

Samuel Harris

Location of Lynching: Salem, Alabama

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Date: November 3, 1902

Age: 24 years old (born in 1878)

Married to Beatrice Dawkins in 1898. Beatrice and Samuel had three children together. Annie P Harris was born in 1899, and Mark Harris was born in 1900 (3 and 2 years old, respectively). Beatrice was four months pregnant when Samuel Harris was lynched. In February, she named her baby boy, Samuel Harris Jr.

Brief: While at work, Samuel Harris was accused of an attempted robbery and attempted murder of Virginia and Catherine Meadows near Salem, AL on November 3, 1902. He was presumed guilty because of the smut that was on his hands and face. Mere hours later, he was surrounded and shot by over 125 armed white men. Without any attempt of evidence, Samuel Harris' wife, Beatrice Harris, and father-in-law, Monroe Dawkins, were accused of being an accomplice. Mr. Dawkins was captured by the lynch mob and escaped near Chewacla Lime Works (now Chewacla State Park), unable to return home. Although attempts were made to arrest members of the lynch mob, no one was held accountable for the murder of Samuel Harris or the attempted murder of Monroe Dawkins.

Essay:

The last known victim of lynching in Lee County was Samuel Harris. According to the Lee County census records in 1900, Samuel Harris was listed as a literate farmer who rented his family's farm in Lee County. In November 1902, Mr. Harris was twenty-four years old and employed on the Meadows plantation six miles outside of Salem, Alabama. He was married to Beatrice Harris (Dawkins), and the couple had two children, Annie P. Harris (three-years-old), and Mark Harris (two-years-old). When a lynch mob killed Samuel Harris, Beatrice was around four months pregnant.

On the morning of November 3, 1902, Virginia Meadows and Catharine "Cattie" Meadows, the wife and teenage daughter of farmer George Meadows, were assaulted in their home with an axe in what was deemed an attempted robbery. Though several reports detail that

the drawers and cabinets of the house had been rifled through, nothing was reportedly stolen. According to Montgomery's *Weekly Advertiser*, Mrs. Meadows' skull was crushed, and Miss Meadows' skull was fractured, though other reports suggest she was hit only in the arm. While newspaper articles suggest Mrs. Meadows injuries were fatal, census records show that Mrs. Meadow outlives her entire family.

While working in the field, Samuel Harris was accused and presumed guilty of this crime because of "smut" on his hands and face, which, depending on the newspaper, appeared to match the fingerprints on the back of Meadows' chimney, or showed evidence of him disguising his identity before breaking into the Meadows home. That afternoon, a mob of more than 125 white men, including the Chief of Police, seized Samuel Harris from work and dragged him in front of Cattie Meadows. According to the *Weekly Advertiser*, the "vast throng of men" silently arranged themselves on all sides of Mr. Harris while he was brought to the door and confirmed guilty by Meadows. Mr. Harris denied all guilt "until the first shot was fired" and was then shot, repeatedly. Reports of Mr. Harris's murder gloat about the "speedy vengeance" served on him after the mob "hurled him into eternity."

Without any evidence, local authorities placed Beatrice Dawkins, Samuel Harris's wife, under arrest and "charged with complicity" in the crime. Soon after, Monroe Dawkins, Beatrice's father, was also implicated in the attacks on the two Meadows women. The mob captured Mr. Dawkins, who protested his innocence, and who the Montgomery *Weekly Advertiser* reported had "a fine reputation in the community." According to this report in the *Advertiser*, Dawkins pleaded with the mob to "go with him to his white friends who would vouch for his character and prove his innocence." Dawkins was last reported seen with the mob near the Chewacla Lime

Works and after that “no trace of him has been found.” Later evidence from census records indicated that Dawkins escaped this attempted lynching.

Shortly after the murder of Samuel Harris, the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported that Governor Jelks ordered Sheriff Hodge and the Prosecutor C.A.L. Samford to look into the matter thoroughly. The same report indicated that “The Lee County officials have been impressed with the Governor’s determination to punish the guilty parties if they can be found.” Almost a month later, a separate investigation sought to catch the members of the mob who the Governor believed had lynched Monroe Dawkins. Although the sheriff did not immediately respond to the Governor’s request for an investigation, the Prosecutor, C. A. L. Samford, assured the Governor that he would investigate. In this report, Dawkins is described as “a good negro, peaceable, law-abiding and of good deportment.”

The Governor’s efforts to find and punish the members of these lynch mobs relied on the involvement of local officials, including the prosecutor and the sheriff. The need to involve the sheriff in finding the lynch mob members is perhaps ironic, given the fact that it was often the sheriff’s lack of action to protect alleged criminals that resulted in their lynchings. The state lacked resources to deal with officials who were more loyal to the local white community than the power of the Governor’s office. According to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the Governor regarded lynching as a flagrant violation of law and order, and if possible, sought to punish the guilty parties. The newspaper further reported:

The Governor said yesterday that while the Constitution required that he see the laws were properly executed, he was powerless unless the solicitor and the sheriff did their whole duty. Governor Jelks said: “If the new Constitution had given the Governor the power to relieve sheriffs from the discharge of their duties and appoint their successors,

lynching would be broken up without delay. In almost every case, he said, sheriffs can prevent lynchings if they try to do so.”

If Governor Jelks knew that the Sheriff’s lack of actions to protect Harris and Dawkins resulted in their attacks, one has to wonder how serious the Governor was about finding and punishing the people responsible or what options he had in an era prior to the formation of the Alabama Bureau of Investigations in the 1930s.

Despite newspaper reports of this effort, no records of any charges, testimonies, or accusations against the people who participated in the murder of Samuel Harris or the attempted murder of Monroe Dawkins have been located.