “There is a class of ignorant roughs in this country who can learn this fact only through the administration of soothing doses of buck shot and minnie balls in copious quantities. If they interfere with you, friends, let them have it; it is what they need.” The editors of Chicago’s Conservator and Broad Ax and Indianapolis’s Recorder published similar sentiments. Shocked by the Urbana lynching, Harry Smith, then serving in the Ohio legislature, agreed: “The use of arms must be resorted to by our people. It is the only remedy.” Even George Knox, who usually counseled against resort even to defensive violence, urged acquittal of an Ohio man who had shot and killed two armed white harassers.

Other Afro-Midwesterners probably needed no urging from editors to take up the gun in self-defense. A tradition of armed resistance existed even before there were African American newspapers in the Lower Midwest to report and approve it. During the Cincinnati riots in 1862, armed African
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Americans not only defended their own neighborhoods, but also invaded an Irish district. Armed self-defense was reflexive and personal, but it was also collective and deliberate.

Sometimes, however, a resort to armed self-defense did not turn out well, as a case in Fremont, Ohio, in 1902 demonstrated. During a strike at a local factory, three African American strikebreakers who were attacked by a mob fired at their attackers, killing one and wounding two others. The court refused to consider their action as self-defense and convicted at least two of them. Collective self-defense seems to have succeeded, however, in three other instances. In Bloomington, Indiana, in 1879, attempts to terrorize and drive out local African American residents were met with armed defiance. Sympathetic European American residents heard of the intimidation and denounced the terrorists. During the following year, some whites in Aurora, Indiana, tried to maintain the town’s lily-white reputation by ordering out of the community six African American workers brought to town by a Cincinnati contractor. Apparently such harassment had always worked before to drive out African Americans from what the Leader referred to as a “God-forsaken, devil-ridden, hoodlum sink hole of pauperism and crime,” but this time the workers frightened off their attackers by brandishing revolvers.

In Decatur, Illinois, African American residents arrived at armed self-defense after trying other strategies. Decatur African Americans by the early 1890s had mobilized effectively enough to elect a county supervisor and to obtain appointment of two letter carriers and a police officer. They were unable, however, to stop the lynching in 1893 of Samuel J. Bush, an itinerant worker accused of raping two European American women. A mass meeting in the lynching’s aftermath debated various strategies before resolving to appeal to local and state officials to punish the mob’s leaders, who were well known. Two grand juries, however, refused to return indictments. A year later an African American porter, James Jackson, was arrested and charged with the rape of a European American woman. This time local blacks refused to rely upon local authorities to prevent a lynching. Instead, more than a hundred armed men took over the streets of Decatur each night for three nights, effectively raising the costs of lynching higher than local whites were willing to pay.

Many of the themes of midwestern antiblack violence that I have traced thus far may be found in the region’s best-known race riot before World War I, the Springfield, Illinois, riot. But the brutal violence in Lincoln’s town also affords a rare opportunity to examine perceptions of such violence by remaining members of a local African American community. According to sociologist Roberta Senechal’s fine study, African American progress played
a crucial part in provoking the full-scale race riot that occurred on August 14 and 15, 1908. The specific events leading to the riot began on July 4 when Clergy Ballard, a European American mining engineer, was fatally stabbed during a struggle with an intruder in his home. The next morning, Alabamian Joe James, briefly released from jail on a vagrancy charge during Fourth of July celebrations the previous day, was found sleeping off a spree in a yard near the scene of the crime. The police arrested James, but despite threats of lynching from some of Ballard’s many friends, no mob materialized for nearly six weeks afterward. In reporting Ballard’s murder, the local press focused on African American crime and the threat of coerced interracial sex, since the intruder had first been discovered in the bedroom of Ballard’s teenage daughter, and the newspapers assumed that rape was the motive for the intrusion.

