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The Removal of Blacks from Corbin in 1919: Memory, Perspective, and the Legacy of Racism

by Kristy Owens Griggs

Late in the evening on October 29, 1919, two men overtook A. F. Thompson. They stabbed him, slashed his hand, and held a knife to his neck, forcing him to remain quiet as they robbed him of his weekly pay. The unidentified assailants then fled into the darkness. Gravely injured, Thompson struggled to the nearest residence for aid. Rumors of the brutal assault, said to have been carried out by blacks, circulated through the small railroad community of Corbin, and the next evening, a mob of vigilantes exacted revenge against the African American community of the town. The mob forced members of a black railroad crew, in town to make improvements on the rail lines, into a boxcar and sent them south to Knoxville.

Recounted by local residents, various contemporary newspapers, and numerous historians, the details of this incident vary in each source. Alleged motives for the removal include the attack on Thompson, a general increase in crime and lawlessness in the city, economic competition, white workers gambling and losing money to blacks, and the classic motivation for racial violence, the rape of a white woman. Various versions tell how, with a marching band playing, Steve "Pistol Pete" Rogers and a mob of some 300 men allegedly searched local homes and businesses, rounded up all of the blacks in town, and shipped them away. Contradictory sources reveal that local blacks, protected by white citizens, remained in town during and after the event.

Southern society maintained white supremacy and incited countless incidents of racial violence, many more horrific than the events in Corbin. Nonetheless, Corbin possesses an infamous legacy of racism and hatred. How did the fateful events of 1919

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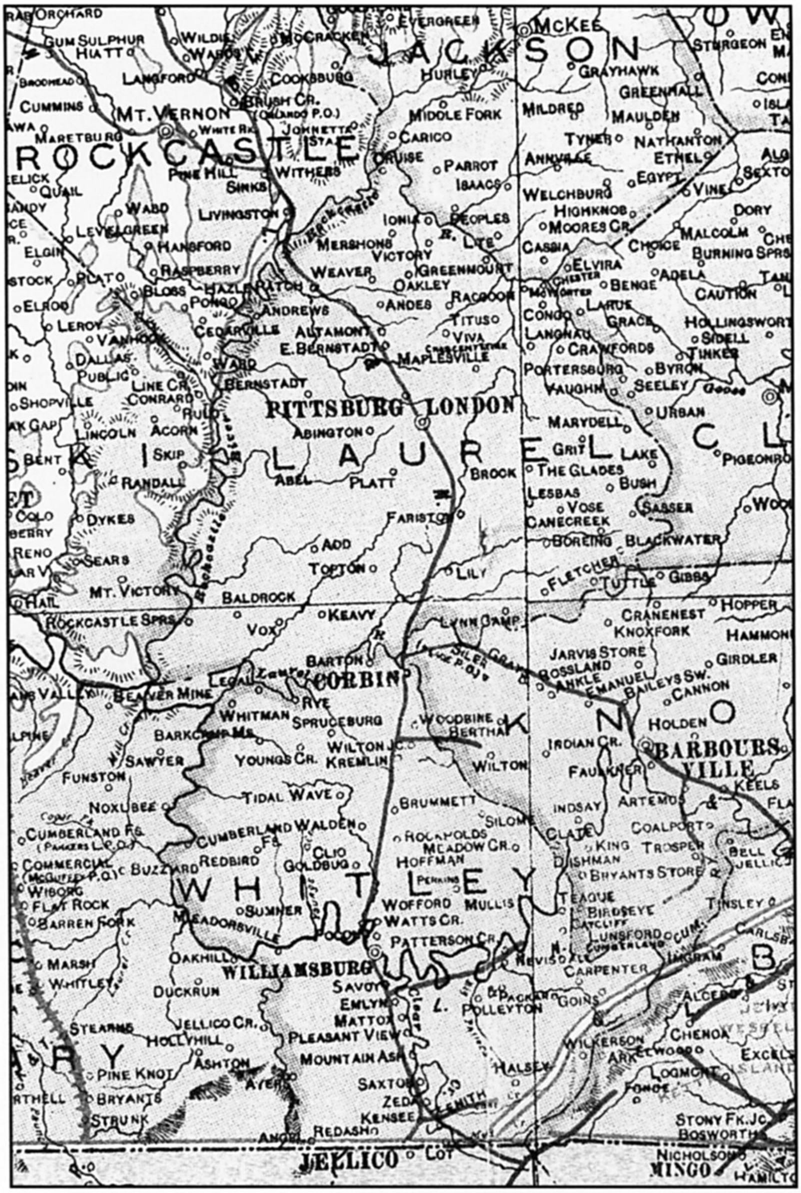
ROCKCASTLE
JACKSON
LAUREL
KNOX
WHITLEY
MT. VERNON
PITTSBURG
LONDON
CORBIN
BARBOURSVILLE
WILLIAMSBURG
JELLICO
McKEE
LIVINGSTON

