

“A VERY CHEAP ARTICLE”

The Lynching of Willie James Howard,
Suwannee County, 1944

Way down upon de Swanee Ribber,
Far, far away,
Dere’s wha my heart is turning ebber,
Dere’s wha de old folks stay.
All up and down de whole creation
Sadly I roam,
Still longing for de old plantation,
And for de old folks at home.

Stephen C. Foster, “The Suwannee River
(Old Folks at Home)” (ca. 1851)

While thousands of people lost their lives to lynching violence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of the most egregious instances of extralegal violence involved youthful victims. In October 1942, two black teens, Ernest Green and Charles Lang, were kidnapped from a jail in Quitman, Mississippi, castrated, and lynched, for the “crime” of playing tag with a white girl. Similarly, one of the most tragic and well-known examples of the senselessness and indiscriminant violence characteristic of lynching was the brutal murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, in 1955. Aside from the fact that he was kidnapped and later killed for allegedly making inappropriate comments and gestures to a

white woman, it was Till's age, a tender fourteen years, that made the tragedy seem much more callous.¹

While Till may be the best-known young victim of southern violence in the twentieth century, another African American teenager was killed for similar reasons nearly ten years earlier in Florida. One Sunday morning in January 1944, eleven years before Till's tragic death, three white men forced fifteen-year-old Willie James Howard to jump at gunpoint into the frigid waters of the Suwannee River to his death, all while his father helplessly watched. His crime: overstepping the bounds and taboos of southern culture by passing a note to a white girl with whom he was acquainted. This simple action cost him his life.

Even though Cellos Harrison had been killed just six months earlier, the threat of negative press or potential federal involvement did not deter Howard's killers. Events proved that their confidence was warranted; unlike the prior lynchings of Williams and Harrison, Howard's lynching did not garner national media attention, nor did it inspire investigations by the state or federal government. Despite these facts, his murder was perhaps more tragic than the others because of Howard's young age and the trivial nature of his offense. In the larger scheme, Howard's lynching illustrates the continuing pattern of small groups of secretive actors who relied on the tradition of communal white racial solidarity to escape punishment for extralegal murder. Aside from the historical patterns and what they reveal about the forms of antiblack violence in Florida in the twentieth century, understanding the aftermath of Willie James Howard's lynching opens a window through which to understand how members of a segregated community craft their own private discourse to construct their own separate interpretation of these events. Oral history from community members who lived on opposite sides of the racial divide allows modern observers to understand the role of collective memory in forming and re-forming communal views of lynching.

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For many, their only association with the Suwannee River comes from its mention in Stephen Foster's famous minstrel song "The Suwannee River (Old Folks at Home)," adopted as Florida's official state song in 1935. Sandy soil, pine trees, sinkholes, and springs dominate the landscape of the land that the placid river circumvents on three sides as it meanders to the

Gulf of Mexico. After Florida was ceded to the United States in 1821, the present area of Suwannee County was included within the boundaries of Duval County, which was chartered in 1822.² It would be another twenty-three years before Florida became the twenty-seventh state in the Union. By 1860, its 687 square miles were home to 1,467 whites, 835 enslaved blacks, and one free black man. Live Oak, which would eventually become the county seat, was officially recognized in 1863. While slavery existed in antebellum Suwannee County, it would be inaccurate to describe the county as having a plantation economy, which was more associated with the five more notable “Black Belt” counties in North Florida—Jackson, Gadsden, Leon, Jefferson, and Madison.³

Suwannee County’s small size and relative youth did not exempt it from the disruption and turmoil caused by the Civil War. For whites, the coming of the war brought a combination of exhilaration, uncertainty, and fears, which later turned into the misery of defeat in April 1865. For enslaved African Americans in Florida, as with other people in bondage throughout the South, the most anticipated change to occur came with emancipation. With the close of the war and the end of slavery, former bondspeople began exploring their freedom. To that end, a select number of African American men pursued and held elected offices. Between 1870 and 1877, nine African Americans served on the Suwannee County Commission, one on the city council, and two as justices of the peace. A decade later, a black man, Thomas Harris, served as Live Oak’s postmaster from 1889 to 1905.⁴

