

SPECIAL FORUM

INTRODUCTION

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In 1993, the University of Illinois Press published W. Fitzhugh Brundage's seminal book, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930*. Hailed by historian Numan V. Bartley as “the best work ever written on lynching,” Brundage's study transformed our understanding of southern mob violence, providing new interpretations of the causes, chronological and geographic characteristics, and eventual decline of “America's national crime.” In the more than a quarter century since its publication, Brundage's groundbreaking research has also served as the catalyst for the many and diverse new studies of lynching that these days crowd academic bookshelves. We now know far more about lynchers and the lynched: why, when, and where acts of mob violence occurred and what was done to resist them.

This issue features a series of critical analyses of the most significant studies of lynching published in the more than twenty-five years since the appearance of *Lynching in the New South*. The essays, themselves written by some of today's foremost scholars of lynching, assess the ways in which historians and social scientists have drawn upon and responded to the analytical and methodological innovations of Brundage's pioneering scholarship. Each essay explores directions and opportunities for future research in this still growing field.

One thing that these essays make clear is that the field of lynching studies has become much broader than it was in 1993. Today, those who study lynching continue to explore, as Brundage did, white mob violence against African Americans in the South, but historians have also applied Brundage's methods to the history of mob violence against other ethnic and racial groups, to other regions, and in earlier eras. The essays in this volume reflect this expanded range of lynching topics and encourage historians to continue to expand the field, while also emphasizing that there is much still to learn about the particular strand of lynching that claimed the most victims and produced the largest mobs in American history, white extralegal violence against African Americans.

In this introduction, we explore the state of lynching scholarship and public discussion in the years before the publication of *Lynching in the New South* before setting the stage for the following essays. They collectively chart the period after 1993 and the subsequent resurgence of interest, both scholarly and popular, in the subject of lynching. Following the introduction, you will find an interview with the author about the writing of *Lynching in the New South*.

Before Lynching in the New South

Lynching received significant attention in American newspapers and magazines beginning with the California Gold Rush, but such attention was episodic and ephemeral until the late nineteenth century when African American leaders began to publish more systematic work on the crime that had come to heavily target Black communities. This more systematic work arose in part because most whites, and even many Blacks, according to historian Christopher Waldrep, accepted that lynching might be justified or at least tolerated under certain circumstances. In the 1890s, however, Ida B. Wells initiated what would eventually become a complete transformation in the way that Americans studied and perceived lynching.

Wells was not the first to criticize racially motivated lynching. Her colleague and later employer, the African American journalist and orator T. Thomas Fortune, had begun criticizing lynching as a defense of white supremacy no later than the early 1880s. Despite subscribing to Fortune's newspaper, Wells later admitted that she had largely accepted the general defense of community-sanctioned mob violence until 1892. In that year, Memphis whites executed three Black men and then deployed standard tropes to defend the actions of the mob. Wells (and many other Blacks in Memphis) knew the victims personally, however, and saw through the white justifications. This was, of course, not the first lynching of innocent Black men and not the first time that African Americans balked at white accounts of alleged Black crime. In Memphis, as in other places with similar acts of racist mob violence in the past, African Americans organized to defend their communities, threatening armed self-defense from future attacks. What was different in this case, however, was the response of Wells herself.¹

Wells decided to conduct a systematic investigation of lynching and the justifications used to defend particular episodes. She conducted research trips to Mississippi and found that claims of rape used to defend the lynching of Blacks were false. On May 21, 1892, she published "Eight Men Lynched" and claimed that Black male rape of white women was an "old threadbare lie." Wells argued that the charge of rape was largely circulated to justify the mob's action to those outside of the local community because Wells said that the charge of rape was actually believed by "nobody" in the neighborhoods that hosted the actual lynchings. This was an explosive charge aimed at the heart of the defense of lynching, which had long been justified upon the weakness of the local court system in combination with the heinousness of the particular crime committed. Driven from Memphis by angry whites after the article, Wells found work with Fortune and published a more systematic treatment of lynching and the charge of Black male rape in late 1892. This new pamphlet, *Southern Horrors*, combined with Wells's trip to England where she shared and further publicized her critique of lynching, had long-term consequences, especially in the coverage of racial violence by newspapers outside of the American South.²