Railroad Commission map of Kentucky, 1915. The Knoxville and Cumberland Division of the L&N ran through Corbin.

actually transpire? How did these events compare to other contemporary incidents of racial violence? More than eighty years later, why is Corbin still known for racist sentiment? Answers to these questions require an investigation of Corbin in the era surrounding the events and an understanding of the town in the context of the widespread epidemic of racial violence.

African Americans first arrived in Corbin in any numbers in 1886 when the Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) built a roundhouse and other buildings there. Limited to positions as domestic servants or manual laborers on the railroad, blacks constituted only a small portion of the population. The extension of the rail lines expanded economic opportunity and brought many foreign immigrants to Corbin as well. Historian H. E. Everman suggests that many have ignored that ethnic diversity. Racially and religiously diverse, the European immigrants hailed from Ireland, Italy, Germany, and Poland. The population included Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish factions. Racial differences themselves did not translate into tension, however. The town's increasing crime and violence resulted more from the transient labor forces than from racial conflict. Many of the laborers in Corbin temporarily lived in town to expand railroad facilities, clear timber, or construct roads and buildings. These single men often frequented "Saloon Row," a haven for drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Accordingly, the majority of criminal indictments from this era list gaming, public drunkenness, bootlegging, disturbing the peace, and fornication more frequently than other offenses. Twice, in fact, the governor sent militia units to Corbin to quell violence in the city. Neither time had racial violence been the cause.[1]

In 1919, the L&N once again expanded the railroad in Corbin. Due to the labor shortage created by World War I, 200 black workers arrived to construct the high line and east yard. The total population of Corbin in 1920 was 3,406. A decade earlier, only sixty-one residents were African Americans. Now, this group of black workers quadrupled the black population instantly, substantially changing the dynamic of society. Almost immediately, this group was blamed for an increase in crime and violence that allegedly coincided with its arrival. Newspapers presented this accusation in every account of the removal.

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[1] H. E. Everman, "Corbin: A Complex Railroad 'Boom' Town, 1895-1930" (paper presented at the Ohio Valley Historical Conference, October 2001), 1-2 (forthcoming in a future issue of *The Register*); *Corbin Daily Tribune*, February 23, 1967; Whitley County, Kentucky, criminal indictments, 1916-22, Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives (KDLA); Whitley County History Book Committee, *Whitley County, Kentucky (1818-1993): History and Families*, (Paducah, 1994), 40.

City ordinances at this time addressed crime more frequently; however, the high crime rates in the city preexisted the arrival of the black workers, and an increase in crime cannot be strongly connected to the influx. In fact, Corbin resident John Garrett stated that the town later discovered that whites committed most of the crimes in question, not blacks. But many residents of Corbin accepted the racial assumptions of the time and viewed African Americans as moral degenerates, incapable of resisting criminal impulses. They connected black workers to the increase in crime, proof of the accusation notwithstanding.[2]

On the evening Thompson was attacked, he reported two unidentified black men as the perpetrators. Corbin's residents later learned otherwise: the responsible individuals were actually two white men, painted in black face. Since the attack took place in the dark, at 11:20 p.m., some confusion could have occurred. No one can now determine, however, if Thompson actually did mistake the identity of his assailants, or if he deceived the townspeople and blamed the easily targeted black workers. Either way, news of the mugging infuriated local residents, who were already angry over the perceived increase in crime.[3]

The next day, many Corbin citizens gathered at the grade school for a Republican meeting; Congressman J. M. Robsion spoke and a local brass band performed for the event. According to Blake Killinger, a member of the band, they marched downtown after the close of the event. At this time, Rogers and the

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[2] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920* (Washington, 1923); idem, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910* (Washington, 1913), 754. Census data for 1920 reflects the impact of the riot and removal, thus the 1910 data is the closest estimate for the number of resident blacks in 1919. Everman, "Corbin," 6; John Garrett, interview by Dennis Pennington, June 28, 1977, Bennett Center, London, Kentucky; Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black/White Relations in the American South* (New York, 1986), 71.