As the disruptions caused by the Civil War subsided and the nation refocused on its economic pursuits, Suwannee County experienced a relative boom in growth and expansion. Its central location, approximately halfway between Tallahassee and Jacksonville, and the proximity of the Suwannee River made it a convenient regional crossroads for both transportation by rail and communication by telegraph. Additionally, steamboats on the Suwannee River moved goods and supplies from the interior of North Florida to the Gulf of Mexico, as well as providing recreational cruises for those who could afford it; however, water travel would be surpassed by rail in the coming years.⁵ Trains supported the burgeoning economy built around lumber, turpentine, and resin, all derived from the plentiful long-leaf yellow pine trees that were abundant in the area. Several rail systems emerged in Live Oak and the surrounding areas during

the early 1900s—the Live Oak-Rowland Bluff Railroad; the Live Oak, Charlotte-Harbor Railway; the Live Oak, Perry and Gulf Railroad; and the Savannah Western Railroad. Many would dissolve or merge before being taken over by the Atlantic Coast Line Railway.⁶

Inevitably, the aggressive harvesting of pine trees for timber outpaced nature's ability to replace them. The reduction in the availability of pine and pine products simultaneously diminished the importance of the local railway system, which was already being surpassed in importance by the automobile. By the 1930s, the economy of Suwannee County began to depend on other, more diverse agricultural products, tobacco key among them. Despite the transition from timber to tobacco, one fact remained the same: a successful local economy depended upon black labor. The main crops growing in Suwannee County in the 1940s were corn, peanuts, tobacco, cotton, and watermelon. Fifty-six percent of the working population engaged in some type of farming, compared with a statewide average of 16 percent. Race, however, influenced where blacks and whites fit into the strata of farm labor. Most African Americans were employed as farm workers, or earned wages as hired laborers.⁷

As in other southern towns, life in Live Oak was dictated by the rules of segregation and a rigid code of racial etiquette. As a result, African Americans in Live Oak created and maintained their own society, including their own neighborhoods, schools, churches, and businesses. The main school for African Americans, established in 1868, had roots in the Reconstruction era and was named after the famous abolitionist and lecturer Frederick Douglass. Located on Houston Street, along the invisible border between the black and white communities, the Douglass School stood just a few hundred yards away from the town's all-white high school.⁸ Blacks lived among each other in mostly all-black sections of town like the West End and Sugar Hill, or in the numerous other rural communities such as Houston, Rocky Sink, Falmouth, and Fort Union. In Live Oak, a few blacks owned their own businesses. Several of these businesses were grouped at the Hopps Building in downtown Live Oak on Howard Street. Called "The Hill" by local blacks, the building housed several African American-owned businesses, such as Eddie Holmes's laundry, a bar operated by Ike Smith, Mary Bell's restaurant, and Gertrude Solomon's restaurant. Besides this concentration of businesses, other black entrepreneurs and professionals lived and worked in the community.⁹

Suwannee County was not exempt from the blot of lynching violence. Prior to the 1940s, the county witnessed eight lynchings and experienced a particularly bloody decade between 1890 and 1900. Six people were lynched in Suwannee County during those years, all of whom were African American men.¹⁰ Beyond the specific instances of extralegal executions, a climate of generalized terror reigned during this time. For example, the Florida Baptist Institute, an all-black normal school that had operated in Live Oak since 1879, became a target of white violence. After whites shot into the school in April 1892, with a bullet barely missing one of the instructors, the school's principal, along with at least two other members of the teaching staff, left for Jacksonville, where they established the Florida Baptist Academy.¹¹

Notably, when compared to other Florida counties, Suwannee ranked relatively high on the list of areas with frequent lynching violence. Of the 265 lynching incidents recorded in Florida between 1882 and 1945, Suwannee tied with Jackson in having the sixth highest number of occurrences (nine lynchings each) of the forty-four counties that witnessed such violence during those years, following Marion (23), Alachua (20), Polk (20), Columbia (16), and Madison (15). The geographic distribution of these lynchings is also telling. With the exception of Jackson County, which is located in the Florida panhandle bordering Georgia and Alabama, it appears that Suwannee County formed a part of a "lynching belt" in north-central Florida that ran through the contiguous counties of Madison, Taylor, and Lafayette to the west, and Columbia, Alachua, and Marion to the south and east.¹²

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New Year's Day 1944 arrived in Live Oak with the usual celebratory air that accompanied the holiday season. For both black and white residents, the pace of life slowed, with time off from work and school to relax with family and friends. In addition to fellowshipping, many families busily carried out rituals that were considered a part of properly ringing in the new year. Many African Americans returned home early that morning after participating in "Watch Night" services at their churches, observing the arrival of the new year with prayer, praise, and singing. Before that, in accordance with the commonly held superstition that the conditions and behaviors that ruled on New Year's Day would be replicated for the rest of