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A Civil War Lynching in Athens

Donald E. Wilkes Jr.

University of Georgia School of Law, wilkes@uga.edu

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A CIVIL WAR LYNCHING IN ATHENS

In my article "The Last Lynching in Athens," published in *Flagpole* on Sept. 10, 1997 [see www.flagpole.com], I recounted the grim saga of the 1921 lynching of John Lee Eberhart, the only officially recorded lynching in Clarke County since the government began gathering official statistics on lynchings in 1882. In my article, I noted that, while it was the last lynching in Clarke County, the Eberhart lynching may not have been the only one in the history of this county, because there might have been lynchings here before 1882.

Recently, while reading E. Merton Coulter's classic history of ante-bellum Athens, *College Life in the Old South* (UGA Press, 1983 reprint), I came across a reference on page 247 to an Athens lynching occurring early in the Civil War. Having checked into the matter, I can now announce that, indeed, there definitely was at least one lynching in Athens prior to 1882. This lynching, possibly, but not probably, the first lynching in Athens, took place in 1862.

The only available information about the 1862 lynching incident is in several articles in the July 23, 1862 issue of a former local newspaper, *The Southern Watchman* (subtitled: "An Independent Family Journal: Devoted to News, Politics, Agriculture, [and] Current Literature").

One of these articles, euphemistically entitled "Execution of a Negro," reveals that on Tuesday, July 15, 1862, a black man (who was not named or identified in the article, but clearly was a slave) was arrested on an unspecified but evidently capital criminal charge and brought to

Athens. On the next day, a court hearing was held before a justice of the peace in the Athens Town Hall, and the arrested slave was ordered committed to jail to await a trial in the Clarke Superior Court. Following the hearing, however, a number of persons in the Town Hall "overpowered the Sheriff and his Deputy, and taking the negro (sic) about a mile from town, hung him."

According to Frances Taliaferro Thomas' excellent book, *A Portrait of Historic Athens and Clarke County* (1992), the Town Hall where the slave was seized had been completed in 1847, and was "the center of town life." It had two floors: the first floor doubled as a town market and jail, and the second floor contained a large hall for concerts, minstrel shows, public meetings and political debates. Prior to 1876, the Town Hall, Ms. Thomas says, "served as courthouse and jail."

The Town Hall faced Lumpkin Street. (The present City Hall, constructed in 1904, is located on College Avenue between Washington and Hancock Streets.)

The 1862 lynching was a public spectacle. In another article in the same issue of *The Southern Watchman*, it was reported "that a portion of the crowd which followed the negro (sic) to the gal-

lows (sic) indulged in singing, yelling, and hallooing!" However, the article continued, "[i]n justice to those who conducted the [lynching], it is proper to state that this improper conduct was not sanctioned or participated in by them, that it was the work of outsiders."

The article added: "It may be proper to remark that the crowd was not composed entirely of Athenians nor even Clarke county men. There were people from other counties and other States, we learn." Whenever a lynching occurred in the 19th Century South, it was a standard practice for local authorities to blame the particular lynching on strangers from outside the county.

In a third article in the same issue of *The Southern Watchman*, it was announced that the newspaper had just "received a communication in defense of mob law." Presumably the communication was intended to justify the recent lynching. Noting, however, that it had "observed a growing tendency towards mobocracy," the newspaper declined "under any circumstances to publish [the communication]... even as an advertisement." Those who advocate the cause of mobs, the newspaper said, "would inaugurate a worse government than that of the infernal regions! And we cannot think of making our paper the

advocate of such destructive doctrines." The 1862 lynching was not the only violent manifestation of mobocracy in the Athens of the time. In his superb biography of Athens' greatest lawyer and statesman, *Thomas R. R. Cobb: The Making of a Southern Nationalist* (1983), William B. McCash mentions an incident in Athens in November 1860 in which Cobb "intervene[d]... to help save a man who was being tried by a mob at the Town Hall for allegedly expressing free-soil sentiments. The accused was released with the understanding that the next offense should be punished by hanging."

McCash also mentions the formation by the Athens town council in November, 1860, of a "vigilance committee, composed of twenty prominent citizens, empowered to investigate and try persons accused of encouraging slave insurrection and punish those found guilty." The town council established the vigilance committee, McCash tells us, because it "dreaded the possibility of slave revolts."

Viewed in light of other events of the era, therefore, the 1862 lynching exposes ante-bellum and Civil War Athens as a city where mobs, lynchings and threatened lynchings—directed at slaves or opponents of slavery—helped keep the white, racist, pro-slavery establishment firmly in control.

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.

Donald Wilkes is a professor at the UGA School of Law

... a portion of the crowd which followed the negro (sic) to the gallows (sic) indulged in singing, yelling, and hallooing!"

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