Race and Mob Violence: The Matthew Williams Case

On December 4, 1931, Matthew Williams, a 35-year old African American, shot and killed his employer, Daniel J. Elliott, a prominent Salisbury lumber dealer, over a long-standing dispute concerning Williams' wages. After shooting Elliott, Williams tried to commit suicide, but failed and was shot by Elliott's son while trying to escape. Williams was taken to Peninsula General Hospital and placed under guard.

Later that evening, a large mob formed in the center of town and marched to the hospital. After tricking Williams' guards, members of the mob dragged him out of a hospital window, paraded the struggling man through the streets of Salisbury to the small green in front of the county court house. There, Williams was hung from a tall maple tree in the court house yard. As the crowd continued to grow, William's body was cut down from the tree, dragged to a nearby lot, and set ablaze. One eyewitness described the scene as follows:

*We were in the fight club and several hundred persons were waiting for the first bout.... Suddenly the word came that they were lynching Williams. There was a stampede for the doors. I drove my car a distance of about a mile and a half to the courthouse green and they had just cut the negro down. As I walked around the courthouse here came the leaders, carrying the body along. As they stepped out into the street they let it drop and then dragged it by the rope down through the negro part of town. Later I saw the fire, but didn't want to go down there. We went back to the fight... And some of the fighters didn't show up and only about half the crowd. It was a quiet and orderly mob. I saw no drunks. There were many women.*

Governor Albert Ritchie and Attorney General William Preston Lane were under tremendous pressure to identify and bring the mob leaders to justice. Newspaper reports indicate that local residents who witnessed the lynching refused to identify the men, even as they eagerly related gruesome details of the crime.

The story was carried by newspapers across the country. Within Maryland, newspaper coverage illustrated the underlying cultural conflict between the urbanized Western Shore and the rural Eastern Shore. Although all Maryland newspapers condemned the lynching, Baltimore newspapers in particular viewed the mob action as a sign of a degenerating character common to Eastern Shore residents. The conflict was so inflamed by an editorial published in the Baltimore Sun by H. L. Mencken -- who, among other things, suggested that the mob leaders were well known to local law enforcement officers -- that prominent Salisbury residents advocated a boycott of the newspaper and the former town mayor demanded that Mencken and editors of the Sun and Evening Sun be subpoenaed before the coroner's jury as witnesses.

Despite the number of people who witnessed the lynching, police investigating the crime were unable to identify the ringleaders and no arrests were made. Although the Wicomico County grand jury examined 128 witnesses, their final report indicated that there was "absolutely no evidence that can remotely connect anyone with the investigation or perpetration of the murder" of Matthew Williams. With that, the case was closed and no further action was taken.

SOURCES: See "Mob Described by Brockman" Baltimore News, December 5, 1931 for contemporary account quoted above.