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“A WARLIKE DEMONSTRATION”
Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894-1898

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It is the thesis of this volume that subjection to violence in various forms has been a central ingredient of the Afro-American experience. Violence, the actuality or the threat of death or serious injury from assault, has constituted an ever-present reality in practically every black community and for practically every black person.

—Herbert Shapiro, White Violence and the Black Response

Lynching is crucial in the continuance of the racial system in the south. . . . It is the most powerful and convincing form of racial repression operating in the interest of the status quo. Lynchings serve the indispensable social function of providing the ruling class with means of periodically reaffirming its collective sentiment of white dominance.

—Oliver C. Cox, Caste, Class and Race

Such resistance . . . serve as a warning that . . . extreme oppression could provoke retaliation and demonstrated to those inclined to believe their own “Sambo” stereotype that Blacks could fight valiantly indeed.

—Herbert Shapiro, White Violence and the Black Response

In a memorable quotation from the turbulent 1960s, black activist Jamal Al-Amin (a.k.a. H. Rap Brown) declared, “Violence is as American as cherry pie.” Amin’s statement is both a commentary on American society and an indictment of its system of racial oppression. The truth of Amin’s simile underscores that violence has been at the center of race relations in the United States. In the main, African Americans have been the victims rather than the perpetrators of racially motivated violence.

Private collective violence against African Americans has manifested itself in three dominant forms: lynching, race riots, and hate crimes. All three forms of social control have occurred throughout the African American experience. Nevertheless, specific forms of racial violence have dominated particular historical periods. For instance, during slavery very few blacks were lynched, but after emancipation the number of black victims gradually superseded that of whites, such that during the nadir, 1890 to 1915, lynching came to symbolize
racial repression. Although race riots were widespread in the 1830s and in the aftermath of emancipation, they did not come to typify antiblack violence until the twentieth century and were the dominant form of racial violence from 1900 to 1943. Acts of racially motivated violence probably began with the transition to enslavement during the 1640s, yet, since the concept’s advent in 1980, hate crimes have characterized racial hatred. Scholars have documented more than three thousand lynchings, hundreds of race riots, and tens of thousands of hate crimes in the United States. Racial violence has been persistent and pervasive throughout the nation-state’s history. For instance, documented cases suggest that between 1890 and 1900, 121 African Americans were lynched yearly. In more graphic terms, this means that every three days a racist mob murdered a black man, woman, or child. Furthermore, even though 95 percent of African American lynching victims were murdered in the former slave states, lynching transcended the South.

Academic interest in racially motivated violence has generally had an underlying social motivation. Contemporary concerns are often the impetus for historical investigation. This has been particularly true concerning the African American experience. For example, academic interest in slavery, especially in slave resistance, soared after the civil rights and black power movements. Moreover, race riots only became a major topic of scholarly inquiry after the urban insurrections of the 1960s. Scholarly interest in lynching seems to have followed a similar pattern. Historians’ increased attention to lynching coincided with the sharp upturn in private racial violence that occurred during the 1980s. Consequently, although lynching has been a central chapter in the American historical narrative, it was not until the 1980s that lynching emerged as an area of concern among historians.

During the 1980s, historians belatedly began to explore lynching. These scholars completely reversed the tendency to ignore or diminish lynching; by the late 1990s, lynching has become an important area of historical research. Initial historical examinations of lynching focused on (1) the antilynching movement, especially the leaders of the federal antilynching bill campaign; (2) the relationship between gender and lynching, especially the activities of white women in the antilynching movement; and (3) reconstructing particularly infamous lynchings. Although these lynching studies expanded our knowledge of this heinous act and the efforts of activist intellectuals to outlaw it, several areas remained underexplored. Four major problems characterized these works. First, they concentrated on the South. Second, they disproportionately adopted a national focus. The third problem is related to the second. The national focus predisposed them toward the antilynching movement, particularly campaigns for an antilynching law. Fourth, even though many of these works included the name of the lynch victim in their titles, they rarely examined the lives of these individuals. Fifth, these scholars tended to ignore African American resistance to and retaliation for lynchings.
The southern emphasis is understandable; after all, lynching was a southern mania, but it was also a national tragedy. Furthermore, newspapers in towns and cities across the country reported lynchings on their front pages. African American newspapers in the North not only reported the latest outrages against the race but also discussed African American responses. Consequently, as Adam Fairclough claims, lynching is deeply rooted in African Americans’ memories. Moreover, it was a significant factor in many African Americans’ decisions to migrate to the North. Given the prevalence of lynchings, it is fair to say that it affected virtually every black man and woman, at least psychologically. Lynching was a national phenomenon, and examination of northern lynchings broadens our understanding of how this form of racist terror adapted itself to different social contexts.

Second, like much of the early scholarship on the civil rights movement, the national focus occluded studying local black communities. Because scholars like Donald L. Grant and Robert L. Zangrando ignored African American community building, they neglected more militant forms of local resistance. Therefore, we learn very little about the institutional structures and social networks through which African Americans organized community and, subsequently, resistance. Third, by emphasizing national campaigns for anti-lynching legislation, they constricted African American self-activity to legalism or institutional politics. Their top-down approach and focus on elites and traditional reform tactics left them unable to explain the class and ideological battles waged inside black communities. Consequently, the relationship between well-known “negro leaders,” insurgent activists, and the black masses is often ignored or poorly theorized.

Fourth, just as black communities were marginalized, lynch victims are not central to these stories. In this regard, Howard Smead’s Blood Justice is a representative text. Thus, we learn very little about Mack Charles Parker and the multitude of other black men and women whose lives were taken. Often, they were strangers passing through the communities in which they were lynched, but frequently they were longtime residents deeply rooted in the local black community with strong social ties to white persons in whose “honor” they were being lynched. In the latter cases, their lives, motivations, and social relationships can be reconstructed. Failure to do so constitutes an academic lynching.

Fifth, in these works, historians rarely explored African American resistance. Why have historians traditionally ignored or underestimated resistance to lynching? In part, it is because they neglected the victim and the black community. Nevertheless, it also is derived from the conviction among scholars that blacks lacked the racial-class capacities to resist white aggressions. Racial-class capacities are the human, material, institutional, and ideological resources available to a racial class in its struggle for justice, equality, and self-determination. Having accepted a priori the rarity of black resistance, earlier generations of scholars failed to look for it.
Consequently, few scholars have examined the multitude of examples of advocated and actual armed self-reliance reported in the African American press. What does it mean that murder was the major single reason given for lynching blacks? Was the murder of white landlords and law enforcement officers by propertyless and politically subjugated black sharecroppers a form of resistance? What does it mean that “other causes” were the largest category given by whites for lynching blacks? Other causes ranged from the ambiguous, such as refusal to show deference to whites, to the clear and specific, such as assault, robbery, and arson. Was arson (and other property-related crimes) protest or retaliation as Albert C. Smith maintained? Finally, few lynching scholars relate blacks’ ability to build organizations like the Union League, Colored Farmers Alliance, the Tennessee Real Estate Association, or the National Afro-American League to their capacity, either covertly or overtly, to resistance or retaliation for lynchings.\textsuperscript{13}

The propensity to diminish or disregard African American resistance has been challenged recently by a new generation of historians led by W. Fitzhugh Brundage. By expanding the range of behaviors considered oppositional, their work has transformed this area of intellectual inquiry.\textsuperscript{14} This strategy, however, is also problematic. Their focus on everyday oppositional forms leads them to overemphasize episodic individual acts that do not threaten the system of oppression. The expanded conceptions of resistance used by scholars like Brundage, William J. Harris, and Jane Daily have produced different problems but ones perhaps as grave as those they successfully contested. By conceptualizing resistance as any response by African Americans, contemporary lynching scholars ultimately undermine the concept’s heuristic value. Philosopher Jeffery Issac has criticized this approach to resistance as “anti-scientific romanticism” because it posits a teleology in which the dominated are “either actually or immanently in opposition to the existing system of power.”\textsuperscript{15}

Whereas the 1980s’ historians generally failed to conceptualize resistance, the 1990s’ scholars of lynching accepted it as widespread and continuous. Nevertheless, many in the new generation believed blacks were only able to mount “double-voiced discursive” opposition. Therefore, they interpreted resistance through James C. Scott’s notions of “hidden transcripts” and “infrapolitics.” For Scott, hidden transcripts are the ideological and cultural processes by which the oppressed critique elite representations and construct their own counter visions. These transcripts are hidden because they are “encoded” and “masked” and are only audible or visible through cultural mediums such as songs, folklore, jokes, and gestures.

According to Scott, infrapolitics are the “weapons of the weak,” or the daily acts of dissemblance, evasion, and deference used by peasants to undermine elites surreptitiously. Those who apply Scott’s ideas to the African American experience focus on reinterpreting behaviors previously dismissed as deferential or insolent. For instance, W. Fitzhugh Brundage cites a letter by a committee of African Americans in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, in 1919 applauding...
a mob for their *restraint*. They thanked the murderers “for handling this case so nice. . . . Our white people fought no one but the brute, Obe Cox, which was right and we thank them for it.” According to Brundage, “the tactic of public deference almost certainly stands as testimony to the subtlety, cunning, and ongoing refusal of . . . blacks to internalize white ideology, not their craven obedience to it.” From the evidence, Brundage concludes that “Although blacks’ appeals for protection may have been couched in the language of deference, they almost certainly were disingenuous.” How does he reach this conclusion? For Brundage, deference is a weapon of the oppressed; it is double-voiced and always masks opposition. Thus, he reaches this conclusion by substituting a general theory for historical evidence. Mediated through the work of Robin Kelly, Brundage uncritically applies Scott’s questionable notions to the African American experience.

Consequently, Brundage and other enthusiasts for Scott’s views treat domination as domination. They ignore differences between social structures of accumulation in South Asian peasant societies, sharecropping in the rural American South, and capitalist political economies in the urban South. Furthermore, many of these scholars diminish the specificity of time and space by ranging over wide temporal periods and broad expanses of territory. Again, Brundage’s work is paradigmatic. In “The Roar on the Other Side of Silence,” he provides snapshots and sound bites of “black resistance” over a sixty-year period in eight southern states. This is surprising since Scott conceives of the “social contract” between peasants and elites as grounded in community-specific visions of obligations and responsibilities. Moreover, most of the approximately twenty examples in Brundage’s “continuum of resistance” are overt acts of “defiance” via discourse and dissemblance. He provides only two examples of individual or collective violent self-help and only alludes to murder, theft, vandalism, and arson as modes of resistance. This contrasts sharply with Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith, who uncovered vast and continuous violent resistance in Memphis, Tennessee, between 1862 and 1920. Not surprisingly, they titled their essay “‘Unhidden’ Transcripts.”