[3] *Corbin Daily Times*, February 23, 1967; Thomas W. Gallagher, *My Memoirs* (Corbin, n.d.), 99; John Leland Crawford, *A Tale of One City: A Brief Account of the Founding and Growth of Corbin, Kentucky* (Chicago, 1981), 59.

Congressman John M. Robsion and Governor Flem D. Sampson at Cumberland Falls in October 1929.

mob charged down First Street shouting that they intended to force the blacks out of town. At the mob's angry insistence, the band did join the men for a short time.[4]

The group raided the boarding cars, tents, and other temporary housing looking for the railroad workers. Next, the mob searched local houses and businesses, gathering the black workers at the depot. Corbin patrolman C. S. Browning tried in vain to stop the group and begged the rioters not to harm the blacks. At 2:15 a.m., the mob added an extra car to a southbound train and forced the black railroad crew to depart for Knoxville. Browning did remain at the depot, and it is probable that his presence kept the African Americans from being killed or seriously injured. His superiors concluded that the incident had been handled well and did not even report it to state authorities. At least Browning had made an effort. During similar incidents in other communities, officers rarely tried to quell the violence and sometimes participated in it.[5]

Contrary to legend, the mob did not force all black residents out of Corbin that evening, though most others departed quickly. A forty-member, all-black Louisville construction crew of George M. Eady, in town to pave several city streets, remained until the following day. Out of fear for their safety, they then returned to Louisville. Another firm, McKinney Construction, also employed a number of African Americans. Corbin resident Gus Hausman, a white employee of that company, recalled that his boss bought train tickets for all the black workers to return to their native Lynchburg, Virginia, for their security. Some local white residents hid respected black citizens during the incident, including the families of John Berry, Alex Tye, John Turner, Emma Woods, and Howard Nolan, several of whom continued to live in Corbin for many years.[6]

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[4] Blake Killenger, interview by Dennis Pennington, June 28, 1977, Bennett Center.

[5] *Louisville Courier- Journal*, November 1, 1919; *Lexington Leader*, October 31, 1919; *Lexington Herald*, November 1, 1919; Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1998), 296.

In the first issue published after the event, the weekly *Corbin Times* strongly denounced the race riot on November 7, 1919. It called the action "deplorable, and [we] condemn it to the very last." A letter to the editor by a "law-abiding citizen" asked for justice against mob participants. The paper derided them as individuals "whose ambitions reach no higher than the glory of heroes of trashy fiction." Typically for the time, the "better" society dismissed mob participants as members of the lower class. In *Trouble in Mind*, however, historian Leon Litwack suggests that while lower classes may have been more responsible for such violence, "they often did so with the tacit approval and at some times the active and zealous participation of upper- and middle-class whites."[7]

The paper also recognized the harm inflicted on the town's reputation: "Our name has gone out over the nation with a black spot that can never be removed." A letter to the editor by Mrs. William B. Matthews echoed the sentiment and recognized potential economic repercussions of the incident: "No town between Cincinnati and Knoxville has had as bright a future before her as Corbin had; no town in the State was so much in the minds of far-seeing businessmen. . . . Just as she was beginning to win an enviable reputation; just as she was ready to proudly take her

