

# The Truth Is Not Always in Black or White: Facts and Fictions Surrounding the David Walker Family Lynchings

Melinda Meador

“Everything you add to the truth subtracts from the truth.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Just before midnight on Saturday, October 3, 1908, a group of 30-50 masked white men calling themselves Night Riders rode into the small community of Brownsville located 3 1/2 miles south of Hickman, Kentucky. They left their horses at the farm of a man named Joe Williams and went on foot to the home of David and Annie Walker, an African American couple living on their 2 1/2 acre farm nearby. When the Riders arrived at the Walker home, they called David Walker to come out and take a whipping, but he refused to comply. They then set fire to the house, and the masked men shot the couple and four of their children as they attempted to escape. Mr. Walker was killed instantly. Mrs. Walker, clutching an infant in her arms, was shot in the abdomen as she fled the house, though she lived long enough to give testimony at the coroner's inquest. The infant was also struck by a bullet and died, still cradled by his mother as she collapsed on the ground. Other children were similarly wounded by gunfire, and one young daughter died immediately. The family lay where they fell throughout the night and well into the following day before people in the community came to assist those still living and to remove the bodies of the dead.

Lynchings were so common during that era that they were often of only passing interest, but, in this instance, the press carried the story as headline news in hundreds of newspapers across the country ranging from the *New York Times* to the *Los Angeles Times*. Most of the large regional newspapers in Kentucky and Tennessee provided extensive coverage as well.<sup>1</sup> Reporters and their editors seemed genuinely shocked by the brutality of the attack. Headlines ranged from “FIENDS WIPE OUT FAMILY. . . UNHEARD-OF ATROCITY” to “MOB SLAUGHTERS FAMILY.” One headline in particular captured the horror of the night: “KENTUCKY WEEP! For Your Children of Hell Have Broken Loose Again.”<sup>2</sup> The editorial board of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* even went so far as to

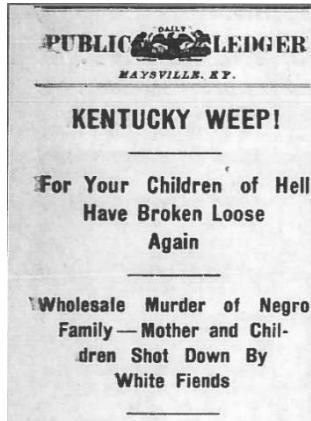
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<sup>1</sup> “Night Riders Kill Three,” *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Mob Madness. Night Riders Slay Family,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Massacre for Negro Family,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Seven Are Shot by Angry Mob,” *Nashville Tennessean*, Oct. 5, 1908.

<sup>2</sup> *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, Oct. 8, 1908; *Valentine (Neb.) Democrat*, Oct. 8, 1908; *Dakota Farmers' Leader* (Canton, SD), Oct. 9, 1908; *Public Ledger* (Maysville, KY), Oct. 6, 1908.

compare the Night Riders unfavorably to Apaches. In the editors' words, "Not in the bloodiest days of border warfare between the aborigines and white settlers was a more ghastly outrage committed."<sup>3</sup>

Even so, the press did little to investigate the circumstances surrounding the murders.<sup>4</sup> None of the facts in any of the newspaper accounts were attributed to specific sources, and the reporters seem to have accepted the first explanation offered as to why the



The Public Ledger  
(Maysville, Kentucky)  
October 6, 1908

Newspapers by Ancestry.com

Walkers were targeted. According to the newspapers, the simple answer to the "why" question was that David Walker had "cursed a white woman and drawn a gun upon a white man."<sup>5</sup> That explanation does contain elements of the truth. David Walker had indeed been accused by his neighbor Joe Williams of using abusive language toward Williams's wife and of drawing a gun on him. But, as will be discussed below, the matter had been resolved four months prior to the murders, and, even in the Jim Crow South, abusive language provided scant justification for killing an innocent wife and children.

The local *Hickman Courier*, published on Thursdays and therefore five days late to the story, seems to have recognized the need for further justification and declared, without substantiation, "Walker was a bad negro" who "in other instances" had been charged with being "brazen and impudent."<sup>6</sup> The paper continued to heap abuse on the Walkers the following week by printing, again without attribution, that "Walker was no saint, neither his wife and 18-year-old girl, all of whom are said to have insulted a white lady with the most rank profanity."<sup>7</sup>

The *Paducah News-Democrat*, the nearest daily paper, said the opposite. According to that paper's local (but unnamed) sources, Walker had never been in any serious trouble, and "the outrage has caused the greatest indignation in this [the Hickman] part of [Fulton] county."<sup>8</sup> Consistent with the Paducah paper's account, there is no record to indicate that David Walker or any member of his family had ever been arrested or sued civilly by anyone in Fulton County or the surrounding area apart from the singular incident involving Joe

<sup>3</sup> "Worse Than the Apaches," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Oct. 6, 1908.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, no one even bothered to learn the first name of Mrs. Walker, who has consistently, without exception, been referred to in every newspaper and historical account as "Dave Walker's wife." U. S. Census records for 1900 readily reveal her first name to have been Annie. See <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1900%2f004118909%2f00613%2f029>, accessed July 10, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> "Night Riders Kill Three," *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1908.

<sup>6</sup> "Night Riders Wipe Out Negro Family—4 Dead, 4 Wounded," *Hickman (KY) Courier*, Oct. 8, 1908.

<sup>7</sup> "Local Notes on the 'Night Rider' Situation," *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 15, 1908.

<sup>8</sup> "Fire and Shot for Negroes," *Paducah (KY) News-Democrat*, Oct. 6, 1908.

Williams. Nevertheless, press reports suggest no further investigation into who David Walker was or why the Night Riders targeted him.

Modern day accounts of the Walker family murders appear to accept the newspaper reports of the day and effectively end the story here.<sup>9</sup> Both local histories and more scholarly accounts uniformly conclude that nothing was ever done to bring the murderers to justice, and “No charges were ever filed for this atrocity.”<sup>10</sup> There is, however, a great deal more to the story.