Ironically, the specter of the “old Negro” looms over much of the new resistance scholarship. The rampant examples of dissemblance and deference in this scholarship serve only to resurrect that racist stereotype. This is most certainly subconscious, but nonetheless, it is the logical consequence of their paradigm. It is ironic because the propagandists of white supremacy shifted their depiction of blacks from infantile to beasts to justify the frequency and brutality of lynchings. Yet, it is precisely this earlier image that the scholars influenced by Scott threaten to rehabilitate. If the old Negro was a real representation of African Americans during the nadir, than Sambo, his antebellum predecessor, must have been a valid portrait of blacks during slavery. Because these stereotypes were once presented as typical, depictions of the servile, sneaky old Negro cannot be simply recast and rationalized away as just a “mask” or coping strategy.
This project addresses the limitations of previous lynching research. It explores the racial-class struggle unleashed in Decatur, Illinois, a middle-sized northern industrial town, after the lynching of Samuel J. Bush in 1893. This work examines Bush’s efforts to save his own life and his commentary on his accuser. Thus, I treat him as an active agent rather than as a passive victim. Moreover, by examining the black community’s social networks, institutional structures, and leadership, I provide a detailed analysis of its racial-class capacities. By focusing on the organizing activities of the black community, this case study explores a wider range of resistance tactics than is common in the lynching literature. Although African American newspapers, contemporary writings, local folklore, and history contain numerous accounts of individual and collective armed self-help, lynching scholars have rarely pursued this line of research. For instance, Ida B. Wells reported that on August 14-15, 1892, armed black men guarded the jail in Memphis, Tennessee, to protect Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart from being lynched. After they disbanded because they believed the danger was over or were disarmed by the sheriff, a mob broke into the jail and lynched Moss, McDowell, and Stewart. According to Lester Lamon, in 1906 Tennessee authorities sent “four companies of militia” to Nashville to quell “2,000 to 4,000” blacks protesting the lynching of Ed Johnson. Moreover, George Wright cites numerous examples of armed blacks guarding jails to prevent lynchings in Kentucky including the following: Mount Sterling in 1889, Paducah in 1892, Maysville in 1902, Dixon in 1908, and Stanford in 1911. Specifically, this essay contends that personal self-defense and collective violent self-help were primary responses by African American communities to racial violence.

The lynching of Bush sparked a five-year battle between militant African Americans and Decatur’s white Republican Party leadership. This conflict included immediate responses to Bush’s lynching, an armed intervention ensuring that James Jackson was not lynched in 1894, and political mobilization against the candidacies of Isaac R. Mills and Harry Midkiff during the 1898 congressional and Macon County sheriff races. Many black leaders believed that Mills and Midkiff were complicit in Bush’s murder. The Bush lynching ripped away the liberal facade shrouding race relations and revealed the naked face of racial oppression. Race, however, was not the only “ideological force” unleashed during this dispute. Beliefs about community, class, and gender also emerged as potent ideologies that sometimes reinforced racial reasoning but also mitigated against strict racial readings of these events. As African American leaders struggled with the complexity of these issues, latent ideological differences erupted into the open. Activists advocated competing strategies and tactics that included legalism, violent self-help, and electoralism. It is my thesis that violent self-help was the most effective strategy employed by Decatur’s black leadership.
Decatur was founded by Benjamin Austin, John Ward, and Andrew Smith on January 19, 1829, on 18,560 acres. It is located in Macon County at the geographical center of the state. In 1836, its three hundred white residents incorporated the town. Like its founders, Decatur’s early residents were overwhelmingly drawn from the South. In this, Decatur was also typical of Macon County and most of the state of Illinois. Historian Elmer Gertz described Illinois as southern in population and tradition. Its northern location and southern population created a contradiction for the state of Illinois. For instance, the 1818 Illinois Constitution prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude but permitted indentured servants up to ninety-nine years on renewable one-year contracts. After Illinois ratified its constitution, it was nominally a free state, but the legislature quickly enshrined the spirit of the slave codes into their own set of antiblack statutes. On March 30, 1819, the legislature adopted the state’s first “Black Laws.” Illinois’ antiblack statutes defined anyone with at least one grandparent as “black” and denied African Americans’ basic civil rights. Decatur and Macon County residents fit neatly into this racist pattern. At its first session, the County Board of Supervisors levied a tax on personal property. The taxed items included “Slaves and indentured negro and mulatto servants, pleasure carriages, watches [sic], distilleries, horses and mules—almost everything except firearms.”

Consequently, due to antiblack attitudes, its small size, and its rural economy, Macon County was not attractive to the country’s small number of free blacks between 1829 and 1860. The first permanent black resident in Macon County, Benjamin Berkshire, arrived in the area in 1834, along with cousins John Geddes and John Sawyer. Berkshire was an escaped slave from Kentucky who was picked up on the road by the two Pennsylvanians. Before 1860, Berkshire’s status is unclear, although he appears to have been Geddes and/or Sawyer’s indentured servant. Between 1850 and 1860, blacks began to trickle into Decatur slowly. Many migrants were escaped slaves. By 1860, the African American enclave had grown to eighty.

For the black community, the Civil War and emancipation, rather than Decatur’s developing industrial economy, provided the context in which migrants came to Decatur. Just prior to and immediately after the war, the small colony of African Americans began to mold themselves into a community from a collection of individuals. Under Reverend Reasoner’s leadership, fourteen African Americans formed the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in 1857. In 1863, a fledgling congregation of African Methodists purchased two lots from Captain David Allen. They built St. Peter’s African Methodist Episcopal Church on Church Street across from Antioch Missionary Baptist Church.
Church. The organization of churches reflected the community’s growth and foreshadowed the creation of other independent institutions.  

Initially, Decatur was a service center for its agricultural hither land. Farmers found the area favorable for cultivating grains and raising cattle. But between 1870 and 1900, Decatur evolved into an industrial city. By 1900, local industries included grain processors and rolling mills, brickyards, breweries, coal mines, farm equipment manufacturers, cigar makers, and textile plants. Blacks, however, did not benefit from Decatur’s industrial revolution. They were mainly excluded from industrial employment. Most black men were employed as common laborers, many of whom were employed irregularly as day laborers. Almost all employed black women worked as domestic servants and laundresses. Some African American men continued to work in the older trades of brick masonry, carpentry, and barbering. For instance, Larkin Kinded, a brick mason, laid the foundation for St. Peter’s African Methodist Episcopal Church. Joseph Dansby, a prominent Republican Party leader during the 1890s, like most established black men in Decatur, operated a barbershop. Decatur’s total population increased 300 percent, from 7,161 in 1870 to 20,754 by 1900; yet, the black population grew very slowly during the same period, increasing from 235 in 1870 to 620 in 1900 (see Table 1).

By 1880, the core African American enclave had been created. Although scattered in clusters among white working-class ethnics throughout the city, most blacks lived primarily in the Greenwood area. The Greenwood neighborhood was immediately south and southwest of the central business district. The third ward encompassed the Greenwood district. Moreover, blacks’ central institutions—Antioch Missionary Baptist Church (1857) and St. Peter’s African Methodist Episcopal Church (1863)—were in Greenwood. Literary societies and several other social organizations were affiliated with these religious institutions. Between 1874 and 1882, African Americans in Decatur began formally to construct secular organizations. Initially, they formed fraternal orders such as the Masons (1874), St. Francis Court of the Heroines of Jericho (1878), the Grand United Order of the Odd Fellows, the Knights of the Pythias, and the Household of Ruth (1882). However, during the late 1880s and early 1890s, they began to build political organizations such as the local chapter of the National Afro-American League (1891), the Young Men’s Improvement Club, the Race Rights League, and the Colored People’s Law and Order League (1908). The primary purpose of these organizations was protest and race advocacy. African Americans also owned a few businesses. Most were small traditional racial service enterprises such as barbershops and boarding houses. Collectively, these religious, social, political, and business organizations composed the institutional infrastructure of Decatur’s black community.

Whereas nationally the 1890s ushered in disfranchisement and Jim Crow, contradictorily, in Decatur and other northern cities, blacks made their greatest political gains. At this time, blacks also bridged racial barriers in education and
In 1891, the African American community helped elect “one of their own” to the Macon County Board of Supervisors. In January of 1892, Houston Singleton was a delegate to the State Convention of Supervisors, and that November he was elected to the Executive Committee of the Illinois State Republican Party. Singleton, a former barber turned restaurateur, employed five workers. Catering to a predominantly white clientele, Singleton’s restaurant was in the heart of the city’s central business district. Isaac Rogan, a former slave, prosperous barber, and community activist, followed Singleton on the county board. After Rogan’s four-year term ended, James Hollinger, also a barbershop owner, served for fourteen years. John Williamson joined the police force in 1891 and was an officer continuously for nearly twenty-one years. Surprisingly, at least two African Americans were on the city’s police force between 1891 and 1912, except during 1902 and 1906. Louis Stewart began carrying the mail in 1888; Baker Nickens joined him in 1891. The presence of African Americans in these unusual positions and other evidence suggest that lynching was an anomaly in Decatur’s race relations.

### Table 1

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<td>1900</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>656</td>
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### The Lynching of Samuel J. Bush and the Emergence of a Militant Black Community

White supremacists consolidated their construction of a new racial formation during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Disfranchisement and the institution of apartheid represented the nonviolent political and legal mechanisms by which they effected a new racial rapprochement. However, extralegal racial violence augmented the legal tactics. Racial terror in the form of lynching erupted across the nation. On June 3, 1893, this horror struck the black
community of Decatur, Illinois, when Samuel J. Bush, an African American
day laborer, was forcibly taken from the Macon County jail and lynched.28

Between March 30, 1893, and June 2, 1893, mobs of white vigilantes
roamed the streets and back roads of central Illinois. They were hunting for a
black man accused of assaulting two white women, Mrs. Herbert B. Dill of
South Wheatland Township and Minnie Cameron Vest of Mount Zion. Initial
accounts given by Vest and E. T. Barnett, a Mount Zion farmer whose home
Bush visited, described him as “not bad looking . . . about 5 feet 8 inches in
height, about 25 years of age . . . not coal black, but dark . . . medium sized
moustache and short, kinky hair.” Vest or Barnett reported Bush “did not use
the negro dialect as much as some.” Furthermore, Barnett claimed he had “a
brutal and insolent walk.” Despite the description, mobs of whites indiscrimi-
nately harassed and pursued black men throughout central Illinois. Rumors
alleged that upon capture of the black man, Mount Zion males would lynch the
“nigger beast.”29

According to Marie Gray Baker, a group of African American men, includ-
ing her father, met with Macon County Sheriff Peter Perl on June 1, 1893, in
response to these rumors. Led by Everett Edward Jacobs, a press operator at
the Herald-Dispatch, and Edward Gray, a common laborer, they courageously
offered to guard the prisoner. Jacobs was an officer in St. Peter’s African Meth-
odist Episcopal Church Aid Society, and he and Gray were members of
Decatur’s chapter of the National Afro-American League. Sheriff Perl
declined their offer. He left for Chicago, Illinois, to attend the World Fair after
assuring the black men the sheriff’s office would protect Bush. Ironically, the
Colombian Exposition was publicized as “The White City” and was designed
to showcase the United States’ “new civilization.” Bush was captured Friday
morning, June 2, 1893, and brought to Decatur by train that afternoon. Imme-
diately after his incarceration, Bush hired Attorney Wilson B. Woodford to
defend him. Woodford was the only African American lawyer in Decatur.30

Little is known about Samuel J. Bush. Ironically, had he not been murdered
Bush would probably have remained beyond the interest of historians. Appar-
tently, Bush was an itinerant worker passing through Decatur. Bush interacted
with enough people in Macon and Moultrie counties between May 30 and June 2
that his movements can be recreated. Moreover, upon capture he claimed he
was a thirty-year-old native of Mason, Mississippi, who had been in central
Illinois for only a short time. He admitted to stopping at the Vest and Dill farms
but denied he was guilty of rape.31

After Bush’s death, incomplete but probably more accurate information
was provided in a letter he wrote from jail. Bush wrote three letters while incar-
cerated. He wrote his two sisters, Laura Davis of Jackson, Tennessee, and
Hattie Hill of Ragland, Alabama. He also wrote to a cousin, Louis Collins, also
of Ragland. The Decatur Review and the Decatur Daily Republican printed the
latter letter the morning after his lynching. Bush wrote,
Dear Louis Collins my cousin:

I am in jail and am into a very bad scrape. Tell Felix and Myron and your other brothers and all of my connections to make up for me the sum of 48 or 50 dollars and send here quick. I believe I can come clear for that or not less than 25. See my father and brother. They is nigh there. Now is the time of need. I never did ask for any favors of you all. Please grant this one at once if you all haft pawn something. Send the money to this Lawyer & he will clear me. If not I expect to be Linched. If you all fail try all of them men & woman to make it up, if nickles & dimes do so. Pray for me, earnest in hart. This said to be white women ‘cuse me of hurting her. Send the money at once.

