

John Moss & George Hart

Location of Lynching: Canaan Church/Cemetery, Waverly (Jamesville)

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1sVIs8KDzee7Ed2qylv1SCa61wb0UAYbA&usp=sharing>

Dates: John Moss: November 3rd, 1886

George Hart: November 5th, 1887

Age: While exact ages are unknown, John was “no more than twenty years”, and George was between 20-22 (The Times, Opelika, November 3rd, 1886)

Brief:

John and George were cousins and, in 1886, worked on the Waldrup family property. John Moss and George Hart were accused of killing Ed Waldrup Jr. (age 21) after John, as a part of a search party, successfully located the missing body of Ed Waldrup Jr. After hearing a lynch mob was forming, both John and George fled for safety. John was tracked and captured near Wetumpka by a white mob and taken to Canaan church near Waverly. That evening 50-60 armed white men broke into the church. Despite his pleas of innocence, the white mob hanged him and burned his body.

George Hart was captured near Birmingham and taken to the Montgomery jail due to a high threat of violence in Lee County. He was held in Montgomery for a year before transferring to the Opelika jail two weeks before his trial. When the news broke that he was in Opelika and projected to be cleared of charges, armed white men broke into the Opelika jail and kidnapped George Hart. The same white mob hanged George Hart from the tree still scarred from the lynching of John Moss. They pinned a placard to his back to further threaten and terrorize the Black community. No one was held accountable for the lynching of John Moss or George Hart.

Essay:

In 1886-1887 just outside of Waverly, Alabama, cousins John Moss (age 18-20) and George Hart (20-22) were lynched. Their case epitomizes a gross indifference to Black humanity and the use of lynchings to perpetuate fear and terror within the Black community. Their story spanned a period of more than a year and involved numerous interactions with a judicial system that failed to protect the two Black men and their community.

On October 27, 1886, Edmond Waldrup Jr. (age 21), youngest son of Sarah Waldrup and Edmond Waldrup Sr., went out for a walk and did not return to his Lee County home. The next

morning, a search party found Edmond's body dead in one of the Waldrup family fields near the surrounding woods. The search party included two Black men, cousins John Moss and George Hart, both of whom worked on the Waldrup property. Mr. Moss and Mr. Hart were quickly accused of his murder, though newspaper accounts differ in their rationale for the accusations. According to the final reports, "John Hart [Moss] was first to report that the body had been found, and where it was. Suspicion at once rested upon the negro..." Both Mr. Moss and Mr. Hart immediately fled the region for safety while armed white men began "scouring the county in search of the murderers." Regional newspapers immediately picked up the story and declared Moss and Hart "guilty."

Newspapers described Mr. Moss and Mr. Hart as cousins, though it is unclear whether or not they were actually blood relatives. Regardless, the newspapers sought to keep the two names synonymous with this murder. Newspapers from the onset of the first reports named Mr. Hart as the murderer, and soon described Mr. Moss as his accomplice. Mr. Moss' alleged role in the murder is described differently in contradictory reports. One reporter suggested that Mr. Moss murdered Waldrup. Certain reports suggested details about the murder that go far beyond any insinuation by other papers. For example, *the Prattville Progress* reported on November 26, 1886, that Mr. Moss and Mr. Hart "were simply the leaders of an organized gang whose purpose was to murder a whole neighborhood for money." Exaggerations of broader threats, especially with this type of economic undertone, were a common justification for lynch mob violence.

On November 3, 1886, the armed party tracked down John Moss in Wetumpka and took him back to Waverly, where a bailiff and guard held him in Canaan Church and, according to *The Montgomery Advertiser*, "intended to carry him to Opelika jail the next morning." That evening between fifty and sixty white men broke into the church to lynch John Moss. Despite his

pleas of innocence, the white mob tortured him, hanged him with a metal chain, and burned his body, just 200 yards from the church and half a mile from where the Moss and Hart family lived.

In the following weeks, fear, violence, and anger deepened in Waverly. *The Montgomery Advertiser* reported that in the wake of the lynching of John Moss and the community's desire to capture George Hart, residents armed themselves and rumors festered of murder and robbery "on an extensive scale." These rumors led to the arrest of ten Black residents, without evidence, on conspiracy to murder. Of the ten arrested, Mr. Anthony Williamson and Ms. Carrie Trammell, were held on bond for \$1,000 and \$300 (more than \$27,000 and \$8200 in 2020 dollars). Mr. Barlow, who operated a farm with the labor of leased convicts in Tallapoosa County, paid their bonds and "put them to work on his farm." Barlow used the payment of their bond as means to hold them in a state-sanctioned status of unpaid labor that strongly resembled slavery through convict leasing. **[See Convict Lease System blurb below]** The Lee County community lynched John Moss only eight days after Waldrup's disappearance, and in less than a month had initiated legal prosecutions of other Black residents with no other justification. The journalist who reported the story for the *Advertiser* drew clear connections between these arrests and the fear over Mr. Moss and Mr. Hart. On the same day the article appeared, the pursuers captured George Hart.