At the time of the murders, the Walkers were, in fact, a well-established family who had lived in Fulton County, Kentucky, for 30 years. David Walker’s father, Edward, called “Ned,” had moved across the Tennessee state line from Obion County to Fulton County, and bought a 25-acre farm from a white man named A. J. Whipple in March 1878, when David, known as “Dave,” was 12 years old.<sup>11</sup> In 1892, when Dave was 26, he bought 2 1/2 acres from one of his father’s white neighbors, and, by the time of his death in 1908, he had become a reasonably successful farmer by the standards of the day.<sup>12</sup> According to court records filed after his death, Dave Walker’s personal property included 40 barrels of corn and 2500 pounds of cotton in the field, along with 23 pigs, six cows, three mules, three horses, two wagons, two buggies, three saddles, three plows, and assorted other farm implements.<sup>13</sup>

The neighbor from whom Dave purchased the farm was T. P. Williams, who owned and lived on a quarter section of land that adjoined Ned’s property.<sup>14</sup> One of Williams’s sons was Joe Williams, who eventually had his own farm on a portion of his father’s quarter section. Dave and Joe would have known each other since childhood, and they lived as

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<sup>9</sup> Current day lists of lynching victims consistently cite the reason for David Walker’s lynching as swearing at or cursing a white woman. See, e.g., George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), App. A, 321; Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 54, fn. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 124; Paul J. Vanderwood, *Night Riders of Reelfoot Lake* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1969), 41; David G. Hayes, *The Historic Reelfoot Lake Region: An Early History of the People and Places of Western Obion and Present Day Lake County* (Collierville, TN: [InstantPublisher.com](http://InstantPublisher.com), 2017), 318.

<sup>11</sup> Recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 11, Page 350 (all Fulton County records cited *infra* are located at the Fulton County Clerk Office, Hickman, KY); 1880 U. S. Census Records at <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1880%2f005160675%2f00599&parentid=usc%2f1880%2f1000120725862>, accessed Aug. 5, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 17, Page 261.

<sup>13</sup> See Appraise Bill, Fulton County Court Order Book #8, Page 628, filed on behalf of Dave Walker’s Estate. According to the estate appraisal, the only household goods to have survived the fire were a bell, a kettle, and a tub.

<sup>14</sup> A section consists of 640 acres, or one square mile. See <https://www.sos.ky.gov/admin/land/non-military/jacksonpurchase/Pages/Mapping-the-Jackson-Purchase.aspx>, accessed May 20, 2020.

neighboring farmers for 16 years before there was any record of significant trouble between them.<sup>15</sup>

On June 5, 1908, four months before the murders, the *Hickman Courier* carried a short news item which read:

Dave Walker was fined \$10 and cost Wednesday by County Judge Naylor for using abusive language. The warrant for his arrest was sworn to by Joe Williams and wife. Walker was also charged with flourishing a deadly weapon, but the evidence on this charge was not sufficient to convict.<sup>16</sup>

This brief account carried no suggestion of a racial transgression and was so insignificant that it was sandwiched between two equally mundane stories – one about a euchre party and the other about a house under construction that had blown down in a storm. Walker was not even identified in the story as a Negro, which would have been standard practice for newspapers in 1908. A private investigator later told the *Louisville Courier-Journal* that the trouble was over Joe Williams's cattle, which had broken into one of Walker's fields. According to the investigator, Dave Walker went to Joe's house to speak to him about it, and when Joe's wife came to the door and said her husband was not at home, Dave "impugned her veracity."<sup>17</sup>

Assuming that story is true, the incident was essentially a spat between two neighbors, and Joe Williams responded by doing what he would have done with any white man: he took the matter to the courthouse and let the judge decide. At the time, the penalty in Kentucky for using abusive language was a fine up to \$50, and the penalty for the crime of flourishing a deadly weapon was a fine between \$50 and \$100, as well as a potential 10-15 day jail sentence.<sup>18</sup> As though to emphasize how trivial the dispute was, the judge simply fined Walker \$10 for using abusive language and found him not guilty of the weapon charge.<sup>19</sup> That was the end of the matter until four months later when the Night

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<sup>15</sup> Williams Plat recorded in Fulton County Process'ers & Comm'ers Rpts., Book 2, Page 146.

<sup>16</sup> News item, p. 4, col. 5, *Hickman Courier*, June 5, 1908.

<sup>17</sup> Warden Hale, "Detective Who Worked on Cases Tells of Attacks on Negroes in the Western Part of the State," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Dec. 13, 1908.

<sup>18</sup> Ky. Stat. §1271, §1308 (1899).

<sup>19</sup> A local account of the story, reported only at the time of the murders four months later, included the following: "According to the story that reached here. . . Walker is charged with telling bystanders after the trial that he was fixed for them." This appears to have been yet another attempt to bolster justification for the Night Riders' raid, since the claim did not surface until after the murders and there was no specific source for the information – only "according to the story that reached here." See "Negro Family Massacred at Hickman by Masked Men Sunday Morning Because They Resist Visitation," *Paducah (KY) Sun*, Oct. 5, 1908.

Riders decided to give Dave Walker a whipping — a whipping in which Joe Williams, tellingly, refused to participate.<sup>20</sup>

By October 1908, Night Riders had been active in both western Kentucky and northwest Tennessee for many months, albeit for different reasons. The Night Riders of western Kentucky were part of what historians have labelled “the Black Patch War.” Briefly, in 1901, tobacco farmers in Middle Tennessee and western Kentucky began an effort of organized resistance against price-setting in the dark-fired tobacco industry led by the American Tobacco Company. When legal and legislative action failed, the farmer’s Association turned to vigilantism, and, beginning in early 1906, masked men calling themselves Night Riders began to burn tobacco warehouses and to intimidate farmers unwilling to join the Association. By the spring of 1908, the Night Riders had established themselves in western Kentucky not only as the soldiers of the tobacco wars but as the enforcers of homogeneity and normative behavior in the region.<sup>21</sup> Enforcement efforts included racially-motivated crimes designed to rid local communities of African American farmers and laborers who competed with whites in the tobacco markets and in the job market in general.<sup>22</sup>

The tactics of the Black Patch Night Riders appealed to farmers throughout the lower Mississippi Valley, and in particular to cotton farmers in Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana who were suffering a similar plight in their dealings with cotton merchants. Cotton farmers began calling themselves Night Riders and set about burning cotton gins and warehouses and terrorizing cotton merchants.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, newspapers from the period leave the impression that wholesale anarchy broke out across the lower Mississippi Valley.<sup>24</sup>

Nowhere was this more true than in the vicinity around Reelfoot Lake in the northwestern corner of Tennessee. Formed by an earthquake along the New Madrid fault line which caused the Mississippi River to flood in 1811-1812, Reelfoot Lake runs roughly parallel to the Mississippi River for approximately 14 miles and ends less than 5 miles from

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<sup>20</sup> “Night Riders Wipe Out Negro Family,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 8, 1908.