Louis I write to you when I was at Carrollton & never hered any more. If uncle Bill & my other uncles to help me & once if I am at myself I could tell you all about it. Tell my father to borry the amount of money I sent a year ago if he please & send me some with out fail & no delay. I am, your cousin.

Sam Bush

Bush’s letter is quite revealing; he clearly understood the gravity of his situation. He fully expected to be lynched but only if his family could not raise Woodford’s fee. Moreover, what was Bush implying when he called Minnie Cameron Vest a “said to be white women”? African Americans generally use the phrase “said to be” to cast doubt on the veracity of someone. Bush probably was not questioning her skin color. More likely, he was referring to her “whiteness” as a social relation. Bush was implicitly applying a social constructionist perspective of race when he suggested Minnie Cameron Vest was not a “real” “white” woman.

At the same time African American men were desperately seeking a meeting with them, State’s Attorney Isaac R. Mills, Decatur Mayor David Moffett, Deputy Sheriff Harry Midkiff, and Decatur Marshall William Mason were meeting with Charles B. Britton and Charles M. Fletcher, the leaders of the vigilantes. Bush, Mills informed them, would get a life sentence if convicted. The men from Mount Zion reiterated that only his death would satisfy them. Attempting to appease the vigilantes, Mills stated, “if the officers did not do their duty it would then be time to resort to extreme measures.” Now aware of Bush’s maximum penalty, they returned to Mount Zion determined to supplant the judicial process.

Although lynching rumors had circulated for days, the authorities allowed a crowd of approximately a thousand people to gather across from the jail. They did not attempt to move the prisoner. On Saturday, June 2, 1893, just before 2:00 a.m., a mob led by Britton; William Vest, Minnie Cameron Vest’s husband; and Thomas Atterbury and composed of some of the county’s leading citizens broke into the jail. Decatur Marshall William Mason had rushed over from the city building and attempted to stop the mob. Mason was grabbed and thrown down a flight of stairs. After a brief search, they found Bush, who had secreted himself in a mattress. The mob pulled the naked Bush outside and dragged him to a telephone pole on the corner of Wood and Water streets. He
was thrown into a hack where William Vest forced his head through a noose. According to newspaper accounts, Vest asked Bush if he had any last words. Bush tried to speak but the rope was too tight, so he whispered that he wanted to pray. Vest loosened the rope, and Bush pleaded his innocence and told his murderers that he “hoped to see them again in heaven.” Then he asked God to “mercifully receive his soul in the land beyond trouble.” As the mob was becoming increasingly impatient, Bush asked Vest if he could confess. Perhaps he was hoping the authorities might yet intervene and save his life. Surprisingly, Vest agreed. As Bush retold the story he told Britton in jail, the crowd turned rabid and hooted him down. Bush tried to pray again, but Vest grabbed the rope and jerked him off his knees. Climbing out of the wagon, Vest gave the signal. The wagon lurched forward, and Bush was hoisted briefly into the air but then plummeted to the ground. Young men again climbed the telephone pole with the rope. Bush’s head was forced through the noose a second time, and he was thrown back into the wagon. Once more, the wagon pulled away, and his naked body was snatched into the air. Wrenching and kicking in pain, Bush slowly strangled as his body writhed high above his executioners. After six minutes, Dr. Henry D. Heil, a local physician, examined Bush’s pulse and found that he was still alive. After another torturous six minutes, Bush was declared dead. For several minutes, there was silence, as the crowned gaped at his dead body swaying above their heads. Then, they began to shout “Hurrah for Mt. Zion!” Members of the mob attempted to riddle Bush’s body with bullets, but the sheriff’s deputies prevented this last act of depravity. At about 4:00 a.m., Macon County Coroner Jesse Bendure removed Bush’s body. Two unidentified Mount Zion men cut up the rope and began distributing the pieces. A lone, elderly black woman, tears streaming down her face, declared, “De Lord will pay somebody for him.” The mob lynched Bush in front of about a thousand witnesses and with the complicity of county officials.  

Sheriff Perl read about the lynching Saturday morning on the front page of the June 3, 1893, Chicago Tribune. He caught the first train to Decatur. Complaining it “was his luck to miss all the big things that happened,” Perl expressed disappointment on arrival. Moreover, he expressed gratitude “that nobody had been killed!” Shortly after his arrival, a delegation of African American men approached him. They volunteered to help arrest suspects. Attempting to frighten them off, Sheriff Perl informed them that it might be dangerous. One black man was reported as replying, “I’m not afraid!” and another as passionately declaring, “I’ll go!” The Sheriff rejected their offer and referred them to State’s Attorney Isaac R. Mills.  

Mills was unable or unwilling to meet with them. They were not the only African Americans attempting to see the state’s attorney, however. Woodford also was unable to get an appointment with Isaac R. Mills, but he did meet with Andrew Mills, the state’s attorney’s older brother and law partner. The elder Mills advised Woodford to encourage blacks to cooperate with the authorities by identifying mob participants.  


A member of Decatur’s black leadership also published a statement in the local newspapers after Bush’s lynching. Sunday morning, all three Decatur papers carried “An Open Letter to Decatur’s Colored Citizens” by Attorney Wilson B. Woodford. In it, Woodford condemned “the lawless mob of maddened men” who had murdered Samuel J. Bush. The African American attorney contended the lynching was not an isolated incident but part of the dominant strategy of racial repression. Woodford denounced the “daily occurrences of such depredations upon the race throughout the country” and reminded African Americans of “the littleness in which the lives and property of the race are held.” Concluding, he implored “every Negro, with one spark of love for his race and its future, who believe ‘a man’s a man’ who, above all loves his country and its laws” to attend a mass meeting. Woodford proposed that African American men meet to “devise ways and means to hire counsel and otherwise assist in bringing to justice . . . the cowardly mob of human fiends” at an “indignation meeting.”

In his protest letter, Woodford skillfully selected terms of discourse that allowed him to manipulate the interconnections between race, gender, and class. Amazingly, he alternately addressed both European Americans and African Americans in this short statement. Initially, he aimed his propaganda at European Americans, especially white men. His goal was to divide the white community by challenging the liberal advocates of legalism to support punishment of the perpetrators. Woodford attempted to do this in two ways: first by appealing to “law and order” and second by manipulating contemporary notions of masculinity and civilized behavior. During the nadir, the concepts “law and order” were connected to an ensemble of ideas that included “whiteness,” “manhood,” and “civilization.” According to Gail Bederman,

in the Darwinist 1890s, “civilization” had become a racial concept. . . . In fact, many white people believed “civilization” was itself a racial trait, inherited by all Anglo-Saxons and other “advanced” white races. . . . By referring to “the white man,” contemporaries simultaneously invoked the manly white males who were “civilized” and “civilization” itself.

Euro-Americans deemed characteristics associated with Anglo-Saxons as the essence of manhood and civilized behavior. Following the lead of black journalists Ida B. Wells and John Edward Bruce, Woodford sought to subvert whites’ claims to hegemony over “civilized behavior.” At the 1890 founding convention of the National Afro-American League in Chicago, Bruce stated, “But, this modern barbarism practiced upon the Negro in Christian America by white men who boast of high civilization makes me tremble for this country when I remember that God is just.” By emphasizing the “barbarity” of lynching, Woodford also deftly undermined notions of white racial superiority embedded in the concept of civilization. He masterfully turned the language of the racists back on them. By describing the lynching as a “damnable outrage,”
Woodford appropriated the terminology used by Euro-Americans to characterize rape in the 1890s. Through his manipulation of this symbol, Woodford subtly questioned the masculinity of Bush’s murderers and their defenders. In the 1890s, white supremacists contrasted “the white man” to “the negro.” By calling the lynchers a “the lawless mob of maddened men” and a “cowardly mob of human fiends,” Woodford implies that they lacked the self-control associated with manhood and civilized behavior. By boldly denying their masculinity, Woodford severed the connection between “whiteness,” “masculinity,” and “civilization.” Undermining the ideological basis of white superiority was necessary for him to legitimate black male action, which was his primary goal. Woodford’s appeal is devoid of deferential language because black men were his primary audience. Woodford wanted to unite African Americans into an oppositional force and to orchestrate their response. Initially, he framed his appeal in racial terms, but he quickly adopted gender-specific language. What began as a defense of “Negroes” was rapidly recast into a challenge to African American males’ “manhood.” By adroitly manipulating black men’s notions of masculinity, Woodford intensified their awareness of the threat Bush’s lynching posed.

Incited by Woodford’s challenge to their manhood, 150 to 300 African American men courageously attended the indignation meeting Monday night, June 5, 1893. The mass meeting reflected the democratic tradition prevalent among African Americans. According to Nell Irvin Painter, it was the “normal” process by which “uneducated Blacks” decided “to take public community action.” C. C. Crandall, a member of the grand jury, and a reporter for the Decatur Daily Review were the only whites who attended the meeting. No women, black or white, were allowed to attend. By the convening of the indignation meeting, “warrants still had not been issued.” The black men met at the Elijah Lodge of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. A member of the lodge, Attorney Woodford was elected chairperson.

From the outset, Woodford sought to dictate the direction of the proceedings. He recommended the formation of two committees: one on resolutions and another to work with the state’s attorney. Woodford appointed Edward Jacobs and laborers Sam Merle and William Price to the committee on resolutions. The group of African American men that met with Sheriff Perl before Bush was lynched was led by Jacobs, who most likely also headed the second delegation. His appointment to the resolutions committee was significant because he represented the opposition to Woodford’s legalism. Houston Singleton and William Holland, a cook, joined Woodford on the other committee. Their charge was “to wait on Mr. Mills and offer their help in the prosecution,” especially by hiring a private attorney to help Mills. Woodford never fully explained why the state’s attorney should hire private counsel or why private citizens should pay for it.

Opening the meeting for discussion, Woodford attempted to limit the speakers by asking for “talks by conservative men.” His leadership was challenged
from the outset. An unnamed speaker asserted Bush’s innocence. Although he had been poised to become Bush’s attorney, Woodford thought he was guilty. He silenced the speaker, declaring, “Let us not have such discussion. Something will be done that will hurt our cause. I want to ask you as one who risked everything to call this meeting together to be careful what you say.” His appeal and his authority to select speakers allowed him briefly to silence opposition.

Eventually, Woodford recognized Jacobs. Ignoring Woodford’s counsel, Jacobs wove a compelling argument, simultaneously appealing to race pride and manhood and exposing the raced and gendered nature of the law. Building on Woodford’s earlier challenges to their “manhood,” Jacobs introduced the different but equally charged issue of black women’s vulnerability to abuse from white males. Jacobs contrasted the authorities’ response to Bush’s “rape” of a white woman to their response the previous year to a white man’s assault on a black woman. In the former, they mounted a multicounty search; in the latter, they failed to make an arrest. He asserted, “If that man (Bush) had been a white man the outrage would never have been committed.” Ida B. Wells had made this point the year before in her pamphlet *Southern Horrors*. After uncovering the tradition of white men abusing black women, Wells noted the invisibility of this practice in the mainstream media. According to Wells, “When the victim is a colored woman it is different . . . nobody is lynched and no notice is taken.” Like Alexander Crummell, Jacobs understood that “black men have no rights that white men should regard, and black women no virtue which white men should respect.” Concluding, Jacobs “called for war” and urged the assembly to send an armed band of African Americans to Mount Zion to arrest Bush’s murders. Disdainfully rejecting Jacobs’s tactic, Woodford declared, “Talk of carrying guns, and going to Mt. Zion after the lynchers is nonsense.”