Several publications describe how W.A. Trammell of Lee County, a neighbor who used his familiarity with Mr. Hart to make a citizen's arrest, tracked down Mr. Hart by following a local Black resident who, on November 21, led him directly to Hart. Trammell carried out a "citizen's arrest," and an Opelika newspaper reported on November 24, 1886, "His identity and guilt seems unquestionable." When word spread that Trammell had found Mr. Hart, local citizens quickly organized a lynch mob. Trammell telegraphed Governor Thomas Seay for

instructions and took Hart to the Montgomery jail due to the high threat of violence in Lee County.

The November 30, 1886, edition of the *Advertiser* reported that two brothers of Ed Waldrup visited Mr. Hart in the Montgomery jail. It reads, “They all recognized him and identified him as George Hart. They asked him why he committed the crime, and he denied that he had any hand in it.” Authorities held him in the Montgomery jail for nearly a year, where they coerced and threatened Hart into making a full confession. Attempts to transfer Mr. Hart to the Lee County jail in Opelika were met with violence and such a high threat of lynching that, on both occasions, authorities moved him back to the Montgomery jail before nightfall.

On November 5, 1887, a full year after local community members accused George Hart of murder, authorities transferred him to the Opelika jail for a third time in anticipation of his upcoming trial date on November 14, 1887. When word spread that he was in the Lee County jail, and that the newspaper predicted an acquittal, “certain men who knew the facts in the case felt indignant at the prospect of the prisoner’s escape from the death sentence. So they determined to take the law in their own hands and see that the punishment was meted to him swift and sure and terrible. And so it was.” A mob of more than sixty armed white men knocked on the jail door to awaken Sheriff Thomas L. Gordon. Many sheriffs either participated actively in these violent killings or sometimes they passively allowed these murders to happen by failing to protect the victims while in their custody. One report stated that Sheriff Gordon refused to hand the keys to the cell over to the men, who overpowered him. Another newspaper claimed that Gordon was sleeping when the mob knocked and then rushed in to take Mr. Hart. Newspapers seem to agree that he played at least a passive role. Without any effective resistance, the mob entered the jailhouse and took George Hart.

The mob forced George Hart to the same tree—still scarred from the metal chain used a year before—where they had earlier murdered John Moss. A white mob, likely with many of the same participants as the year before, hanged and shot George Hart. In his pockets were pictures of President and Mrs. Grover Cleveland (Cleveland was in his first term as President and had passed through Montgomery on a goodwill tour while George Hart was imprisoned there. It is not clear if Hart made some kind of appeal to Cleveland or not) and, “in his left coat pocket a small testament and a letter from his wife, bearing date of October 30, bearing the postmark of Notasulga.” *The Times* further reported a placard pinned to his back that read “The man that cuts this negro down will swing from the same limb. He was put there by one hundred men. Negroes who act right will certainly be treated right, but when they get out of their place they will swing to this tree.” The next morning, the murderers left a note on the steps of Canaan Church near the site of the lynchings. It read, “George Hart will be found swinging to the same limb that you found John Moss swinging to. He was put there by a crowd of one hundred men.”

Three days after George’s death, *The Birmingham News* reported, “While our people condemn lynch law, they have no sympathy for George Hart.” This sentiment pervaded reports of the lynching. While nearly all newspapers claimed they did not support lynching on a grand scale, most attempted to justify the death of George Hart. In Dadeville, *The Tallapoosa New Era* of November 10, 1887, argued that while “Such acts as this are greatly to be deplored,” the community could not have been expected to wait around for justice longer than a year. The article suggests that in this case a lynching was to be expected.

Despite “condemning lynching law,” the community and its justice system took no action against any member of either mob. *The Weekly Advertiser* reported on November 24, 1887 that a special grand jury had been impaneled to investigate the men involved in the mob that lynched

George Hart. Despite numerous names listed in newspaper articles, the Special Grand Jury “respectfully report that after due and diligent enquiry... we have been unable to elicit anything concerning or implicating any person or persons, and the perpetrators remain to us unknown. Therefore, believing that we have exhausted every means in our power to discover the guilty party or parties, we respectfully ask to be discharged.” The grand jury’s denial of justice to George Hart was typical for lynching victims and indicates the range of ways that white communities participated in perpetuating this violence.

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Blurb: Convict Lease System

The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1865. It prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude but exempted those convicted of crimes. This exception allowed for similar violations, such as paying a person’s bonds after an arrest and expecting the person to work to repay that money, to appear protected by law. Between 1875 and 1928, the state of Alabama profited from a form of prison labor known as the convict-lease system. Under this system, individuals and companies paid fees to state and county governments in exchange for the labor of prisoners. Following a conviction, the state transported a prisoner directly to a work site, such as a farm, lumberyard, or coal mine, and the prisoner remained there for the duration of their sentence. More than 95 percent of county prisoners and 90 percent of state prisoners were people of African descent. By the 1880s, nearly all state and county prisoners under the convict-lease system in Alabama worked in coal mines located around Birmingham. Alabama was the last state in the nation to abolish convict leasing – a clear continuation of slavery – in 1928.