In 1903, African American leader W. E. B. Du Bois powerfully added to the attack on racial violence and lynching in *Souls of Black Folk* when he described the lynching of Georgian Sam Hose as a crucifixion and labeled the American South as a region filled with "fierce hate and vindictiveness." His contributions to the fight against lynching grew substantially after the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. In his various roles with the NAACP, he amplified the work of Wells, Fortune, and other Black leaders in redefining lynching. The transition took decades but the traditional depiction of lynching as a necessary act of local community justice that might erupt in multiple regions of the United States was eventually replaced by a new understanding of lynching, namely that it was a tool of white supremacy deployed overwhelmingly against Black men in the American South.³

Despite the work of Wells and Du Bois, historians gave little serious attention to the study of lynching for most of the twentieth century. Sociologists, however, took the topic seriously. The first scholar to explore the history of lynching was James Elbert Cutler. Inspired in all likelihood by the work of African American human rights activists like Ida B. Wells and perhaps by his own experience in Colorado as a high school and college student, Cutler decided to study the history of lynching for his doctoral degree at Yale University. Finished in 1903, the dissertation appeared in book form two years later as *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States*.⁴ In 1907, while a faculty member at the University of Michigan, Cutler published a further essay on the subject, entitled “The Practice of Lynching in the United States,” in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*.⁵

Cutler’s intellectual contribution was profound. Many whites before the publication of his book had editorialized against lynching in response to individual acts of violence, but Cutler’s scholarly attack on mob violence was something new. Those authors who published histories of lynching and mob violence before Cutler, like Hubert Howe Bancroft, had often defended extralegal violence as a legitimate response to the particular circumstances of local communities struggling with issues of law and order. Cutler, by contrast, combined rigorous scholarship with moral condemnation of lynching, which he denounced as “a serious and disquieting symptom of American society.”⁶

In 1907, Cutler joined the faculty of Case Western Reserve University and never returned to the study of lynching, focusing on administrative work as the founding dean of the School of Applied Social Sciences and redirecting his research to the study of social work. The influence of his lynching scholarship, however, endured. For over a century, Cutler’s work remained important, though only sociologists followed his lead in the decades immediately after the publication of *Lynch-Law*. In the 1930s, several important publications on lynching emerged, including two critical books published by the University of North Carolina Press, J. H. Chadbourn’s *Lynching and the Law* (1933) and Arthur Raper’s *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1933); as well as John Dollard’s broader study, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937).⁷ It was almost another half century before historians began to engage the study of lynching.

During the middle of the twentieth century, historians and scholars of race relations and the American South often referred to lynching but usually as a minor element of their larger narrative. Two historians who placed mob violence far more centrally than others during this period were Joel Williamson and Bertram Wyatt-Brown. In contrast to the work of Cutler and the sociologists, Wyatt-Brown’s 1982 work, *Southern Honor*, emphasized that vigilantism and racial violence were nothing new to the American South in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Wyatt-Brown’s central argument is that the roots of southern violence stretch across the Atlantic to Europe. While these ancient codes of honor emphasizing the importance of defending male integrity died out in the North, they persisted in the South and underlay that region’s violence, something he finds demonstrated in the region’s ritualistic vigilantism. Wyatt-Brown’s work and his argument that mob violence was evidence of the “community will” was enormously influential and led to many other historians borrowing from this theoretical construction of honor to explore violence before and after the period of his study.⁸

Published in 1984, Williamson’s *The Crucible of Race* made a similarly deep impact on scholarship but in a quite different manner. Williamson’s sprawling, massive work focused on the postbellum era and sought to explain the origins of segregation, disfranchisement, and the evolution of southern white racism. Similar in its questions and goals to earlier works such as C. Vann Woodward’s *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955),