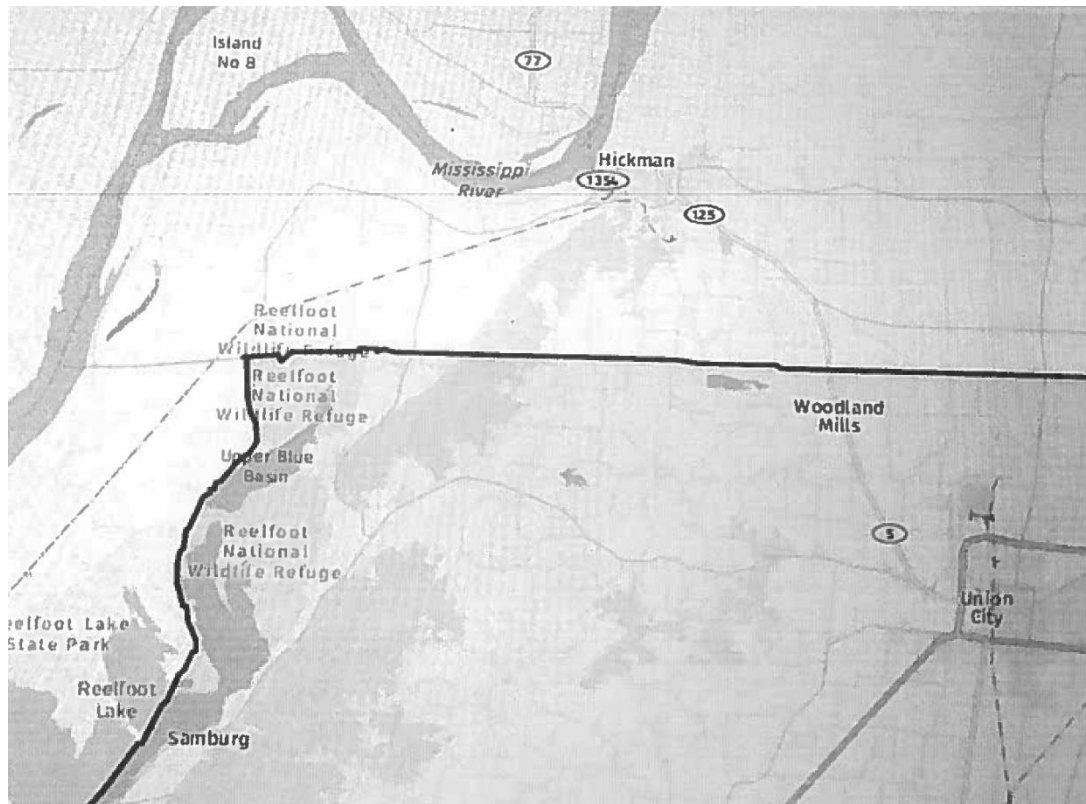
<sup>21</sup> See generally Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890-1915* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> See generally Suzanne Marshall, *Violence in the Black Patch of Kentucky and Tennessee* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994); Eliot Jaspín, “Don’t Kill Us All,” chap. 5 in *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> See “The Night Rider in the Cotton Patch,” *Owensboro (KY) Messenger-Inquirer*, Sept. 18, 1908; “Cotton Prices Must Go Higher: Remedy for Night Riding,” *Nashville Tennessean*, Oct. 22, 1908; “Discussing Night Riders: President of the Ginners Urges Repeal Anti-Future Laws As a Remedy,” *Natchez (MS) Democrat*, Nov. 12, 1908.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., “Near Riot in Convention: Attack Upon and Defense of Night Riders at Memphis Cotton Conference Puts House in Uproar, with Members Standing on Chairs Shouting,” *Arkansas Democrat* (Little Rock), Nov. 12, 1908.

the Kentucky state line. The western shore of the shallow lake runs the length of Obion County, and the eastern shore lies in neighboring Lake County. Both counties sit on the Tennessee-Kentucky border.<sup>25</sup>



West Kentucky and Tennessee where Night Rider Violence Occurred  
(Google Maps)

The Night Riders in the Reelfoot region were neither tobacco nor cotton farmers, but were instead commercial fishermen and subsistence farmers who lived on or near the shore of the lake. The lake had been used for hunting and fishing and as a source of income for many local people trying to eke out a living since settlement of the area began in the 1820s. Public use of the lake was not a concern until a man named James C. Harris began acquiring title to large quantities of lake property in the latter part of the 19th century. When Harris announced in August 1899 that he owned the lake and intended to drain it in order to grow cotton, the community took legal action.<sup>26</sup> A lengthy court battle followed, which concluded only after the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled that, because the shallow, narrow lake was not navigable, it was not a public body of water and was therefore subject to private ownership.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For extensive discussion of the lake's creation, see Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 18-29.

<sup>26</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 8-10.

<sup>27</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 11, citing *Webster v. Harris*, 69 S.W. 782 (Tenn. 1903).

Reelfoot Lake now belonged legally to the Harris family. James C. Harris died in 1903 and his plan to drain the lake was never carried out, but he left the property to his son, who nonetheless asserted his ownership rights by enjoining anyone from using the lake without his permission. More litigation followed between Harris and a few property owners whose rights to certain shoreline property remained in dispute. The matter concluded only with the creation of a corporation which brought together as shareholders all parties to the litigation along with a few investors including, notably, some of the parties' attorneys. The new corporation, formed on July 31, 1907, and called the West Tennessee Land Company, then leased exclusive fishing and game rights to an entity known as the Reelfoot Lake Fish Company formed by the local dock owners who had previously opposed Harris.<sup>28</sup> Betrayed by their leaders who had formerly opposed private ownership and deprived of their ability to use the lake, local fishermen and hunters resorted to violence.