Abruptly ending this line of discussion, Woodford called for the report from the committee on resolutions. Jacobs had not been silenced, but his voice had gone unheeded. The men adopted Woodford’s strategy, apparently sharing his faith in the legal system. Ratifying the Mills-Woodford legalist strategy, the report condemned the barbarity of Bush’s lynching, reaffirmed African Americans’ support of law and order, and appealed to the authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice. According to the *Decatur Daily Review*, these “mild resolutions” were forwarded to Governor John Peter Altgeld and State’s Attorney Mills. Woodford closed the meeting by instructing his brothers to remain calm and to avoid debates with white men. He implored them to support the law but also to “keep your eyes on the officers of the law and see that they do their duty.” Last but not least, he reminded them that they needed to raise money to pay for a lawyer.

An attorney, Woodford was predisposed to distinguish between the law and its enforcers. Woodford, like other liberal men and women, believed that racial prejudice and contempt for law and order were the twin causes of lynching. The fiery Jacobs, on the other hand, questioned both the law’s discriminatory
enforcement and its racist character. He understood the symbiotic relationship between the authorities (state) and the vigilantes. Jacobs knew the authorities had mobilized the vigilantes to help them capture Bush but had rejected African American support either to protect him or to arrest his murderers. They had good reason. Nevertheless, Woodford advocated reliance on the law, while Jacobs articulated reliance on militant African American agency.

Woodford won the first battle, but Jacobs’s call for war would eventually manifest itself in a “warlike demonstration.” By 1893, lynchings had become one of the national pastimes. Jacobs represented a growing national tendency as African Americans sought ways to curtail escalating levels of white terror. Jacobs, Woodford, and many activists who protested Bush’s lynching were members of the Decatur Chapter of the National Afro-American League. The league practiced a dialectical strategy that involved “a double and reciprocal struggle for black development and against white restrictions on that development.” Consequently, the league combined the preeminent philosophy of self-help and racial solidarity with the protest tactics of legalism, direct action, and violent self-help.45

In his opening address at the league’s founding convention in Chicago, T. Thomas Fortune enunciated a philosophy that merged legalism and self-defense. He declared,

All those men who have gotten profit by our disorganization and fattened on our labor by class and corporate legislation will oppose this Afro-American League movement. In the intensity of their opposition they may resort to the coward argument of violence; but are we to remain forever inactive, the victims of extortion and duplicity on this account? No, sir. We propose to accomplish our purposes by the peaceful methods of agitation, through the ballot and the courts, but if others use the weapons of violence to combat our peaceful arguments, it is not for us to run away from violence. A man’s a man, and what is worth having is worth fighting for.46

Reeling from racist violence, previously moderate voices joined the militant chorus led by Fortune and journalist John Edward Bruce. For instance, a writer in the A.M.E. Church Review suggested the formation of a secret paramilitary organization. Jacobs’s call for war was in keeping with the changing national mood toward greater militancy. Soon, blacks in Decatur would be forced to adopt Jacobs’s aggressive approach.47

On one point, Jacobs and Woodford agreed. Both were skeptical of local law officials, especially State’s Attorney Isaac R. Mills and Deputy Sheriff Harry Midkiff. Early Saturday morning, June 3, 1893, Coroner Jesse Bendure impaneled a coroner’s inquest. Officer John Williamson was the only African American to testify before the grand jury. Three black men—Henry Cole, Albert Butler, and Robert Green—had informed Mills that they could identify one of the lynchers; yet their subpoenas were returned, allegedly because they could not be found. Monday, June 5, as the coroner’s inquest was hearing
testimony, the grand jury convened amid threats to State’s Attorney Mills’s life. Judge Vail presented two cases to the grand jury: the Bush lynching and the attack on the black woman mentioned by Jacobs. The grand jury proceedings confirmed Jacobs’s and Woodford’s suspicions. Mills did not hire Woodford or another private attorney to help him. On June 13, the coroner’s inquest recommended that Vest, Atterbury, and Britton be bound over to the grand jury. Despite a strong charge from Judge Vail, on June 28, 1893, the grand jury failed to return indictments. Judge Vail’s attempt to impanel a special grand jury on June 29, 1893, also failed. Finally, on September 5, 1893, a new grand jury reexamined the Bush lynching. More than a month later, on October 17, 1893, the second grand jury reported “the sentiment of the people mitigated against conviction, if indictments were returned.” However, they decided “the officials in charge were possibly indirectly responsible for the occurrence . . . by their failing to take proper precautions to prevent it.” Although phrased in overly cautious language, the grand jury’s ruling clearly implied that Mills, Perl, and Midkiff had been negligent in their duties.

It is important to understand that these men were officials of Macon County, not the city of Decatur. Besides Decatur, their constituency included Mount Zion and the rural areas of the county. In contrast to Mills, Perl, and Midkiff, Mason attempted to stop the lynching but was overrun by the mob that threw him down a flight of stairs. Earlier on May 30, he had turned back a group of Mount Zion vigilantes who attempted to enter Decatur and search the Greenwood district. The social fault lines cut in multiple but counter directions. Macon County residents united and fragmented around concepts of community, race, class, and gender. The concept of community is essential to understanding the actions of both European Americans and African Americans during this lynching cycle. British sociologist Craig Calhoun has defined community as a fairly stable combination of social networks operating within a culturally defined way of life. For Calhoun, the essence of community is the social relationship and political mechanisms that “tie social actors to each other and their own pasts.” According to him, the bonds of community are characterized by the properties of “density, multiplicity, and systematicity.” The behavior of either African Americans or European Americans can be analyzed using these concepts.

The first, density, refers to the abundance of direct face-to-face relations. This social property is best approximated in small farming communities like Mount Zion and racial enclaves such as Decatur’s black community, in which many residents are related, and nearly everyone knows everyone else. At this moment, in a small village like Mount Zion, the operative concept of community was more likely the principle of locality than the social relations perspective of community. The Vests were longtime residents of Mount Zion and had built up many intimate relationships throughout the community. For instance, within hours after John Hornbeck, a neighbor of the Vests, aroused the community, dozens of armed Mount Zionites were searching the countryside. This
instantaneous formation of a lynching party suggests that the Vests were an integral part of the Mount Zion community. 51

Calhoun’s second concept, multiplicity, refers to the extent to which individuals share interlocking relationships. According to him, when individuals are involved in a matrix of mutually reinforcing relationships such as kinship, neighborhood, employment, occupation, and church and organizational memberships, they are more likely to develop the close bonds necessary for cooperation. Residents of small towns often developed a web of relationships that augmented each other. For instance, Charles M. Fletcher, Charles M. Britton, and Eli Ulery Jr., members of Mount Zion’s white economic and political elite, were leaders of the lynch mob. William Vest and Thomas Atterbury, however, were not elites. They were not landowners, but Vest, like Fletcher, Britton, and Ulery, was a farmer. Fletcher was a prominent Mount Zion political activist and farmer, owning 436 acres of land. Britton’s primary businesses were buying grain and operating a grain elevator and secondarily farming. He had a reputation of engaging “in physical combat.” Although educated at St. Louis’ Christian Brothers College, Ulery was also a farmer. More important, his father was one of the wealthiest men in Macon County. The elder Ulery owned 3,335 acres of land in Macon County, including Woodbine park recreational area, and a large ranch in Colorado. Eli Jr. inherited his father’s property. Britton’s brother Frank worked for Ulery Sr. Moreover, all of them were related by marriage. Britton and Fletcher were brothers-in-law as were Ulery and Fletcher. Ulery’s sister, Donna, was married to Fletcher, and his daughter, Mona, would eventfully marry Britton’s son Lester. These multiple relationships undergirded Fletcher, Britton, and Ulery’s capacity to mobilize Mount Zion residents quickly into a Citizen’s Committee. This body recruited the mass of vigilantes, organized the manhunt, and demanded Bush’s lynching. The Citizen’s Committee offered a reward of $50 if Bush was taken to Decatur but $100 if he was brought to Mount Zion. As members of Mount Zion’s ruling elite, Fletcher, Britton, and Ulery believed it was their duty to vindicate the Vests’s honor. The actions of Mount Zion’s elites and common citizens were complex. They responded to several interrelated factors. First, they retaliated against an alleged assault on a member of their community. Yet, they also sought to vindicate the “virtue” of a white woman and to preserve white supremacy. 52

Calhoun’s last concept, systematicity, addresses the incorporation of individuals into social collectives and the ordering of groups within a social formation. Since the United States is a racial formation, a society structured by race, the basic institutions and attendant ideologies perpetuate and rationalize white supremacy. Thus, the society empowers all whites in relationship to all blacks. Consequently, racial domination created material foundations for white unity, which most often overrode cleavages of community, class, ethnicity, and gender. Regardless of class, ethnicity, or gender, whites were deemed superior to African Americans despite class, color, or gender. However, in this instance, it appears that other aspects of community mitigated against race being used as
an organizing principle to unite whites across notions of locality. The Vest family was separated from Decatur’s white elite by locality, class, and social relationships. Although they shared bonds of systematicity, of “whiteness” with the Vests, in and of itself this factor was not strong enough to motivate white Decaturites to participate in this lynching. Decatur’s whites, especially white elites, did not share bonds of density and multiplicity with the Vest family. Thus, they felt no compunction to vindicate Minnie Cameron Vest by lynching Bush. They shared white supremacist ideology with the lynchers, and like the lynchers they believed white women “needed” protection from “Negro rapists.” Yet, they did not identify with Minnie Cameron Vest as a member of their community. Therefore, Decatur whites watched the lynching. They composed what Frank Shay described as “the spectator mob.” Even though many, if not most, may have derived a perverse pleasure from this inhuman act, they were guilty of voyeurism, not murder. Their actions were morally despicable, but because they did not participate in the lynching, they were not criminal. Relationships constructed on notions of community derived from the perspective of locality helped unite white Mount Zionites, but the social relationship perspective of community provided space for white Decaturites to resist appeals to collective racist violence.53

Conceptions of community also animated Afro-Decaturites’ actions. Calhoun’s concept of systematicity is especially useful in explaining how the actions of members of oppressed groups reflect the behavior of the entire group. It helps to explain how racial oppression created material foundations for black unity. African Americans, whatever their class, color, or gender, were deemed inferior to whites, whatever their class, ethnicity, or gender. All African Americans were subject to the racial control system’s structures of domination and ideologies of racial inferiority. Consequently, racial oppression exerted pressure on African Americans to unite for companionship, protection, mutual aid, and development. For instance, despite the published description of Bush, African American men were pursued indiscriminately throughout central Illinois. The consistency with which African American men who clearly did not fit Bush’s description were harassed, chased, and arrested suggests that racial gender was the only characterization that mattered.54

Concepts of density and multiplicity also were reflected in the structure and size of Decatur’s black community. Most of Decatur’s 510 African Americans resided in the Greenwood neighborhood; thus, not only did most African Americans know each other, but also many were related. Decatur’s black community, like many African American enclaves, included several large extended family groups. Most men were common laborers. Many were irregularly employed as day laborers. Almost all women worked as laundresses or domestics, servants. Moreover, the black community’s institutional architecture further reinforced a sense of collectivity. The community had only two churches, and they were located across the street from each other. Furthermore, there was a great deal of overlapping memberships in religious, social, and political
organizations. For instance, the Woodford brothers, Jacobs, Joe Dansby, and Singleton were all members of St. Peter’s Church. They were also members of the Elijah Odd Fellows Lodge, as were Jacobs, Gray, and Singleton. Although Wilson B. Woodford and Jacobs took opposing positions regarding the response to Bush’s lynching previously, they had published a newspaper together, and both, along with Houston Singleton, were active in the Afro-American League. Collectively, the concepts of density, multiplicity, and systematicity describe the processes of social organization and identity formation by which white Mount Zionites, Euro-Decaturites, and Afro-Decaturites molded themselves into communities with different and conflicting interests.