Williamson's book gave a much more central place to the terrible racial violence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Williamson, lynching was a clear sign of the rise of what he termed the southern white "radicals" and was the product of both the economic depression of the 1890s and the manipulation of white thought by leaders such as Ben Tillman and Rebecca Latimer Felton.⁹

While the works of Williams and Wyatt-Brown discussed lynching and vigilantism in new and sophisticated ways, mob violence was not their central topic but one, albeit critical aspect, of the larger culture they sought to explain. It seems beyond doubt that their work was inspirational to historians following them who did turn toward more focused exploration of lynching and its history. Among the first historians to concentrate explicitly on lynching as its own subject were Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Robert Zangrando, who both focused on anti-lynching campaigns. Hall's *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (1979) and Zangrando's *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (1980) established lynching as an appropriate and important subject for historical analysis.¹⁰

Published three years before *Lynching in the New South*, George C. Wright's *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865–1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (1990) rightfully deserves space alongside Brundage's volume for the advancement of lynching scholarship. Prior to Wright and Brundage, few historians had attempted the painstaking and laborious work of inspecting local records to correct, add, and subtract to the inventories of lynching victims compiled in the early twentieth century by the *Chicago Tribune*, Tuskegee Institute, and the NAACP.¹¹ Toiling throughout the 1980s, both Wright and Brundage had come to their idea for how to move lynching scholarship forward independently, though they both knew of each other's projects from the conference circuit.

Wright based his study on the creation of a new and improved inventory of lynching victims in Kentucky. He documented 353 cases, significantly more than the 205 that were listed in NAACP reports for the state. Much, though not all, of this increase came from Wright's decision to include lynchings dating back to the end of the Civil War in 1865. The NAACP and other collectors of data before Wright had data that began in 1882 because that was the year the *Chicago Tribune* began publishing annual lynching statistics. Wright was able to collect information on the earlier period because of his decision to focus on a single state, one which he knew well as a native and which had been the subject of his first book. The sources for his new and improved inventory were primarily "local newspapers and county histories."¹² Such sources were the same as those simultaneously mined by Brundage, but for Virginia and Georgia.

Lynching in the New South

Racial Violence in Kentucky was well-reviewed by scholars in the early 1990s, and Wright's work would have lasting impact on future historians of lynching such as William Carrigan, Michael Pfeifer, and Christopher Waldrep. Yet, it is clear that Wright's book did not have the same influence as *Lynching in the New South* due, in part no doubt, to its more modest title and the focus on just one state. Of further significance is the fact that Kentucky did not fit into traditional narratives of lynching or of southern or African American history. If Wright had written a similar study of Alabama, his book might well have been more influential.

By contrast, Brundage's choices of Georgia and Virginia perfectly aligned with expectations of readers and historians interested in a study of lynching and southern

race relations. Published in 1993, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* soon earned great acclaim. Brundage's volume broke new ground as a deeply researched work of comparative history that allowed him to provide a fresh perspective on one of the most challenging questions in lynching history, namely why did lynching episodes vary so much across space and time given the relative uniformity of white supremacy. The more populous Virginia, for example, hosted only 86 lynchings between 1880 and 1930 whereas Georgia was the scene of 460 acts of mob violence. In addition to the comparative approach, historians also greatly valued Brundage's work because he borrowed from other disciplines like sociology and anthropology while remaining clearly historical in his overall method. In the end, Brundage's findings were not necessarily shocking to historians. He concluded that in "rough proportion to the degree that a particular region diverged from the plantation South, likelihood of habitual mob violence in that region shrank."¹³ Yet, in arriving at this conclusion, no historian (with the exception of George Wright) had ever done as much research, considered as many possible alternative explanations, or mustered such persuasive handcrafted data. There was, of course, much more in *Lynching in the New South*, including a deft handling of the issue of ritual in mob violence and an extensive exploration of the reasons for lynching's decline (which Brundage convincingly attributes to the collapse and reorganization of southern agriculture that took place as a result of the Great Depression and the New Deal).