On Friday, August 14, the same themes reappeared in inflammatory newspaper reports that Mabel Hallam, the European American wife of a streetcar driver, had been raped by an African American. She identified George Richardson, a construction hand who had been working in her neighborhood, as the assailant. When threats of a double lynching of James and Richardson began to spread, the county sheriff and a local militia commander removed the two prisoners from Springfield to Bloomington. To transport James and Richardson out of town speedily, officials canvassed friendly car owners. Harry Loper, a European American restaurant owner who owned a fast, reliable automobile, volunteered to help. As in Akron and Evansville, removal of their initial target failed to pacify the mob. Learning of Loper’s role in the escape, the mob attacked his restaurant, sacked it, and burned the offending car. The mob then began assaulting individual African Americans found on the streets. In addition, it targeted Springfield’s “Levee,” a two-block district of saloons, small restaurants, pawnshops, and cheap boardinghouses on East Washington Street in the downtown area. Moving through the first block, the mob systematically destroyed every African American business while sparing most European American shops. At the beginning of the next block, however, the mob met stiff resistance from the owner of the corner saloon, “Dandy Jim” Smith, and his friends, who fired down from second-floor windows above the saloon. The defenders fatally wounded three rioters before retreating in the face of superior force. The mob wrecked Smith’s establishment, then gave the other black businesses on the block the same treatment.

By this time the riot had been going on for three hours, but because of official temporizing sufficient troops had not been mobilized to begin the task of ending it. The rioters moved on from the smashed businesses of the Levee to a larger African American residential district, “the Badlands,”
where they began to assail and burn African American homes. At about two A.M. on Saturday, the mob encountered Scott Burton, a barber whose shop had been destroyed earlier and who was determined to defend his home. Burton got off at least one shotgun blast before he was seized, hanged, and his body mutilated. Finally, Illinois National Guard troops arrived—white troops, since officials had chosen not to mobilize the forces of the African American Eighth Regiment—and dispersed the mob with a volley.

Despite the presence by the next day of more than 1,400 troops, the mob reassembled during the evening and commenced hit-and-run attacks on African American residential areas that the troops were unable to protect. One group deliberately marched to the home of William Donnegan, a wealthy retired shoemaker who had lived in Springfield since 1845. Donnegan’s throat was cut and he was hanged. Throughout the rest of Saturday night, groups of rioters attacked the homes of prosperous and prominent African Americans, including grocer Clarke Duncan and his son Otis, a state government worker and major in the Eighth Regiment. The riot did not end until early Sunday morning. On Monday, 3,700 troops were in the city. By the riot’s end, at least twenty-one African American businesses had been damaged or destroyed, and more than forty African American homes were burned.81

Springfield’s European American elite appear to have condoned the first night’s violence, if they did not participate in it. An eyewitness report stated that by the time the first troops arrived, “the better element had almost entirely disappeared from the ranks of the mob,” clearly implying that the “better element” had participated in the initial mob action.82 On Saturday, the local press held that “the riot was an effective and justifiable remedy for black misbehavior.”83 The Illinois State Journal editorialized that “[i]t was not the fact of the whites’ hatred of the negroes, but of the negroes’ own misconduct, general inferiority or unfitness for free institutions that were at fault.”84 Only after Saturday night’s violence did white elite opinion conclude that the rioting had gone too far. Elite whites, however, were not sufficiently upset by the events of the riot to ensure that judicial punishment was meted out to those responsible.