A “WARLIKE DEMONSTRATION”:
ARMED SELF-DEFENSE OF JAMES JACKSON

A year after the Bush lynching, James Jackson, a black male porter, was arrested and charged with the attempted rape of Carrie Hise, a white female domestic worker. Again, the circumstances were questionable. Carrie Hise claimed she woke up around midnight and discovered Jackson in her room. Both Jackson and Hise roomed at the Perl Building, a hotel located in the central business district. She initially reported that Jackson pulled a revolver and demanded that she submit to his sexual desires. According to Hise, she convinced Jackson to allow her to go get a drink of water. Once in the hallway she woke the manager and together they summoned a police officer. Finding Jackson asleep in Hise’s bed, the officer promptly arrested him.

It seems the state learned its lesson from the previous year. The father of the alleged victim, Charles Hise, a carpenter, threatened to have Jackson lynched. He claimed help was coming from Mount Zion. The lynchers of Bush had come from Mount Zion. Decatur and Macon County officials could not afford another lynching. Although they did not transport Jackson to another county, they did take precautions. Mayor David Moffett took charge of the situation. He spent the night at police headquarters and had the entire force placed on call. Sheriff Peter Perl was out of town again, but his brother, Deputy Sheriff John Perl, ordered officers to disperse crowds before they could be transformed into a mob.

These precautions inspired the Review to editorialize the following:

There has been a decided change in this community in regard to lynching. While there never was a positive preponderance of sentiment in favor of it there was sort of an acquiescence on the part of so many that it looked as if public opinion favored it. This is the reason our officers were not more determined last June. A thousand people stood around the jail all day and not one advised the officers to hold the prisoner. Now it is different. While no one thinks there is likelihood of an attempt to lynch Jackson, it is also evidence that such an attempt would meet with a repulse that would come as quickly as it would be decisive. This
community has had one lynching and that is enough. Every good citizen would lend a hand to prevent another.  

Apparently, members of the African American community doubted the editorialist’s assessment of the white community’s antilynching sentiment. Trusting neither officers of the law nor popular white opinion, African Americans acted on their own.

On the evening of June 28, 1894, African Americans in Decatur, Illinois, like blacks in several localities throughout the country asserted their right to armed self-help. A Review reporter described the scene: “Just at midnight four big darkys passed east on Main to Water, each with an army musket on his shoulder. They joined a party of forty or more at the corner of Franklin and Wood Streets.” In a hyperbolic comment, the reporter covering these events observed, “it seemed as if every African American was downtown.” Blacks controlled the streets surrounding the jail. They could be seen in doorways, under stairwells, behind wagons, armed and ready for action. Other African Americans patrolled the streets scrutinizing whites who happened to be out late. And unlike the protest meeting, at least two black women participated; one was reputed to be James Jackson’s widowed mother, Anna, a cook. Their inclusion contrasts sharply with the exclusion of black women from the indignation meeting a year earlier.

On June 29, 1894, the editor of the Daily Review condemned blacks’ use of armed self-defense. The editorial declared the following:

It might be inquired what right a hundred or more colored men have to parade the street night after night with guns in their hands. Even if they are not openly armed, they make no secret of the fact that every man carries weapons enough to kill a dozen men. There is no reason for sanctioning one kind of lawlessness anymore than another.

Blacks did not respond directly to the Review, but Charles Hise responded to their militant action in the pages of the Review.

Hise now told the Review, “talk of a lynching was all a mistake.” He asked the press to “set me right before the public.” African Americans’ “warlike demonstration” forced Hise to recant. Hise’s public renunciation of his call for a lynching may be unique in U.S. history! However, Hise’s efforts to recast his previous statements did not sway militant blacks. They had learned not to risk the lives of black people on promises made by white men. They remained vigilant. Black Decaturites continued to patrol the streets surrounding the courthouse. And unlike the Tennessee Rifles or blacks at Lebanon Junction, Afro-Decaturites neither abandoned their post nor allowed the police to disperse or disarm them. There were no incidents, nor an attempt to lynch Jackson.

Jackson’s life was spared, but the grand jury returned two indictments against him. He was charged with “burglary with intent to rape” and “flourishing
a deadly weapon.” Carrie Hise changed her story between Jackson’s arrest and her appearance before the grand jury two days later. Initially, she told the police Jackson had attempted to rape her, but when she appeared before the grand jury, she claimed he had raped her. Evidently, the grand jury doubted her story since they charged Jackson with burglary with intent to rape rather than rape.63

The Jackson incident forced Decatur’s black community to employ tactics they had rejected only the year before. Much had changed locally and nationally in the intervening year. By 1894, African Americans were under siege; as lynchings rose, blacks advocating self-defense were no longer voices crying in the wilderness. Decatur mirrored the national trend toward militancy. In 1892, Wells advised, “The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.” In a letter to the Illinois Record Rev. Jordan Chavis of Quincy, president of the downstate Illinois Afro-American Protective League, claimed “the greatest necessity for the Afro-American Protective League” was to mobilize “the thinking, the educated and loving men and women of the race come together not for notoriety, self-aggrandizement, nor political trickery, but to systematize efforts, to manifest the strength, and encourage the weak of the race to meet constant opposition manly and unfaaltering.” Local militants acted in accordance with the advice of Wells, the A.M.E. Church Review, and Rev. Chavis. This time, black leadership did not engage in protest activities; they did not lobby officials, write protest letters, or hold an indignation meeting—they simply acted. They acted discreetly and decisively. Jacobs’s call for armed self-defense, a minority tendency the previous year, was now the accepted response. Decatur’s black community transcended self-defense. As incredible as it seems, for three nights they militarily occupied the central business district of a growing industrial town! Yet, they did not try to disguise themselves! Their militant action probably deterred Mount Zionites from returning to Decatur to lynch another black man.64

The temporal proximity of the lynching of Bush and the threat to lynch Jackson served to heighten black unity and resistance and simultaneously worked to fragment white unity and aggression. Notions of community were also important in defining the contours within which unity and fragmentation along race, class, and gender lines occurred. For instance, African Americans’ aggressive response was partly due to Jackson’s status as a member of the small black community. The meaning of Jackson’s residency is amplified by his mother’s reputed participation in the black community’s seizure of public space. Whites again were divided by countervailing of notions of locality, white supremacy, and the desire to protect white women. Carrie Hise and her family seem to have moved several times the year before the alleged assault. According to the Review, the family moved from Decatur to Mount Zion shortly after the Bush lynching but was again living in Decatur when Carrie
was allegedly attacked. Hise, however, maintained that she had moved to Decatur from Niantic a day before the incident. Charles Hise directed his call for Jackson’s lynching to Mount Zionites rather than to white Decaturites. He crafted his appeal in locality and racial terms. This suggests that he believed Mount Zionites were more likely to respond favorably than was Decatur’s white community. Yet, white Mount Zionites also ignored his pleas. No one publicly endorsed his call for a lynching. Perhaps the community doubted Carrie Hise’s story. Craig Calhoun contends that community is a reciprocal concept that requires a high level of stability. Perhaps the Hise family’s transience undermined the social bonds necessary for other whites to mobilize on their behalf? 

BLACK POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND THE CAMPAIGNS OF 1898

In 1898, four years after the Jackson crisis, African American activists organized blacks across central Illinois to oppose State’s Attorney Mills and now Constable and Collector Harry Midkiff’s bids for higher political office. Mills was running for Congress in the seventeenth district, and Midkiff was seeking the Macon County Sheriff’s office. Leading members of Decatur’s black community believed Mills and Midkiff had been indifferent to or culpable in the Bush lynching. Writing in the Illinois Record in February, Wilson B. Woodford declared that “the cry of the negro should not be remember the Maine, but remember the hanging of Bush. You have rights to vindicate. The ballot box is the place to vindicate those rights.”

Woodford’s call not only reflected Illinois’ blacks rising militancy but also the struggle to defeat Mills and Midkiff would become a constitutive element in advancing statewide insurgent black politics. Three issues sparked black militancy during this pivotal year: (1) the Alton and Centralia school cases, (2) dissatisfaction with the Republican Party, and (3) anger over the Pana and Virden riots.

For instance, during February, the Young Men’s Improvement Association sponsored a mass meeting at St. Peter’s African Methodist Episcopal Church to support the Alton and Centralia School Cases. Edward Jacobs was president. The keynote speaker, Waymon Wilkerson, told the audience that “Those who put their trust in legislation as a sure means of receiving good and preventing evil are no wiser than those of today who have implicit confidence in the saving power of corporations, trusts, and monopolies.” Subsequently, Wilkerson emerged as the leading African American opponent to Mills and Midkiff.

The rejuvenated Afro-American Protective League of Illinois led insurgent African American political activists in challenging Republican Party domination. In March of 1898, Charles E. Hall, managing editor of the Illinois Record,
the organ of the Illinois Afro-American Protective League, urged blacks “to get their fair numerical share of delegates to the State Republican Convention.” In Alton, Brooklyn, Decatur, and Pulaski County, blacks forthrightly challenged white republican hegemony. In July, Hall announced a joint convention of the state’s two league affiliates “to unite the various sections of the Illinois Afro-American League” six weeks before the fall elections. In banner headlines he proclaimed, “COME IN LARGE NUMBERS TO THE CONVENTION,” and in bold language he stated, “The time demands organization! The time has come when we must stand on our merits as men and not as tools in the hands of political sycophants who don’t know you after the election is over.” Wilson Woodford, Jacobs, Waymon Wilkerson, Dr. M. A. Majors, Archie Ward, and thirteen other Decatur blacks were delegates to the September 27, 1898, convention. Dr. Majors was the secretary of the Illinois Afro-American Protective League.

Probably more important than events in Alton, Brooklyn, or Pulaski County in pushing black Decaturites toward violent self-help were the Pana and Virden riots. From September 1 to mid-November, racial violence flared in Pana and Virden, Illinois. Several black men were killed in these violent job competitions in which racism combined with worker self-activity. Hall took Republican Governor John R. Tanner to task for his apathetic response to a lynching in Logan and his slow reaction to the racial violence engulfing Pana and Virden.

In this climate of rising black militancy, Mills and Midkiff sought to conserve the traditional Republican-black alliance. Anticipating a close election, Midkiff declared himself a “friend of the colored people.” Amazingly, he stated that he “was always proud of their rapid progress” and believed them “capable to hold office if they are compelled to pay taxes like other people.” Deputy Sheriff Midkiff claimed he had suggested moving Bush to another county but lacked the power to do so. Continuing to press their revisionism, Mills and Midkiff had themselves portrayed in the *State Messenger*, a black publication, as heroes who courageously tried to defend Bush against the mob.

Woodford, Wilkerson, George W. Robinson, and several other local blacks contested their interpretation in the *Illinois Record*. Hall ran an exposé of Mills every week from September 24, 1898, until the election. Wilkerson claimed Mills stood within a few feet of the lynching and “uttered not one word.” He said he was shocked that Mills and Midkiff had “so poor an opinion of the memory of colored voters as to flaunt in their faces the revived and distorted memory of the day mob law ruled in Decatur.” Levi Smith, a black Civil War veteran, reported a private conversation he had with Midkiff the day of the lynching. According to Smith, Midkiff declined his offer to recruit “some other colored men to act as guards,” because he claimed they were moving Bush out of town. Robinson, the only African American on the grand jury, reiterated his belief in Mills’s complicity at a joint meeting of the Race Rights
League and the Independent Club. The meeting was attended by nearly 160 African American voters. Robinson alleged Mills had prevented indictments and prosecutions in the case. Woodford subjected the Mills-Midkiff story to a rigorous cross examination in the *Illinois Record*. His “Twenty Facts” refuted every point of their story.  