Robert P. Ingalls, writing for *The American Historical Review*, wrote that the "study of lynching reaches a new level of analysis in this impressive work of comparative history" and noted that Brundage's comparison of the history of lynching in two states was unprecedented. Ingalls also praised Brundage's careful attention to change over time during the fifty years of his study, something ignored by previous studies of lynching.¹⁴ Ann Ellis Pullen, in the *Journal of Southern History*, also enthused about *Lynching in the New South*, writing that it was "a major work, unique in providing a perceptive comparative analysis of lynching in diverse regions."¹⁵ Leonard Dinnerstein, whose own book *The Leo Frank Case* was a pioneering case study of southern mob violence, concluded that *Lynching in the New South* "is probably the finest, most detailed, richly complex, and sophisticated study of lynching in the region that has ever been published."¹⁶

One of the key contributions of Brundage's study (and Wright's) was the updated inventory of lynching victims in the book's appendix. Reviewing *Lynching in the New South* for *Callaloo*, David F. Godshalk observed that Brundage's "model monograph" not only offers "new analytical frameworks," but that the book's "definitive inventory of lynchings in Georgia and Virginia renders the book an indispensable research tool" for those who would study the history of lynching. In the years that followed, many historians wishing to study lynching adopted Brundage's methodology. They surveyed local newspapers, county and town histories, and created new and updated inventories of lynching victims.¹⁷

The influence of *Lynching in the New South* was not, however, limited to historians. Social scientists in several other disciplines took note. Larry Griffin in *Contemporary Sociology* wrote that "this is an impressive and important book. It is an enormous reservoir of information, deftly combines empirical generalization with accounts of specific lynchings, and offers several intriguing hypotheses and new categorizations." He concluded that "sociologists interested in collective action, race relations, crime and punishment, or regional studies will learn much from this fine book."¹⁸

Before Wright and Brundage, historians had either completely ignored lynching or studied the subject through the traditional lens of biographical or institutional history. As our contributors will demonstrate in their individual chapters, Brundage's volume opened up many new paths forward for historians.

After Lynching in the New South

The years following the publication of *Lynching in the New South* saw a great increase in both scholarly and popular attention to lynching. The rest of this forum is dedicated to highlighting the scholarly work that has built upon Brundage's work and the other early studies of the history of lynching in the last thirty years. For most readers of edited scholarly volumes, the organization of this special issue will be a bit unusual. We have asked a wide range of contributors to the field of lynching studies not only to reflect on the influence of *Lynching in the New South* on their particular area of research, but also to highlight at least one influential book in their subfield and then to discuss those opportunities that exist for future academics to expand on. Thus, this forum as a whole should provide you with an exhaustive look at all of the many ways that the field of lynching studies has evolved. As readers will notice, some contributors very much maintain Brundage's focus on racial violence against African Americans while others explore new areas in the history of lynching that Brundage did not explicitly discuss, such as mob violence against the Chinese. It is powerful testimony of the influence of Brundage's volume that its influence both continues in and extends beyond the history of the American South. In the end, we hope that this mosaic approach gives readers an appreciation of the wide influence of *Lynching in the New South* as well as many new ideas for those interested in continuing the historical exploration of lynching in the United States.