According to local historian David G. Hayes, in the spring of 1908, several men from Reelfoot Lake visited Calloway County, Kentucky, where Black Patch Night Riders were known to be active. Soon after that visit, the Reelfoot Lake Night Riders began to make their presence felt in the lake region.<sup>29</sup> Organized to thwart anyone who cooperated with either the West Tennessee Land Company or the Reelfoot Lake Fish Company, the Night Riders were predominantly young farm hands, day laborers, and "local riffraff," led by a few small farm owners and commercial fishermen from both sides of the state line.<sup>30</sup> They divided themselves geographically into two gangs in order to patrol each end of the lake, and, like the Black Patch Night Riders, relied upon a manifesto and an oath given on penalty of death, as well as disguises, secret signals, and passwords in order to give the group some semblance of structure.<sup>31</sup> Over the next seven months, the Night Riders wreaked havoc around the lake, beginning with the destruction of the fish dock, storehouses, and barns of the Reelfoot Lake Fish Company on April 11, 1908, and ending on October 20, 1908, with the murder of Quentin Rankin, one of the lawyers who had represented the dock owners and later become a shareholder in the West Tennessee Land Company.<sup>32</sup>

In the months between the destruction of the Reelfoot Lake Fish Company's property and the death of Rankin, the Night Riders turned to the enforcement of their own social code. Their preferred method of punishment was horsewhippings, and, in most instances, their targets were people alleged to have caused some affront to one or more members of the gang. Between the months of April and October 1908, they carried out

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<sup>28</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 12-14.

<sup>29</sup> Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 313; Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 22-23. According to reports at the time, at least twelve Night Riders were from the Brownsville community in Kentucky, and "were particularly active in the raid on the Walkers." See "Bail for Men in Local Jail," *Nashville Tennessean*, Nov. 12, 1908.

<sup>31</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 24-26; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 313-14.

<sup>32</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 12, 35; Margaret Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 111.

approximately 100 acts of violence — most of which were whippings of white men and women throughout Obion County, Tennessee. One woman was whipped on two separate occasions because she refused to withdraw her suit for divorce against one of the Riders. Another woman was whipped because “she talked too much,” and yet a third woman was whipped because she refused to live with her habitually drunken husband. One man was whipped for openly expressing disdain for the Night Riders; other men were whipped for refusing to join or cooperate with them.<sup>33</sup>

Within this scheme of member-driven retribution, the targeting of Dave Walker appears to have been unique for several reasons. First, African-Americans had not been a target of the Reelfoot Lake Night Riders in the months prior to the attack. In fact, nowhere in the oral histories or newspaper accounts covering the Night Riders is there any mention of the Riders ever attacking any black landowner other than Walker.<sup>34</sup> Second, the Night Riders had no personal grudge against Walker. The fact that they stopped at Joe Williams’s house on the night they went to the Walker farm and pointedly asked him to go with them suggests that, even when an African-American was involved, their code compelled them to justify their actions. Joe Williams, however, was not a known Night Rider, and he refused to participate in the raid. They overcame the obstacle Williams created by implicating him anyway: they forced him to hold their horses while they walked the rest of the way to Walker’s house.<sup>35</sup>

Third, Night Rider actions typically followed immediately upon the heels of an affront to one of the members. Why then did the Night Riders choose the night of October 3 — four months after the Fulton County Court had disposed of Joe Williams’s complaint against Dave Walker — to administer the whipping? Events of the day provide a probable answer. On the afternoon of October 3, an Obion County jury had deadlocked at the conclusion of a trial against several Night Riders who had been charged with whipping

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<sup>33</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 26-27; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 316-17, 328.

<sup>34</sup> In fact, the only reference to African-Americans in the Night Riders’ manifesto was a notice that “No man shall be allowed to employ Negro labor in the lake district after Jan. 1, 1909.” Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 316.

<sup>35</sup> In a peculiar twist of fate, Joe Williams died of pneumonia on November 15, 1908, less than six weeks after the deaths of the Walker family. According to the local newspaper, he had been sick “only a short time and his death was unexpected.” He was 37 years old. The paper noted, “Mr. Williams is the gentleman who was given so much notoriety [sic] on account of having been forced by night riders to hold their horses while they killed the Walker negroes a few weeks ago.” “Prominent Farmer Dies,” *Hickman Courier*, Nov. 19, 1908. It is tempting to believe that Joe Williams may have felt responsible for his neighbors’ deaths. Indeed, the incident seems to have marked the entire Williams family, because Joe’s wife Prudence died at the age of 34, a mere three years later. She left behind a letter to her family which read in part, “The dear Lord say ‘Blessed are they that suffer persecutions.’ I have been one that has suffered them. I have had my heart pierced with many thorns since your father was laid to rest.” “Death Near Brownsville,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 19, 1911.



a white man named J. W. Rook.<sup>36</sup> It was the first time any Reelfoot Lake Night Rider had been put on trial for “whitecapping,” and the resulting mistrial meant the Night Riders had effectively won.<sup>37</sup> The *Hickman Courier* later claimed that Hickman was filled with “fire-water” and drunken men that night.<sup>38</sup> It seems likely that Night Riders from the surrounding area decided to celebrate their invincibility by riding to Dave Walker’s farm outside Hickman essentially on a pretext with nothing more than a plan to whip Walker as they had J. W. Rook. Warden Hale, a private investigator writing an exposé about the Night Riders for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in December 1908, suggested as much: “Taking license from the failure of the people of that section to convict . . . [they] marched forth in October . . . and four negroes living near Hickman were shot down in their tracks as they emerged from a burning cabin.”<sup>39</sup>

Hale’s description clearly connected the not guilty verdict in Obion County with the attack on the Walkers in Fulton County, but it should not be read to suggest that the Night Riders went to the Walker farm with the specific intention of setting fire to the house and murdering the family. Arson and murder were the outcome, but the Night Riders were known to be horsewhippers, not cold-blooded killers. All the newspaper reports of the day in fact state that the Riders’ “original intention” was to horsewhip Walker, and none of the evidence suggests otherwise.<sup>40</sup>

The Night Riders, however, underestimated Dave Walker, and the situation quickly spun out of control. From their earliest raids in April until the night of October 3, the Night Riders had met with little resistance, and, in the drunken headiness of their court victory, they would not have anticipated resistance that night. But Dave Walker was not like their other victims. Dave Walker, a black man, must have anticipated the worst when he saw Night Riders approaching his home on a Saturday at midnight. Without knowing their intention to horsewhip him, he would reasonably have assumed that, not only was he vulnerable, but so was his entire family. When the Riders called him out, Walker stayed where he was rather than face them in the open; and, when he did not obey their command, the Riders reacted to his defiance by grabbing cans of coal oil and torching the house. In the ensuing chaos, they shot at not only Walker but every person trying to escape

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<sup>36</sup> “Verdict in the Night Rider Case,” *Clarksville (TN) Leaf-Chronicle*, Oct. 6, 1908; “Night Rider Trial Over,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 8, 1908. In fact, the two stories appeared under a collective headline in one local paper. See “Fire and Shot For Negroes,” and “Night Rider Trial Over,” *Paducah News-Democrat*, Oct 6, 1908.