Exposed, Mills tried to shift the blame solely onto Midkiff. He was quoted at a Republican gathering as saying,

> The niggers in Macon County know all about the facts of the case and we cannot expect to get their vote anyhow. . . . Midkiff is only running in Macon County and I have to get votes in five counties, therefore it is necessary for me to make an explanation and throw all the blame on Midkiff.

Thus, Mills abandoned Midkiff.

Mills’s plan was immediately put into action. A “Mills Colored Club,” with allegedly one hundred members, was organized. According to the *Record*, less than sixteen members were registered voters. A week before the election, approximately twenty couples attended a dance and cakewalk allegedly sponsored by Mills’s African American supporters. The mayor of Decatur and U.S. Representative B. S. Tyler spoke. Claiming that African Americans would still be in bondage if not for the Republicans, they urged those attending to vote for Mills and the Republican ticket.

Two days later, on the eve of the election, two hundred Republicans met to organize an independent Republican club. Fifty, or about a fourth of those attending, were African Americans. Although repeatedly pledging their loyalty to the Republican Party, speakers urged the assembly “to take a day off to kill Mills and Millsism . . . Calhounism and Vailism.” Joe Dansby was the only black person to address the gathering. Dansby was an established member of Decatur’s traditional black leadership. Dansby spoke for the African Americans present. Dansby and independent black Republicans adopted the tenets asserted by Hall. In an October editorial, Hall had challenged African Americans to put race interests above party affiliations. According to the *Decatur Daily Review*, “There never was a campaign in which the opposition to a candidate was so outspoken in his own party.”

On November 4, Mills and Midkiff were soundly defeated. The defection of the independent Republicans proved decisive. According to the *Review*, Midkiff “was the worst beaten Republican . . . in the memory of any living man . . . in this county.” Mills carried Macon but lost in Sangamon, Christian, Logan, and Menard counties. Voting at Rev. Archie Ward’s barbershop in the third ward, the black community finally got their opportunity to try Mills and Midkiff. In a bit of hyperbole, the *Record*’s headline proclaimed, “Colored Voters Assert Their Manhood and Teach the Republican Party a Lesson Not Soon to be Forgotten.” On behalf of “Three Hundred Colored Voters,” Waymon Wilkerson thanked the *Record* for helping them avenge Bush’s
murder. Hall congratulated "Negro voters in this congressional district for their manhood." Unfortunately, neither Wilkerson nor the Record interpreted the results accurately. Mills and Midkiff lost the election, but they won Decatur's third ward. Mills received 221 of 296 or virtually 75 percent of the votes cast in the ward, while Midkiff fared slightly worst, receiving 180 of 280 or 64 percent. 75

The evidence of Mills's and Midkiff's complicity was overwhelming, yet they won the third ward. Had blacks placed party above race? First, it is unclear that this was the case. Even though most blacks lived in the third ward, most of the ward's residents were white, and many Afro-Decaturites lived in other wards. Consequently, we will never know the extent to which Decatur blacks broke with the “Grand Old Lilly White Party.” A large portion of blacks probably did vote for Mills and Midkiff. The black community was divided on this question. The Record may have overstated the election results, but Hall did perceptively describe the internal conflict raging in Decatur's black community. Hall condemned the treachery of "poorly paid ministers," "small bore editors," and "political bosses." Commenting specifically on the actions of local ministers, Hall declared "The Lord called them to save souls, not to sellout [sic] their congregations to political tricksters." The glorification of Mills and Midkiff by the State Messenger, the silence of leading black Republicans and activist ministers, such as Houston Singleton and Rev. Archie Ward, served to confuse many Afro-Decaturites. Conservative ministers, enterprising editors, and political opportunists combined to undermine the influence of black political militants and to keep many African Americans inside the Republican mainstream. 76

Perhaps the biggest blow to the militants' cause came when Wilson B. Woodford defected. On October 18, Woodford alleged that the Record forged his name on the “Twenty Facts” article. Hall responded by asserting that Woodford had been bought or frightened off by Mills. In a notarized statement printed in the Record, Wilkerson swore Woodford had confessed to being forced to recant his condemnation of Mills. According to Wilkerson, Woodford told him "Waymon, I had to do it. Mills has got me in a place that I cannot get away." Despite their immediate refutation of Woodford, his betrayal severely damaged their cause. 77

Convincing the community that Woodford had sold out was difficult. For five years, Woodford had been associated with militant causes. To outward appearances he was a staunch race man, but, on closer inspection, Woodford's treachery is not surprising. Woodford was as skilled at self-presentation as he was at manipulation of words. In his letter, he represented himself as a militant race man; yet at the indignation meeting, he cast himself as a "conservative." During the meeting, Woodford worked to confine black self-activity to acceptable forms of protest. In addition to promoting legalism, he pursued a strategy from which he hoped to benefit financially. In retrospect, it appears Woodford was only prepared to defend Bush if Bush could pay for his services. Although
Woodford ultimately compromised his integrity, he had helped to set in motion a process that radically altered black politics in Decatur, Illinois.

Race was mediated through conceptions of community. Race served to bridge the distance between black activists in Decatur, Springfield, and other parts of the seventeenth congressional district. The Record consistently called on “Afro-Americans” to place race interests above party interests. Wilkerson and other black Decatur leaders promoted race over party interests, while local leaders such as Joe Dansby worked to reform party politics in accordance with racial interests. Yet, several local black leaders ignored Hall’s pleas and placed party above race. Through patronage, many influential African Americans were tied to Mills, Calhoun, and Vail, the republican leadership. For instance, James Hollinger, the lone African American on the Macon County Board of Supervisors in 1898, had handled personal business for Judge Edward P. Vail since 1891. In the end, many local blacks voted for a local white Republican over a white Democrat from Springfield. Community was the second most salient factor uniting and fragmenting the black community.

CONCLUSION

On the surface, Decatur, Illinois, seemed an unlikely site for militant African American self-activity. Yet, this small community carried on a five-year battle to avenge the lynching of an itinerant black man. The debate over appropriate tactics was often heated. Ultimately, blacks adopted tactical flexibility; that is, they applied different tactics to different situations. Questions of community strongly colored all three events. The direct human relationships associated with community help to explain blacks’ divergent reactions to these crises. Blacks and whites were bounded together and separated by community and by race, class, and gender lines.

Why did the lynching of Samuel J. Bush provoke moral suasion and legalism but the threat to James Jackson’s life produce armed self-defense? Two factors dictated African Americans’ response: (1) Bush was a newcomer to the community, and (2) he was the first person lynched in Decatur. His newcomer status mediated against militant action. In his perceptive study of vigilantism in Tampa, Florida, Robert P. Ingalls discovered that outsider status was a crucial characteristic linking the city’s nine victims of vigilantism (only three were black) between 1858 and 1935. According to Ingalls, outsider status was a result of birth or residence as much as it was due to caste or class. The idea of community also provides insight into why Decatur whites observed rather than participated in Bush’s lynching. Moreover, at this time, African American leaders still trusted law enforcement officials. Every group of African Americans who volunteered to guard Bush accepted the sheriff or deputy sheriff’s promise of his safety. Even after Bush’s lynching, most black leaders believed his murderers would be brought to justice. Therefore, they adopted protest
tactics in response to the lynching of Samuel J. Bush. According to Donald Crummey, protest tactics (1) entail a higher degree of vocalization, (2) presuppose a common social and political order, and (3) lead the oppressed to appeal to the “authorities” for amelioration of the grievances. Wilson B. Woodford’s aggressive, public advocacy for African Americans to “join heads and hearts with law and order” is a consummate example of the sense of commonality to which Crummey alluded.  

The lynching of Bush and, more important, the failure of the legal strategy opened the political space for militants such as Edward Jacobs to mobilize community support for armed self-defense. Jackson’s status as a member of the community facilitated the use of violent self-help. Moreover, high levels of density and multiplicity made it possible for Afro-Decaturites to organize a paramilitary “takeover” of the central business district for three nights. The community’s small size, central location of core institutions, extensive kinship and friendship networks, and overlapping organizational memberships facilitated this highly risky undertaking. Opposition to Mills and Midkiff took predominantly an electoral form, because it was the most reasonable response to a political campaign. This tactic prevailed because it reflected the dominant approach advocated by Afro-American League activists across the state and because it meshed with opposition to Mills and Midkiff inside the Macon County Republican Party.

Although one is tempted to treat the events in Decatur, Illinois, between 1893 and 1898 as an anomaly, a close reading of black self-activity during the nadir suggests that “manly” resistance and violent self-help were advocated and probably practiced far more often than current research reflects. Indeed, glorification of armed self-defense often came from women. For instance, in August of 1891, an African American woman, Mary Watson, gave an address before Antioch Baptist Church’s lyceum titled “The Bravery of Our Race.” Nationally, the most lynchings occurred during the three-year period from 1892 to 1894. This upsurge in racist violence elicited several responses in the African American community. On one hand, Booker T. Washington’s ascendency to power was the result of the defeatism that pervaded the African American community during the nadir. The resurgence of racial repression also provided the soil for the exodus and emigration movements. However, the increase in violence also gave birth to calls for “manly self-defense” and militant direct action. Certainly, African American history contains numerous examples of everyday forms of resistance, but blacks often supplemented individual acts of noncompliance and defiant refusal with expressions of collective violent self-help.

Postemancipation-era African Americans built on a tradition of self-defense that extended into the antebellum era. David Roediger found in New York City that “racial clashes” occurred with regularity between 1837 and 1848. Leon Litwack maintains that by 1867, blacks had battled whites “in the streets of several southern cities.” Mary Frances Berry recounts how in
Phoenix, South Carolina, in November of 1898 blacks ambushed an armed group of whites in retaliation for an earlier attack. Herbert Shapiro believes scholars will uncover more stories of violent resistance when they examine “the grass-roots level for individuals and groups of Afro-Americans who did not publish their views or experiences but who most directly confronted white terror.”

Shapiro’s work suggests that much of this neglected history can be recovered. Timothy B. Tyson’s work on Robert F. Williams supports Shapiro’s thesis, especially for the post–World War II era. More important, a gleaning of African American autobiographies suggests that traditional sources also reveal numerous acts of armed self-reliance between 1865 and 1915. For example, Harry Haywood relates how around 1875 his grandfather shot off half a Klansman’s head in Tennessee. Hosea Hudson claims white men in his hometown did not attack him because they feared he would “kill some of them.” Raised on plantations in Leavitt County, Tennessee, Charles Denby recounts two incidents of individual violent resistance in his autobiography. First, he recalled how his older brother prevented the plantation’s “riding boss” from hitting him by pulling a pistol. He also recounted how his uncle Tim threatened to blow a white storekeeper’s brains out for accusing his wife of stealing some cloth. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP’s) principal lynching investigator, Walter White, told how he and his father armed themselves during the Atlanta Riot of 1906. The elder White told young Walter, “Son, don’t shoot until the first man puts his foot on the lawn and then—don’t miss!” The Whites did not have to shoot because gunfire from other blacks drove the white vigilantes away. Near Harpersville, Mississippi, in 1898, a group of blacks repulsed a posse that had come to arrest Bill Burke. This incident is another case in point. Burke had “got the best” of Charles Freeman, his white boss in a fight. After white authorities in nearby Progue arrested Louis Young for allegedly raping a young white woman, black men from Boley, Oklahoma, forcibly freed him from jail. These are examples of what William Sales Jr. calls the “traditional southern black orientation to protect the homestead from white supremacist nightriders.”