Before handing over the reins to our academic contributors, it is worth discussing the ways in which popular perceptions and attention to lynching has changed since 1993. While novelists, filmmakers, and artists of all types had long used their work to comment on lynching and race relations in the United States, there has been much greater attention to the history of lynching beyond academia in the last quarter century. The single most important moment in the rise of this public perception of lynching as part of American history was the release of James Allen's book collecting lynching images entitled *Without Sanctuary*. Allen's publication, the exhibiting of the images at various places before and after the release of the book, and the resulting media coverage was such an important moment in the growing awareness of the history of lynching that one of our contributors, Amy Louise Wood, discusses the collection in one of the following essays. Allen's book is the only nonacademic work that receives such treatment, a sure sign of what we as editors think of the volume's importance.¹⁹

In 2005, another very significant moment in the treatment of lynching history took place in Washington, D.C. In that year, Senators Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and George Allen of Virginia pushed through a resolution, passed by voice vote, issuing a formal apology for the failure of the Senate to pass an anti-lynching law in the early twentieth century. Allen's understanding of his state's lynching past had no doubt been shaped by *Lynching in the New South*, and Landrieu's passion for the issue was certainly inspired by the work of Michael Pfeifer, one of several scholars of lynching who emerged after Brundage's book.

On December 19, 2018, the Senate went further, unanimously passing the "Justice for Victims of Lynching Act of 2018," which will, if passed by the House of Representatives, make lynching a federal hate crime. Among the many influences upon the senators in this case, we want to emphasize that of Bryan Stevenson and Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). Founded in 1989 and dedicated to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, EJI has worked very hard to bring public attention to the history of lynching and to the ways in which the culture that nourished lynching lingers in the

United States. In 2015, they released a widely read report entitled *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*. Three years later, they opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The report and, especially, the memorial have had a profound impact on public awareness of lynching across the United States.

The lines connecting the publication of *Lynching in the New South* to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice are certain but not as direct as the book's influence on academic study of lynching. In the scholarly arena, the field has expanded so greatly that this entire forum, as we have mentioned, is dedicated to charting the many different approaches to lynching that have developed over the last thirty years. While we have tried to be inclusive, the fact remains that the great number of works on the history of lynching since 1993 make it impossible to cover them all. What we have collected, however, is a wide range of essays that highlight some of the most important works published in this field as well as powerful calls for new research and approaches to the study of this history, a history that tragically continues to be needed to understand better patterns and divisions that remain very much present in the United States.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
- 2 Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: The New York Age Print, 1892).
- 3 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Oxford World Classics ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77, 89.
- 4 James Elbert Cutler, *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1905).
- 5 James Elbert Cutler, "The Practice of Lynching in the United States," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 6 (1907): 125–34.
- 6 Cutler, *Lynch-Law*, 1.
- 7 J. H. Chadbourn, *Lynching and the Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933); Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933); John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937).
- 8 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 402.
- 9 Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- 10 Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (Columbia: New York University Press, 1979); Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).
- 11 George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865–1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). Local historians and graduate students had done some of this work, often resulting in regional publications or master's theses at state universities. This work, however, found a limited audience from the historical profession that did not yet consider lynching a topic of importance compared to the more familiar subjects within political, military, and diplomatic history. See, for just two examples, Fred Lockley's pamphlet, *Vigilante Days at Virginia City* (privately printed, 1924) and Warren Franklin Webb, "A History of Lynching in California since 1875" (MA thesis, University of California, 1935).
- 12 Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 5.
- 13 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 159.
- 14 Robert P. Ingalls, review of *Lynching in the New South*, *American Historical Review*, 99:5 (Dec. 1994): 1758–59.

- 15 Ann Ellis Pullen, review of *Lynching in the New South*, *Journal of Southern History* 61:2 (May 1995): 401.
- 16 Leonard Dinnerstein, review of *Lynching in the New South*, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 73:2 (Oct. 1994): 251–52; Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).
- 17 David F. Godshalk, “A New Look at Mob Violence,” *Callaloo* 17:4 (Autumn, 1994): 1272–73.
- 18 Larry J. Griffin, review of *Lynching in the New South*, *Contemporary Sociology* 23:6 (Nov. 1994): 814–15.
- 19 James Allen, ed., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000). Allen’s collection includes essays by academics and scholars did help with the research on the images in the volume, but Allen himself was not an academic and did not publish through a university press.

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