<sup>37</sup> Whitecapping was a term used to describe the unlawful infliction of corporal punishment. It derived from a group calling themselves White Caps, which appears to have originated in Indiana in the 1880s. White Caps claimed to enforce extrajudicial moral codes. See Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 143.

<sup>38</sup> “Lid Was Off Saturday,” *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 8, 1908.

<sup>39</sup> Warden Hale, “Detective Who Worked on Cases,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Dec. 13, 1908.

<sup>40</sup> “Night Riders Kill Three,” *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Massacre for Negro Family,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Oct. 5, 1908.

the flames. The *Paducah Sun* captured the truth of the moment in its first headline about the story: “Negro Family Massacred at Hickman . . . . *Because They Resist Visitation.*”<sup>41</sup>

At the time, some newspaper accounts claimed that Dave Walker had fired on the Night Riders first, when they initially ordered him to come out of the house. Other papers tell the story differently, and at least one local paper stated that Walker fired on them only after they actually entered the house. According to the *Paducah Sun*, “when he refused to admit them and when they burst in the doors he opened fire with a shotgun and his two boys with revolvers.”<sup>42</sup>

The clearest and, likely, most accurate account of what occurred came from Mrs. Walker herself. Annie Walker, miraculously, lived long enough to testify at an inquest early in the week following the attack. Mrs. Walker’s statement clarified the actions of both her husband and the Night Riders, and vividly described the horrific scene that followed. As reported by the *Louisville Courier-Journal*:

. . . .Walker’s wife said her husband made no fight, but refused to come out when commanded by the night riders, and that the night riders broke in the door, poured coal oil on the beds, fired them as the family retreated back to the kitchen and jumped out of the doors and windows when the night riders shot them.<sup>43</sup>

What could have prompted such an uncharacteristically vicious, sadistic response? Up until the moment when Dave Walker refused to go out to meet them, the Night Riders’ actions had been consistent with every other whipping incident in which they had been involved. The turning point must have been Dave Walker’s refusal to submit. For a group of white farm hands and day laborers, there may well have been two triggers for the violence that followed: Walker’s defiance and his land ownership.<sup>44</sup> Viewed in combination, defiance from an even modestly successful black farmer would have been seen as an intolerable aggression, and it led inexorably to a furious and disproportionate reaction. John Dollard identified this very kind of behavior in his now-classic text, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*.<sup>45</sup> Dollard observed that Southern whites often resorted to direct force in

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<sup>41</sup> *Paducah Sun*, Oct. 5, 1908 (emphasis added).

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., “Seven Are Shot by Angry Mob,” *Nashville Tennessean*, Oct. 5, 1908; “Negro Family Massacred at Hickman by Masked Men Sunday Morning,” *Paducah Sun*, Oct. 5, 1908.

<sup>43</sup> “Walker Family Left In Serious Condition,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Oct. 7, 1908.

<sup>44</sup> In addition to being a farm owner, according to the 1900 U. S. Census, Dave and Annie Walker were literate, which would also have distinguished them from many white laborers. See <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1900%2f004118909%2f00613%2f029>, accessed July 10, 2019. For an analysis of the factors that put African American men at risk for lynching, see generally Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1937), 320.

order to maintain their social position vis-à-vis blacks. According to Dollard, the “formula” for direct force was “a counter attack delivered *in advance of* the attack” by blacks.<sup>46</sup> The counter attack in this case included not only Walker but his entire family, who, in the heat of the moment, would have been seen as complicit in Walker’s aggression.

In the aftermath of the night’s violence, many of the Night Riders themselves seemed surprised and caught off guard by what had happened. Realizing they had crossed a line, even in the eyes of the white community, two of them later claimed they had tried to stop it.<sup>47</sup> A third went so far as to suggest that the Walker murders were a turning point for many in the group. According to Paul J. Vanderwood:

The Night Riders themselves were nauseated by the wanton murder of the Walkers. They had not intended to go that far with the blacks, and some of the members of the group began to question the future of the clan. External support for the movement also started to wane, a serious threat to an organization which nourished itself on local sympathy and sought widespread public approval.<sup>48</sup>

The remorse expressed by some of the Night Riders and within the community itself is at odds with a different motive for the murders that has found its way into the story in recent years. This alternate narrative developed as the result of a newspaper article written in 2001 by two reporters from the Associated Press. The reporters wrote that they had uncovered and verified 107 cases in which black families had been “unfairly stripped of their land.”<sup>49</sup> The Walkers were identified as one such case.<sup>50</sup> Their article, which received national coverage and was later included in a journalism textbook, implied that the Walker murders had been committed because a local farmer wanted Dave Walker’s land. The reporters claimed to have documented that “[n]o one was ever charged with the killings,” and that the surviving children were denied their inheritance because Walker’s farm “was simply folded into the property of a white neighbor, who soon sold it to another man — whose daughter owns the undeveloped land today.”<sup>51</sup> The AP story also found its way into

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<sup>46</sup> Dollard, *Caste and Class*, 322-23 (emphasis added).

<sup>47</sup> “Marshall on Stand,” *New Orleans (LA) Times-Democrat*, Jan. 26, 1909.

<sup>48</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 41-42, citing a 1962 interview with Fred Pinion, one of the Night Riders tried for the murder of Quintin Rankin.

<sup>49</sup> Todd Lewan and Dolores Barclay, Associated Press, “When They Steal Your Land, They Steal Your Future,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 2, 2001.

<sup>50</sup> This paper is not intended to dispute the findings of the AP reporters with regard to the 106 other cases identified as illegal land takings. It disputes only the report’s inclusion of the Walker case.