African American newspapers and periodicals also provide excellent sources in which advocacy of and acts of armed self-help can be recovered. For example, after the lynching of John M. Johnson and Archibald Joiner in New Orleans, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner advised,

Let every negro in this country who has a spark of manhood in him supply his house with one, two, or three guns. . . . When his domicile is invaded by bloody lynchers . . . turn loose your missiles of death and blow the fiendish invaders into a thousand giblets.

In the same issue of the Broadax appeared a story about William Clement, a black man who was incarcerated for felonious assault. After a Lynch mob
dragged him from his cell, Clement broke free and tore the masks off several of his assailants. Although shot several times, Clement succeeded in scaling an eight-foot wall and escaping.

Historians such as Shapiro, Wright, and Tyson have discussed black retaliation to racial violence. One of Shapiro’s epigrams at the beginning of this article claims that retaliation by African Americans demonstrated the falsity of black docility. The notions of docility and servility underlay the “Sambo thesis” and the idea of the old Negro. Gladys-Marie Fry offers a succinct discussion of the flaws in the Sambo thesis. She cogently argues that its proponents failed to adequately mine African American oral sources. Alain L. Locke questioned the historical accuracy of the old Negro in the middle 1920s. Writing in The New Negro, Locke asserted that the “old negro was always more myth than reality.” Finally, it is hard to believe that the racial repression of the period from 1865 to 1915 could produce the old Negro when the brutality of nearly 250 years of slavery was unable to give birth to “Sambo.” A deeper probing of local sources, African American newspapers, oral traditions, and autobiographies will transform our interpretations of black responses to racist violence during the nadir. This researcher is confident that as more studies examine black communities and their responses to lynchings and other forms of racist violence during the nadir, the revived myth of the old Negro, like Sambo, its slave equivalent, will be exposed as so much racist propaganda and self-delusion. Although tattered, the thread of self-defense runs straight through the African American experience.

NOTES

4. Walter White identified four periods of lynchings: (1) from 1830 to the Civil War, (2) 1867 to 1890, (3) 1890 to 1914, and (4) 1914 to 1929. Beginning in 1889, more blacks than whites were lynched, but after 1890, lynching became the most repressive weapon in racists’ arsenal and a form of murder reserved for African Americans. See Walter White, Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch (New York: Arno and New York Times, 1969), 82; and NAACP, Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States: 1889-1918 (1919; rpt., New York: Arno and New York Times, 1969), 2.
5. In a very perceptive essay, Susan Olzak points out the differing histories of lynching and what she terms urban violence. The concept of urban violence is central to her contention that lynching occurred in rural locations, while riots occurred in urban locales. Olzak perpetuates the myth that lynchings were rural phenomena. An examination of the lynchings reported in Raper suggests that lynchings usually occurred in the county seat; generally, these small to medium-sized towns were the most urbanized places in the county. This trend certainly holds true for the lynchings that occurred in Illinois. See Susan Olzak, “The Political Context of Competition: Lynching and Urban Racial Violence, 1882-1914,” Social Forces 69 (1990): 395-421; NAACP, Thirty Years of Lynching, 29; Jessie Daniel Ames, The Changing Character of Lynching: Review of Lynching 1931-1941 (1942; rpt., New York: AMS, 1973), 15; Arthur I. Waskow, From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 9-11; Arthur Raper, The Tragedy of


10. Dominic J. Capeci does include a highly suggestive comment about African Americans barricading the black community to prevent the mob from attacking them. See “The Lynching of Cleo Wright,” 859-87; Hall, Revolt against Chivalry; Shapiro, White Violence and the Black Response; Zangrando, The NAACP’s Crusade; George C. Wright, “By the Book: Legal Executions of Kentucky Blacks,” in Brandage, Under Sentence of Death, 250-70.


12. In a highly controversial article, Joel Williamson discusses how he learned about lynching after its erasure from white America’s memory; see “Wounds Not Scars.” See also Miller, “The Ladies and the Lynchers”; Hall, Revolt against Chivalry; Zangrando, The NAACP’s Crusade; McGovern, Anatomy of a Lynching; and Smead, Blood Justice.

13. ‘Armed self-reliance’ is Robert F. Williams’s term for the tradition of self-defense that existed among southern blacks. See his Negroes with Guns (New York: Marzani and Munsell, 1962; rpt., Chicago: Third World Press, 1973), 19; and Timothy B. Tyson, ‘Robert F. Williams, ‘Black Power,’ and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” Journal of American History 85 (September 1998): 540-78, see p. 541. It was not uncommon for the middle-class editors of black newspapers, especially in the South but also in the North, to use a lynching as an opportunity to lecture the black working class on appropriate behavior. Nevertheless, an examination of the black press during the nadir reveals an extraordinary number of militant statements imploring African Americans to resist physical assaults with arms. See the Chicago Broadax, March 27, 1897, p. 1, col. 3; June 12, 1897, p. 1, col. 3; and the St. Louis Palladium, January 9, 1904, p. 2, col. 1; June 13, 1903, p. 1, col. 2. George Wright cites several instances in which blacks used sabotage or arson to extract revenge for lynchings. He notes how whites often instituted repressive laws or prepared for armed uprisings in expectation of black retaliation. See George C. Wright, Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings” (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 11, 96-101, 116, 155-72, 185-90. For works that explore violent self-help or crimes against property, see Cortez Williams, A Survey of Blacks’ Responses to Lynching (Highland, NM: New Mexico Highland University, 1973); Charlton Moseley and Frederick Brogdon, “A Lynching in Statesboro: The Story of Paul Reed and Will Cato,” Georgia Historical Quarterly 65 (1981): 104-18; Albert C. Smith, “ ‘Southern Violence’ Reconsidered: Arson as Protest in Black-Belt Georgia, 1885-1910,” Journal of


24. Dansby was born a slave in Mississippi. When he was seven years of age, he escaped to the Union lines and traveled with the troops to Galesburg, Illinois. There, he trained as a barber and after the war moved to Decatur. Gray Baker, “The Colored People,” Decatur Daily Review, September 1, 1929, p. 3, col. 3; August 29, 1929, p. 3, col. 2; August 31, 1929, p. 3, col. 4; Mabel Richmond, Centennial History of Decatur and Macon County (Decatur: The Decatur and Macon County Centennial Association, 1930), 334; “Population Schedules for the Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Illinois, Macon County,” Roll; and Marie Gray Baker interview, March 1977, Decatur Public Library Local History Collection, 9.

25. Gray Baker, Decatur Daily Review, August 26, 1929, p. 3, col. 4; August 29, 1929, p. 3, col. 2; August 31, 1929, p. 3, col. 4; and Richmond, Centennial History of Decatur and Macon County, 334.


27. Gray Baker and Richmond erroneously list Isaac Rogan, rather than Houston Singleton, as the first African American member of the Macon County Board. Gray Baker, Decatur Review, August 26, 1929, p. 3, col. 4; September 3, 1929, p. 3, col. 2 and p. 4, col. 2; September 5, p. 3, col. 3; State Capital, May 5, 1891, p. 1, col. 2; January 16, 1892, p. 1, col. 5; June 25, 1892, p. 1, col. 7; November 19, 1892, p. 1, col. 4; Decatur City Directory, 1893 (Terre Haute: Charles Ebel & Co.), 238; and Richmond, Centennial History of Decatur and Macon County, 334.

28. Decatur Daily Republican, June 3, 1893, p. 1, cols. 5-6; and Decatur Daily Review, June 3, 1893 p. 1, cols. 3-4; and Cha-Jua, “‘Join Hands and Hearts with Law and Order.’”

29. Although alleged sexual assault was the charge in this incident, in general, rape or attempted rape was alleged in only about 29 percent of lynchings between 1882 and 1946. Zangrando, The NAACP’s Crusade, Decatur Daily Review, June 3, 1893, p. 7, col. 1; Decatur City Directory, 1893, 233, 238; Decatur Herald and Review, February 19, 1979, p. 24, cols. 4-6; and Cha-Jua, “‘Join Hands and Hearts with Law and Order.’” 191.

30. Marie Gray Baker was Edward Gray’s daughter. She was born five months after Bush was lynched. She recounts her father’s version of these events in a 1979 interview. See Baker, interview by Bob Sampson, Decatur Herald and Review, February 19, 1979, p. 24, cols. 4-6; Decatur Daily Review, June 3, 1893, p. 7, col. 1; State Capital, August 29, 1891, p. 1, col. 5. George Wright reports that a similar incident occurred in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky, on June 14, 1904. However, in this case armed black men prevented a mob from removing Marie Thompson, a black women accused of murdering a white farmer, from jail. Yet, after receiving assurances from the sheriff that Thompson would be protected, they dispersed. Two hours later, the mob returned and murdered Thompson. See Wright, Racial Violence, 186.
31. After his death, rumors linking him to thefts in Sangamon and Macon counties appeared. One story claimed he had served a year in jail in Springfield, Illinois, from 1891 to 1892. Another alleged he had stolen a coat in Decatur during the winter of 1892. See Decatur Daily Review, June 3, 1893, p. 7, col. 1; and the Decatur Morning Herald-Dispatch, June 6, 1893, p. 2, col. 4.

32. I have reprinted the letter exactly as it appeared in the two Decatur newspapers. Decatur Review, June 3, 1893, p. 7, col. 1; and the Decatur Daily Republican, June 3, 1893, p. 3, col. 6.


34. Decatur Daily Republican, June 3, 1893, p. 3, cols. 5-6; Decatur Daily Review, June 3, 1893, p. 2, cols. 3-6; p. 7, cols. 1-2; and Cha-Jua, “‘Join Hands and Hearts with Law and Order,’” 194.

35. Decatur Daily Review, June 6, 1893, p. 2, col. 6; and Decatur City and Macon County Directory, 1893 (Terre Haute, IN: Charles O. Ebel, 1893), 349.

36. By 1895, Andrew Mills had been appointed assistant state’s attorney. In 1915, he became a founding member of Decatur’s branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Marie Gray Baker, interview March 1977, Decatur Public Library, Local History Collection, p. 7; and Decatur Daily Republican, June 5, 1893, p. 2, col. 6.


38. Decatur Daily Republican, June 4, 1893, p. 1, col. 4; Decatur Republican, June 4, 1893, p. 3, col. 7; Cha-Jua, “‘Join Hands and Hearts with Law and Order,’” 195-6; David Roediger, Towards the Abolition of Whiteness (London: Verso, 1994), 127-80; and Bederman, “‘Civilization,’ the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness,” 9; Wells, On Lynching, 37. See also Schechter, “Unsettled Business.”

39. J. W. Woodford, the brother of Attorney Wilson B. Woodford, was an officer of the lodge. The Review reported that 300 black men attended. This figure is extremely unlikely since there were only 605 African Americans residing in Macon County in 1890. Decatur Daily Review, June 6 1893, p. 2, col. 5; Nell Irvin Painter, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction (New York: Knopf, 1977; rpt., New York: Norton, 1992), 22; and Gray Baker, Decatur Daily Review, August 31, 1929, p. 3, col. 4.

40. Baker Nickens declined appointment to the resolutions committee. Mr. Nickens was the second African American postal carrier in Decatur. He carried mail for ten years, from 1891 to 1901. During 1891-1992, he was a stringer for the State Capital, an African American newspaper published in Springfield, Illinois. Daily Review, June 6, 1893, p. 2, cols. 4-5; and State Capital, October 8, 1892, p. 1, col. 4.