Nevertheless, most of the rioters were evidently members of the working class, young men who generally lived some distance from their targets. The mob clearly targeted African American achievers, those who had raised themselves above the level that was felt to be appropriate for blacks. Successful African Americans did not, of course, threaten to displace or even equal prosperous European American professionals or businessmen. But the secure government jobs, although lowly, and the thriving businesses drawing white as well as black trade attracted the rioters’ wrath like
a lightning rod. So too did African American families living in otherwise all-white neighborhoods. Politics also fuelled the violence, as Springfield African Americans had been able to influence the local scene sufficiently to obtain appointment of a significant share of police officers and firefighters, as well as minor positions on the city payroll. The saloons represented not only racial interzones where African American music and dance brought blacks and whites together in a sexually charged setting. They also served as headquarters for African American political leaders.85

Good relations across the color line, including sexual intimacy, also aroused the mob’s anger. European Americans who employed or otherwise tried to help African Americans were threatened with reprisals. The mob had at least three reasons to hurt Harry Loper. In addition to his role in spiriting James and Richardson away from a lynching, Loper employed African American waiters in his elegant restaurant. He also opened his restaurant, one of the city’s finest, to African American diners. William Donnegan died not only because he was prosperous, but also because his wife was a European American.86

The Springfield riot thus shared elements in common with other outbreaks of antiblack collective violence in the Lower Midwest. A unique body of source material, however, allows investigation of one significant dimension of such events that remains obscure in all other outbreaks: the perspective of the African American community. During the 1970s, the Oral History Office at Sangamon State University (now the University of Illinois–Springfield) commissioned interviews with older residents of the Springfield African American community, including some who lived through the 1908 riot, and others who, although they were born or arrived in the capital after the event, were told about it by survivors.87 Their memories reveal an internal image of the riot that differs significantly from most views of the event adopted by outsiders to Springfield, both African American and European American.

The Chicago Broad Ax, in its report on the riot, succinctly outlined the image of the riot held by African Americans outside Springfield and, in part, by European Americans sympathetic to African American grievances.

No pen nor tongue can ever portray the horrors and the suffering which were visited upon the heads of defenseless Negro men, women and children who were peaceable and law-abiding and not guilty of committing any crimes whatever, during the supreme reign of anarchy, mob and lynch law in Springfield—heretofore the fair city, which has the proud distinction of holding within its walls the remains of Abraham Lincoln, whose monument, as it were, was stained with the
life blood of some of the Negroes who received their first taste of freedom from the promulgation of his emancipation proclamation.88

The dramatic contrast between racist violence and its setting in the hometown of the Great Emancipator of course served the purpose of shaming northern whites. Such a contrast would lose much of its force, however, if one believed that emancipation resulted primarily from the efforts of African Americans themselves, as at least some African American Democrats did.89 Nevertheless, European Americans generally did hold the conventional view of Lincoln as philanthropist, and the mob’s obvious racism therefore chagrined the most liberal whites and provoked some of them into taking a leading part in creating the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People shortly afterward.90 The view of riot victims as “peaceable and law-abiding and not guilty of committing any crimes whatever” was not, however, accepted by most European American observers. Reformer Graham Taylor expressed a common assumption when he explained the mob’s violence as caused by African American “depravity.”91 Even William English Walling, who joined with other liberal whites to assist in founding the NAACP, acknowledged that African Americans had committed crimes, although he argued that African American criminal behavior was not disproportionate to European American crime.92 But however one viewed black Springfielders’ behavior before the riot, on their role during the bloody events a general consensus took shape: They were victims.93

Among the African American community in Springfield, in contrast, a different image emerged, flourished, and blossomed in its oral tradition. A few reports at the time noted that “the negroes were desperate, and fought viciously and aggressively,”94 that “in a few cases the Negroes attempted retaliation when opportunity offered.”95 A correspondent for the Indianapolis Freeman described the mob in caustic terms as cowards and hoodlums encouraged by police inaction and described Scott Burton as “one poor Negro that gave up his sweet life, but took two of the hoodlums along with him.”96 Freeman editor George Knox recognized the possibility of violent retaliation when he deplored vengeance and insisted upon respect for law.97

Some survivors of the riot emphasized acts of armed self-defense. Mattie Hale, who lived with her family on a farm on the outskirts of Springfield, recalled African American businessmen, “men of the world, they were rough men . . . gamblers,” who could have left, but stayed in town to protect their property.98 Edith Carpenter’s father, grocer Edward White, also stayed.