<sup>51</sup> Arlene Notoro Morgan, Alice Irene Pifer and Keith Woods, eds., *The Authentic Voice: The Best Reporting on Race and Ethnicity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 189. Websites adopted this version of the story and it went viral. See <http://www.thiscruelwar.com/your-children-of-hell-have-broken-loose-again/>, accessed Jan. 26, 2019; [https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Lynching\\_of\\_the\\_Walker\\_family](https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Lynching_of_the_Walker_family), accessed Aug. 13,

a document entitled “The Case for Reparations,” addressed to the U. S. House of Representatives on February 6, 2002, as part of a list containing “examples of land takings documented by the AP.” The first example listed in the document is an account of the Walker murders, and states in part: “No one was ever charged with the killings, and the surviving children were deprived of the farm their father died defending.”<sup>52</sup>

Fulton County records prove otherwise. Probate documents located in the County Clerk’s office clearly show that the estate of David Walker was handled properly through the probate court of Fulton County. On October 15, 1908, Fulton County Court Judge W. A. Naylor (the same judge who fined Dave Walker for using abusive language) appointed J.P. Leggate, to administer the estate. Leggate appears to have followed all the requirements of administration and kept the estate open until 1915, when Willie Walker, the youngest of the three surviving children, reached the age of majority.<sup>53</sup> According to the county’s delinquent tax lists, real estate taxes on the property were current until 1914. Only then does the property appear in the sheriff’s delinquent tax sale notice. As of 1914, the assessed value of Walker’s 2 1/2 acres was \$50.00, with taxes and costs due of \$3.23.<sup>54</sup> At that time, the three heirs were being represented by an attorney from the neighboring town of Fulton, Kentucky. They would certainly have known that their father owned his own land, and that there were sufficient funds remaining in the estate in 1915 to have paid the \$3.23, had the children wanted to pay the taxes or even buy the land at the tax sale, as heirs often did at the time to ensure good title.<sup>55</sup> Instead, the estate was closed on October 11, 1915, without the 1914 taxes having been paid. According to the settlement statement prepared by J. P. Leggate, during his tenure as administrator, he had paid the following bills on behalf of the estate: real estate taxes; costs associated with sale of the personal property; livestock upkeep; doctors’ fees for attending to the Walkers; burial costs, including coffins

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2019; <https://atlantablackstar.com/2014/10/09/8-heartbreaking-cases-where-land-was-stolen-from-black-americans-through-racism-violence-and-murder/2/>, accessed Aug. 13, 2019. In some of these accounts, the Walker murders were conflated with an unconnected wave of violence in 1915 against black tenant farmers who lived in “the bottoms” outside Hickman.

<sup>52</sup> See <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2002/02/06/house-section/article/H184-1>, at H190, accessed Feb. 6, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Appointment recorded in Fulton County Court Order Book 8, Page 333; Settlement Statement recorded in Fulton County Probate Settlement Book 4, Page 112. Based on their ages as reported in U.S. census records for the year 1900, twins Culah (alternately spelled “Cular”) and Beulah Walker would have been 25 years old and Willie would have been 21 in 1915. See <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1900%2f004118909%2f00613%2f029>, accessed July 10, 2019. The age of majority is significant because each of the surviving children would have had a homestead exemption on the property until they reached majority at the age of 21. Because of the homestead exemption, the sheriff could not have sold the property prior to 1915 without creating a cloud on the property.

<sup>54</sup> “Sheriff’s Tax Sale,” *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 11, 18, 25, Mar. 4, 1915.

<sup>55</sup> In fact, in at least one deed reference from 1914, the Walker farm is referred to as belonging to Willie Walker. See Fulton County Deed Book 31, Page 111.

and grave repairs; and attorney's and commissioner's fees. The court approved the settlement statement, and the balance remaining of \$55.53 was paid into the court for distribution to the heirs. Written in the margin of Fulton County Probate Settlement Book 4, at page 112, is the following:

Rec'd of E. J. Stahr, Judge, the sum of \$55.53 for Willie Walker, Cular Walker, and Beulah Walker, the sole and only heirs of Dave Walker, deceased. Said heirs have filed affidavits this day showing they are the heirs of Dave Walker and are of full age.

Hershel Smith, attorney.

The farm was sold, legally, for back taxes in 1916. The actual deed from the sheriff, Bailey Huddleston, to J. L. Dotson as purchaser of the property has not been located due to an incomplete recording in 1916; however, Dotson, who did not own other land in the neighborhood, sold the property to one Leonard Harding on February 16, 1922, for the price of \$50.00 (the same amount as the assessed value in 1914). The deed to Harding contains the original property description as stated in David Walker's own deed when the property was conveyed to him by T. P. Williams. The deed to Harding further states:

This being the same property conveyed to J. L. Dotson by deed dated in the year of 1916, from Bailey Huddleston, Sheriff of Fulton County, and recorded in Book [...] *land sold for taxes, page 222. This being a tax title from Huddleston to Dotson and from Dotson to Harding.*<sup>56</sup>

Leonard Harding did not begin buying the land included in T. P. Williams's quarter section until 1919.<sup>57</sup> Harding died in 1975 and left his farm, including what had been David Walker's 2 1/2 acres, to his four children. Eventually, three of the Harding siblings transferred their ownership interests to their sister, Ruth Harding Norville. Two of those deeds referred specifically to the deed from T. P. Williams to Dave Walker, but simply did not refer to the tax title and subsequent transfer from J. L. Dotson to Leonard Harding.<sup>58</sup> Once Ruth Norville acquired all her father's holdings, what had once been identified as Dave Walker's property was legitimately "folded into" the surrounding property description and became part of what was later known as Leonard Harding's homeplace.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 40, Page 102 (emphasis added).

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Deed to Leonard Harding, recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 34, Page 528.

<sup>58</sup> Recording instruments from siblings to Ruth Norville recorded in the following: Fulton County Deed Book 101, Page 209; Deed Book 101, Page 220; Deed Book 103, Page 397.

<sup>59</sup> Informal Settlement of Ruth Norville estate recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 187, Page 220.