42. Woodford and Jacobs had an interesting relationship. In 1891, they launched a local newspaper, The New Era. One account of their endeavor described them as “two enterprising and pushing young men.” State Capital, September 12, 1891, p. 1, col. 2.

43. A letter to the Review editor identified the black woman who was sexually assaulted on the train as Emma Bond, but it is possible that it was Ms. Emma Boyd, a St. Louis resident who was visiting Decatur in October of 1892. Decatur Daily Review, June 6, 1893, p. 2, cols. 4-5; State Capital, August 29, 1891, p. 1, col. 5; October 8, 1892, p. 1, col. 4; February 19, 1898, p. 1, cols. 3-4; and p. 3, cols. 5-6; Shapiro, White Violence and the Black Response, 59; and Schechter, “Unsettled Business.” According to Angela Davis, the myth of the promiscuous black woman was the necessary corollary to the black man as innate rapist. Angela Davis, “Rape, Racism and the Capitalist Setting,” Black Scholar 9 (April 1978): 39-45.

44. Decatur Daily Review, June 6, 1893, p. 2, cols. 4-5.

45. At its formation, the National Afro-American League advocated a relentless struggle to obtain complete and full civil rights. The league targeted the following areas: the right to vote, racially motivated violence, the discriminatory structure of public schools, brutalization of convicts and exploitation of their labor, discrimination in use of public facilities, and the exploitation of labor. Lerone Bennett, Before the Mayflowers (Chicago: Johnson Publications, 1987), 83; Meier, Negro Thought, 128-30; Harold Cruse, Plural, but Not Equal, 8-9. The first mention of a chapter of the Afro-American League in Decatur was in December of 1891. State Capital, December 26, 1891, p. 2, col. 3; and the Decatur Daily Review, September 17, 1898, p. 2, col. 3.

47. Meier, Negro Thought, 72-3; and Shapiro, White Violence and the Black Response, 38-63.
48. The newspaper does not give the name of the man accused of attacking Emma Bond, so it was impossible to discover if he was prosecuted. Furthermore, a fire in 1963 destroyed most pre–World War Two criminal files. Decatur Daily Review, June 3, 1893, p. 2, cols. 3-6; June 5, 1893, p. 1, cols. 3-4; June 6, 1893, p. 1, cols. 3-4; June 9, p. 1, cols. 3-4; June 14, p. 2, col. 3; Decatur Daily Republican, June 3, 1893, p. 3, cols. 5-6, p. 4, col. 4; June 5, 1893, p. 2, col. 5; September 25, 1893, p. 4, col. 6; October 13, p. 4, col. 4; October 17, p. 4, col. 6; October 18, 1893, p. 3, col. 5; and Cha-Jua, “‘Join Hands and Hearts with Law and Order,’” 200.
50. Craig Calhoun argues that social relationships, social bonds, and political mechanisms, characterized by the properties “density, multiplexity and systematicity,” have greater explanatory power than do subjective concepts such as “sense of belonging” in understanding community. Thomas Bender in his work on the changing concept of community in American history contends that by 1890, the locality-based concept of community was being superseded by a social network concept in many urban areas. Bender’s notion of “social network,” while Weberian, moves in the direction of Calhoun’s more comprehensive concept of social relations. See Craig Calhoun, “Community: Toward a Variable Conceptualization for Comparative Research,” in R. S. Neale, ed., History and Class: Essential Readings in Theory and Interpretation (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 86-110; and Thomas Bender, Community and Social Change in America (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1978).
52. Calhoun, “Community,” 92; Decatur Daily Review, June 3, 1893, p. 3, cols. 2-3; Cha-Jua, “‘Join Hands and Hearts with Law and Order,’” 191-2; and Virginia Gosnell, History of Mt. Zion Community (Astoria, IL: Stevens, 1981), 35, 142. See also the Macon County Directory of Landowners, Taxpayers and County Gazetteer (1896).
53. Shay divided lynching mobs into three components: (1) the leaders, who instigate the lynching; (2) the Lynchers, who carry out the actual lynching; and (3) the spectators, who encourage the Lynchers. Calhoun, “Community,” 93; Frank Shay, Judge Lynch: His First Hundred Years (Montclair, NJ: Paterson Smith, 1969), 86-9.
55. Roberta Senechal de la Roche uses concepts derived from sociologist Donald Black to determine the social arrangements most likely to produce a lynching. Central to Senechal’s project are blacks’ concepts of relational distance, functional interdependence, vertical direction, and cultural distance. Relational distance measures intimacy. Using this concept, Senechal de la Roche predicts that the less intimate the relationship between particular African Americans and European Americans, the greater the likelihood of a lynching should a trigger incident occur. This notion is similar to Calhoun’s concept of density. Functional interdependence refers to the range and degree to which social actors are connected in relationships of mutual dependence. It is derived from relational distance but operates inversely. Thus, Senechal de la Roche concludes that a white person is more likely to lynch a black person with whom he or she has few and less significant economic and social ties. Functional interdependence is similar to Calhoun’s concept of multiplicity. Vertical direction concerns structural inequalities, especially those related to class, while cultural distance alludes to differences between individuals and socially constructed groups in terms of expressive and symbolic behavior, such as language, religion, clothing, music, cuisine, and so forth. During the nadir, race was a prima facie representation of cultural difference. Collectively, these two concepts approximate Calhoun’s notion of systematical Senechal de la Roche approaches her project from a Eurocentric standpoint; that is, from the position of whites as the actors. This is fine, since she is using Black’s concepts to construct a sociological explanation of the circumstances in which whites are more likely to Lynch blacks. I approach lynching with different concerns than Senechal de la Roche. I am concerned with the factors that enhance and impede the organization or resistance to a lynching. I use Calhoun’s concepts because they explore community formation and self-organization. Roberta Senechal de la Roche, “The Sociogenesis of Lynching,” in Brundage, Under Sentence of Death, 48-76.
59. See note 14.

60. The Decatur Republican mildly disputed this version of the night’s events. The Republican’s reporter claimed that “no one was moving about, except squads of colored men who were armed.” Black women sometimes participated in armed patrols and confrontations. W. Fitzhugh Brundage relates that five black women were among those arrested during the Darien “Insurrection.” Brundage, Under Sentence of Death, 279-80; Decatur Daily Review, June 29, 1894, p. 2, col. 5; and Decatur Republican, June 28, 1894, p. 3, col. 3; and Decatur City Directory (1895), 277.


62. Brundage relates the example of George Bowen, an African American, whom many whites believed was sympathetic toward the lynching victim Jesse Williams. After hearing this allegation, Bowen told the local white press that he was “heartily in favor of the lynching and that all the negroes he had talked to are the same.” Apparently, Bowen’s statement did negate the charges and undermine growing white hostility toward him. Brundage, Under Sentence of Death, 272, Decatur Daily Review, June 28, 1893, p. 3, col. 3; and Duster, Crusade for Justice, 50 and n. 2.

63. Jackson hired a white attorney, C. C. LaForger, rather than Wilson B. Woodford to defend him. Unfortunately, we may never know the disposition of the case since the docket sheet was kept in a different record book from the actual file. A fire in 1963 destroyed this record book and several other pre–World War Two criminal files. People vs. James Jackson, Macon County Criminal Case Files, Nos. 4408 and 4409, Macon County Circuit Clerk Office; and the Decatur Daily Review June 26, 1894, p. 2, col. 4; and June 27, 1894, p. 2, col. 5.


67. Shortly after the turn of the century, Wilkerson moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where he became a successful undertaker. In 1909, he became one of the state leaders of Booker T. Washington’s National Negro Businessman’s League. Along with other black investors, he established the Federal Savings Bank and Trust Company in 1910. During the teens, he entered Memphis politics and ran creditable campaigns for Congress in 1916 and 1920 as the candidate of the Lincoln League, a black Republican club, which challenged Shelby County’s “lily white” Republicans for party control. After the bank’s failure, Wilkerson committed suicide in 1928. He was the chair of the bank’s board of directors and was facing embezzlement charges. Illinois Record, February 19, 1898, p. 1, col. 3; State Capital, December 26, 1891, p. 2, col. 3; Decatur City Directory (1895), 346; and Lamon, Black Tennesseans, 46, 56-7, 176, 189-91, and 195.

68. By December of 1892, ten local chapters of the National Afro-American League had been organized in Illinois. Affiliates existed in Alton, Bloomington, Brooklyn, Cairo, Danville, Decatur, Jacksonville, Peoria, and Rock Island as well as Chicago. The league was famous for factionalism, but perhaps no state had greater disunity than Illinois. Two Afro-American leagues existed in Illinois: the Afro-American State Protective League of Illinois, led by John G. Jones of Chicago, and the Illinois Afro-American Protective League, headed by the Rev. Jordan Chavis of Quincy. In part, the duplication of leagues reflected the


70. Illinois Record, August 20, 1898, p. 1, col. 5.

71. Illinois Record, September 24, 1898, p. 1, col. 1; October 8, 1898, p. 1, cols. 1-2; October 22, 1898, p. 1, col. 1; October 29, 1898, p. 1, cols. 1-2.

72. Midkiff believed Mills “traded him off.” He reasoned that he should have gotten as many votes as Mills did in Macon County. Decatur Daily Review, November 5, 1898, p. 1, col. 4; Decatur Daily Review, November 11, 1898, p. 4, cols. 1-2; and Illinois Record, October 8, 1898, p. 1, col. 3.

73. Illinois Record, October 15, 1898, p. 1, col. 2; and Decatur Daily Review, November 1, 1898, p. 8, col. 3.

74. Dansby was born a slave in Mississippi. When he was seven years of age, he escaped to the Union lines and traveled with the troops to Galesburg, Illinois. There, he trained as a barber and after the war moved to Decatur. Gray Baker, “The Colored People,” Decatur Daily Review, September 1, 1929, p. 3, col. 3; Illinois Record, October 15, 1898, p. 1, col. 2; and Decatur Daily Review, November 8, 1898, p. 2, col. 1.

75. Archie Ward was a major African American figure in the Macon County Republican Party. In June of 1892 along with Houston Singleton he attended a meeting of the party’s state executive committee (Singleton was a member). Even a year after the election, Congressperson Benjamin F. Caldwell claimed he could not have defeated Mills without the support of two thousand black voters in the seventeenth congressional district. Broadax, December 2, 1899, p. 1, col. 3; Decatur Review, November 4, 1898, p. 2; November 5, 1898, p. 1, col. 1; p. 2, cols. 2-5; State Capital, June 25, 1892, p. 1, col. 7, p. 2, col. 2.

76. Illinois Record, November 12, 1898, p. 2, col. 1.

77. It is unlikely that Wilkerson would notarize a false statement, especially one concerning a lawyer. Illinois Record, October 15, 1898, p. 1, col. 1; and October 29, 1898, p. 2, cols. 1-2, 4.

78. State Capital, June 6, 1891, p. 1, col. 5.

79. Robert Williams coined this term in the 1950s during his debates with Martin L. King Jr. over the tactical use of armed self-defense. Williams, Negroes with Guns, 19; Cha-Jua, “ ‘Join Hands and Hearts with Law and Order,’” 199; Donald Crummey, Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa (London: James Currey/Heinemann, 1986); and Ingalls, Urban Vigilantes in the New South, 208-9.

80. State Capital, August 29, 1891, p. 1, col. 5; Meier, Negro Thought in America, 73; and Shapiro, White Violence and the Black Response, 78.


83. In an article under the heading “Get Gun, Negroes! And Shoot,” the Chicago *Broadax* reprinted Bishop Tuner’s comments from the African Methodist Episcopal magazine *the Voice of Missions*. See the *Broadax*, March 27, 1897, p. 1, col. 3. See also *Broadax*, March 27, 1897, p. 1, col. 4.