[M]y father put out the word if they [the mob] bothered him, what
he would do to them. I had a sister, that’s the . . . oldest sister, and at that time she was living in Chicago and she was expecting a new baby and so my mother had gone to Chicago to be with her until the baby was born. So anyway I guess we must have called long distance and told them about this thing and so my sister’s husband got a whole lot of ammunition together, guns, big long guns, and a whole lot of the bullets and everything, and he bundled that stuff up and got it to Springfield and it was taken to my father’s store. So he had sent word out and let everybody know that if anybody bothered him, he certainly had everything to do with and I’ll let you know they came right straight down that street, so they say, Adams Street; our store was on Adams Street. I’ll let you know that they never bothered him, and my father had all day long, he might get a chance to nap a little bit, but all day and all night long, he had a gun on each shoulder and he marched from where our store was on 15th and Adams to our home where we lived at 1312 East Monroe, and that was back and forth all evening. And so, I think somebody said that one time he looked out and saw them coming, I think, and so when they saw him with all his guns, they turned and went the other way.99

Others went even further in emphasizing African American agency rather than victimization. Harry Mann, born in Springfield in 1903, heard from his grandfather about the firefight at Dandy Jim Smith’s saloon. Smith and his friends “fought and had white folks up on the porches dying and everywhere else. They was hauling them [a]way in the nighttime, the Negroes had killed so many of them. . . . They said they killed an awful lot of them.”100 John Wilson worked at a Springfield coal mine during the riot. He knew personally some of the men who took part in the battle at Smith’s and had killed rioters. Wilson also related a story about a white family in his neighborhood whose two sons went downtown during the riot against their mother’s wishes and never returned. Afterward, the family disposed of the boys’ clothes. Wilson, too, believed that many more European Americans had been killed than appeared in official reports. “[White] people were dead in the streets and in the hallways. At that time we understood there were many.”101 LeRoy Brown, a Springfield native who was in his early twenties at the time of the riot, was acquainted with both Scott Burton and William Donnegan. He also heard that “there were lots of white people killed that night but they carried them out of town and buried them some place.”102

Albert Harris and Margaret Ferguson also focused on the battle at Smith’s saloon and the number of hidden European American fatalities. Harris, another Springfield native, was thirteen years old in 1908. “Dandy

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Jim and Andy Gordon, and they were bad men! And they tell me that Dandy Jim and Andy stood upon his platform—I mean his counter—just poured volley after volley with their guns into this mob,” Harris recalled. In Dudley’s livery stable on East Washington Street, Harris was told, “for three or four days they’d find bodies [of whites] where they had crawled up there and died in his livery stable.” Margaret Ferguson was only four years old when the riot occurred, but she accurately described the fray at Smith’s. “[T]he blacks did defend themselves,” she concluded, “and they did it very well.”

In the eyes of the African American community of Springfield, that community was certainly not “defenseless.” Nor did the picture of the riot in local oral tradition correspond with the image of blacks as victims that informed the founding of the NAACP. Instead, local citizens focused on their community’s success in hurting and killing those who would hurt and kill them. Obviously the tradition of African American agency during the riot took root and thrived among those who stayed in Springfield after the riot. Although Senechal has shown that reports of an African American exodus from Springfield in the riot’s wake have been exaggerated, some did leave as a result of the violence. Those who left might have shared a different perspective, and the same is true of those who would have migrated to Springfield but turned elsewhere because of the riot. During the period 1890–1910, the capital city experienced the third largest loss in share of the African American population among Illinois urban places. So the emphasis upon African Americans’ killing of whites could have been reflexive and rationalizing, an attempt by longtime Springfield residents to justify to themselves and others decisions to stay in a community that the riot had branded as racist in the eyes of outsiders. Yet some of those who passed on the tradition were not loath to tell how race relations had deteriorated in their community after the riot. In their eyes white oppression formed part of the story, but so too did black resistance.