Daily life in the Brownsville community after 1908 supports these facts. In particular, Ned Walker's position as a member of the community appears to have been unchanged by his son's murder.<sup>60</sup> The elder Walker's 25-acre farm adjoined his son's farm along Dave Walker's southern boundary.<sup>61</sup> If the neighbors wanted to rid themselves of Dave Walker and steal his 2 1/2 acre farm, it is logical to assume they would have wanted to rid themselves of Ned Walker and steal his 25-acre farm as well. Instead, Ned Walker continued to live within a stone's throw of Joe Williams's farm until 1919. Indeed, for several of those years Dave's youngest surviving child, Willie Walker, lived on the farm with his grandfather.<sup>62</sup> In 1919, Ned sold the farm to one of his white neighbors for twice what he originally paid for it, and moved into Hickman to finish out his days living with his niece.<sup>63</sup> By then, he was over 100 years old, and had lived on the same farm in the same community in Fulton County for 40 years.

The other misconception that has followed in the wake of the Walker family murders is that no one was ever charged with the murders.<sup>64</sup> While that was typical for most lynchings, as has been demonstrated here, the Dave Walker family murders were not typical.

On October 7, 1908, Kentucky's Governor Augustus Willson, who was already battling Night Riders throughout the Black Patch, announced that he had ordered a company of militia stationed at Columbus, Kentucky, to go to Hickman to maintain order in the community. He did so, he said, at the request of Fulton County officials who feared additional attacks from night riders.<sup>65</sup> He also announced that "every possible effort"

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<sup>60</sup> See "Uncle Ned Walker Works in Fulton Though Aged 102," *Paducah News-Democrat*, Apr. 28, 1915, in which Dave's father is referred to as "an honest old negro".... "highly respected by all the white people of that vicinity."

<sup>61</sup> See Fulton County Plat Map for 1890, Section 28, located in Fulton County Clerk Office, Hickman, KY.

<sup>62</sup> See 1910 U. S. Census Records at <https://www.censusrecords.com/record?id=usc%2f1910%2f004971590%2f00163&parentid=usc%2f1910%2f004971590%2f00163%2f003>, accessed July 10, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Recorded in Fulton County Deed Book 35, Page 596. See also "Negro Centenarian Dead," *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 23, 1922, which, in providing a brief account of the "night rider trouble," unfortunately confused Ned with Dave.

<sup>64</sup> Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 124; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 318; Morgan, Pifer and Woods, eds., *The Authentic Voice*, 189.

<sup>65</sup> "Hickman Asks For Soldiers To Repel Night Rider Attack," *Paducah Sun*, Oct. 9, 1908; "Governor Orders Troops to Hickman," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Oct. 9, 1908. Six weeks later, "every business man in the city of Hickman" signed a second request addressed to the governor pleading with him to allow the militia to remain in Hickman. It is clear from the second request that these businessmen did not see the threat as one limited to a surly black farmer. In fact, the request made no reference to race at all, saying only that the Night Riders had murdered an entire family, and asking that the soldiers be allowed to remain in Hickman "until the good citizens think the danger is past." Filson Historical Society Collection, Augustus Willson Papers, A/W742, Folder 186, Nov. 25, 1908 letter.

would be made “to apprehend” the men who shot the Walkers, and that he expected to use “every arm of the state government, if available,” in order to bring the killers to justice.<sup>66</sup>

Willson, a lifelong Republican and close personal friend and supporter of U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, clearly saw the murders as a blatant act of terrorism.<sup>67</sup> On October 12, he announced that he was offering a \$500 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any person who participated in the “massacre” of the Walkers. In making the announcement, the governor spoke in impassioned terms about the brutality of the “cowardly fiends” who murdered a man “pleading for mercy,” along with his wife and their young children:

If two or three men had gone to this poor cabin and murdered the family, the crime would have shocked humanity with its revelation of the incredible wickedness, brutality and dastardly cowardice of the three men. That a larger number, some fifty men, joined in such a crime, multiplies the cowardliness and wickedness fiftyfold, and makes every member of the band guilty of murder in the first degree, of the basest, wickedest, the most cowardly and inhuman murder conceivable to mortal mind.<sup>68</sup>

Unfortunately, within days of Governor Willson’s announcement, news of another deadly Night Rider attack exploded in northwest Tennessee. On October 18, 1908, just two weeks after the attack on the Walkers, Night Riders murdered Quintin Rankin, investor in the West Tennessee Land Company and one of those responsible for curtailing the Night Riders’ fishing rights. Rankin and another investor, Robert Z. Taylor, were kidnapped from their beds and marched to the banks of Reelfoot Lake in Obion County near an area called Walnut Log, just a short distance from the state line. Taylor managed to escape, but Rankin was hanged by a noose dangling from a tree and shot to death less than 10 miles from David Walker’s farm.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> “Fourth Dies at Hickman — Governor Going After Mob,” *Paducah News-Democrat*, Oct. 9, 1908.

<sup>67</sup> Justice Harlan steadfastly opposed Jim Crow laws throughout his years on the Court and is best remembered as the sole voice of dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896). See William E. Read and William C. Berman, “Papers of the First Justice Harlan at the University of Louisville,” *American Journal of Legal History*, v. 11, no. 1 (Jan. 1967), 57-68; Alan F. Westin, “John Marshall Harlan and the Constitutional Rights of Negroes: The Transformation of a Southerner,” *Yale Law Journal*, v. 66, no. 5 (Apr. 1957), 637-710.

<sup>68</sup> “Offers Reward for Hickman Murderers,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Oct. 13, 1908.

<sup>69</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 43-47. See also Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 111-12.

The murder of Quintin Rankin, a former captain in the Spanish American War, set off a massive manhunt in Tennessee, which soon led to the arrest of ninety men alleged to



*The Tacoma Times*  
(Tacoma, Washington)  
November 19, 1909  
*Newspapers by Ancestry.com*

be Night Riders.<sup>70</sup> Under pressure from state investigators, several of the detainees began to cooperate with the Obion County District Attorney and with special prosecutors brought in at the request of Tennessee's Governor Malcolm R. Patterson.<sup>71</sup> One of the detainees was a 25-year old man named Frank Fehringer, whose family was from Obion County, but who had become a notorious bootlegger and petty gunslinger in Fulton County.<sup>72</sup> Fehringer told the investigators that he had been the Night Riders' leader on the nights that both Rankin and the Walkers were killed. Given immunity from prosecution in Tennessee in exchange for his testimony, Fehringer soon became the State's chief witness in a trial against eight men charged with the first degree murder of Quintin Rankin.<sup>73</sup>

From the date Rankin's death was first reported, all media attention shifted to the Tennessee murder case. Although the Walker murders were raised in numerous court documents prior to trial, only a few newspapers commented on the connection to the Walkers.<sup>74</sup> As the lead case and two other related cases moved forward through the appeals and retrial process, the story of what had happened to the Walkers in Kentucky faded from the public eye.

The Fulton County Grand Jury, however, did its job. During the May term of 1909, Frank Fehringer was in fact indicted for the "willful murder" of the Walker family.<sup>75</sup> The indictments remained on the Commonwealth docket at least through April 28, 1910, when they were noted as having been set for the current term of court.<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, Fehringer was never tried for the murders. The reasons why are complicated. Fehringer

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<sup>70</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 73.

<sup>71</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 79.

<sup>72</sup> "For Bootlegging," *Hickman Courier*, Feb. 1, 1907; "Frank Ferriner [sic] Caught," *Hickman Courier*, Dec. 20, 1907; untitled news item, *Hickman Courier*, p. 3, c. 6, Jan. 24, 1908.

<sup>73</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 75-76.

<sup>74</sup> See, e.g., State of Tennessee's Answers to Writs of Habeas Corpus filed (and currently maintained) in the Circuit Court of Obion County, dated Nov. 6, 1908, stating that, prior to the murder of Rankin and attempt to assassinate Taylor, "said outlaws had gone over into Kentucky at night and assassinated a negro man, Dave Walker, his wife and two children." And see "Bail for Men in Local Jail," *Nashville Tennessean*, Nov. 12, 1908; "Fight for Release," *Houston (TX) Post*, Nov. 12, 1908.

<sup>75</sup> "Circuit Court Notes," *Hickman Courier*, May 20, 1909, refer to Fehringer having been charged with "complicity." All later court reports refer to "willful murder." See "Some Court News," *Hickman Courier*, Sept. 2, 1909; "Circuit Court," *Hickman Courier*, Jan. 20, 1910.

<sup>76</sup> "Fulton Circuit Court Docket," *Hickman Courier*, Apr. 28, 1910.



was required to remain under the jurisdiction of the Tennessee courts for as long as it was necessary to resolve all the Rankin murder cases. Only then could Kentucky have extradited him to Fulton County for trial in the Walker murders. While awaiting the trials in Tennessee, the court gave Fehringer approval to get married and leave West Tennessee. Shortly after the wedding, the couple moved to Chattanooga, where Fehringer then attempted to murder his wife and kill himself.<sup>77</sup> Fehringer was tried in Chattanooga and found guilty of felonious assault, for which he received a two-year prison sentence.<sup>78</sup> Records show that his release date from prison was October 18, 1911, a full three years after the Walkers' deaths.<sup>79</sup> By then, the Rankin trials and appeals were over, with a final dismissal having been entered on May 25, 1911.<sup>80</sup> There is no further record of Fehringer's whereabouts apart from one note that he "reportedly moved to St. Louis, Missouri, and never reappeared at Reelfoot Lake."<sup>81</sup>

Although two other men ultimately admitted to having been present at the Walker farm on the night of October 3, 1908, trial without Fehringer would have been difficult and would likely have led to the same resolution as the Tennessee cases.<sup>82</sup> Despite spending two years of time, money, and effort to indict 90 men and conduct three trials (two of which resulted in hung juries) as well as one complicated appeal, the State of Tennessee never secured a final conviction against a single Night Rider for the murder of Quintin Rankin.<sup>83</sup> There is no reason to believe a different result would have been reached in a trial against Fehringer and his cohorts for the murder of the Walkers.

What then are we to take away from a close examination of the Walker murders? History tells us stories, and, if we are to learn anything from those stories, they must be told as accurately as possible. The history of the Walker family reveals that the Walkers were longstanding members of a farming community in which their white neighbors appear to have treated them with respect, if not as equals. Dave and Annie Walker along with two of their children were murdered, not because Dave Walker once cursed his neighbor's wife, but because he refused to be whipped by a gang of angry whitecappers. He died standing his ground in his own home, and he deserves to be remembered as the one person in a hundred who refused to bend to the will of the Night Riders.

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<sup>77</sup> "Frank Attempts Suicide," *Hickman Courier*, July 12, 1910.

<sup>78</sup> "Frank Gets Two Years," *Hickman Courier*, Oct. 27, 1910.

<sup>79</sup> "Confessed Night Rider Tries to Kill Himself," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Nov. 19, 1910; Biennial Report of the Board of Prison Commissioners of the State of Tennessee, 1911-1912, v. 9, p. 199.

<sup>80</sup> See Docket Entry dated May 25, 1911, in Obion County Circuit Court Docket Book K, Page 443 (located at the Obion County Courthouse, Union City, TN).

<sup>81</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 143. Vanderwood's report was apparently based on interviews conducted in 1956 with Night Riders Bud Morris and Fred Pinion.

<sup>82</sup> The two men were Ed Marshall and Ethelbert Rogers. See "Marshall on Stand," *New Orleans Times Democrat*, Jan. 26, 1909; Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 127.

<sup>83</sup> Vanderwood, *Night Riders*, 140; Hayes, *Historic Reelfoot Lake Region*, 323.

The governor of Kentucky condemned the murders in the harshest possible terms and offered a substantial reward to anyone with information leading to the arrest of the killers. Twelve white men sitting on the Fulton County Grand Jury made the collective decision in 1909 to indict Frank Fehringer for the murder of an African-American family. Even though no one was ever convicted, the state governments of both Kentucky and Tennessee at least tried to secure convictions of the men responsible for both the Walker and Rankin murders. Dave Walker's estate was handled by the Fulton County court system in accordance with the law and his farm was sold following a publicly advertised county tax sale. His surviving children received, if not restitution, at least the proceeds from the administration of his estate.

In the end, the history of the Walker family murders defies narrative expectations and political platitudes. It is a rich and complex story so compelling in its own right that it does not require embellishment or exaggeration in order to make it relevant to current-day discussions of American racial history. The true story continues to shock the conscience with its senselessness and racist brutality, but it also sheds light on a community and a legal system that did not completely abandon the Walkers. The Walker family story, in fact, reminds us that the truth is not always in black or white. Sometimes, it is both.

*Melinda Meador has practiced law since 1982 and currently serves as First Assistant District Attorney in Union City, Tennessee. She has a B. A. in history and English literature from Murray State University, and is completing an M. A. in history which she began at MSU in 1977.*