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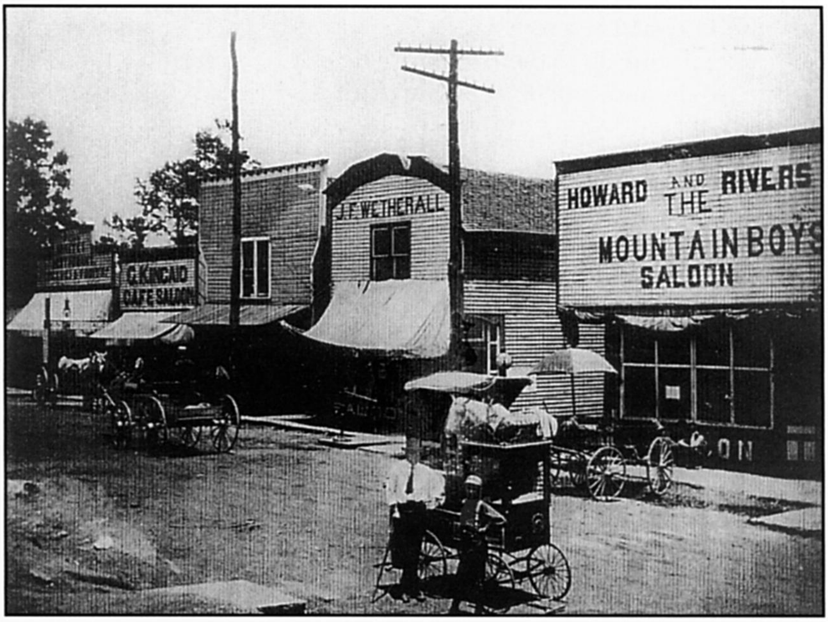
[6] *Lexington Herald,* November 1, 1919; *Corbin Times Tribune,* December 18, 1987; Alan Dizney, interview with author, August 23, 2001, in possession of author; Crawford, *Tale of One City,* 59; *Lexington Herald,* November 1, 1919.

[7] Litwack, *Trouble in Mind,* 294; Williamson, *Rage for Order,* 126.



Courtesy of Dallas Jones

"Saloon Row" on old Depot Street, now Lynn Avenue. It was a favorite area for many of the men temporarily assigned to Corbin for railroad work or other projects.

place as the acknowledged leader of her class and section, Corbin must hang her head in shame." These voices of opposition, however, had not established a strong presence on the night of October 30, 1919.[8]

A 1920 Whitley County grand jury did hand down nine indictments against "Pistol Pete" Rogers and twenty-six other members of the mob on the charge of confederating. The nine indictments, filed by different parties, each listed a different combination of men. The court named Rogers in each indictment. The names of blacks forced from Corbin account for the only other differences in the indictments. One read:

> [The defendants did] willfully and feloniously confederate and band themselves together for the purpose of intimidating, alarming and injuring various colored men whose names are to the grand Jurors unknown, and did in pursuance of said confederacy and banding together as aforesaid, did in-

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[8] *Corbin Times*, November 7, 1919.

> timidate, alarm and disturb the said unknown persons by going to and upon them and threatening, cursing, and abusing them and causing them and others to leave the city of Corbin.[9]

Compromised by conflicting witness testimonies, the trial yielded limited results. Only Rogers and another leader received sentences for their roles in the riot. Friends of Rogers sought a pardon from the governor even though the court only set the term of incarceration as two years. News of such efforts angered the State Interracial Committee, and its director sought and received assurances from state officials that the pardon would not be granted.[10]

Corbin's race riot was only one episode in the trend of racial violence that blighted the South. Though a border state, Kentucky had a history of race relations that yields one conclusion: its pattern of racial violence was southern. Most violence in the South occurred in the form of lynchings, however, rather than wholesale removal of an entire population. Despite a difference in tactics, both violent acts sought to keep black people "in their place." Historian George C. Wright notes that the chief Kentucky exceptions to this rule, Lexington and Louisville, exhibited the "polite racism" of the North; race did not become an issue as long as blacks accepted their second-class role.[11]

In Appalachia, of which Corbin is a part, society operated similarly to how it did in the rest of the South, but the reasons surrounding racial violence did vary. Traditionally, the isolated mountain region did not have many black residents and did not clearly delineate their "place" in society. In 1900, some counties in eastern Kentucky had fewer than twenty black residents, while in Appalachia as whole, African Americans comprised only five percent of the population. Yet historian John C. Inscoe notes that blacks still encountered bias when they emigrated into the area for jobs in railroads and coal mines: "The whites who lived in

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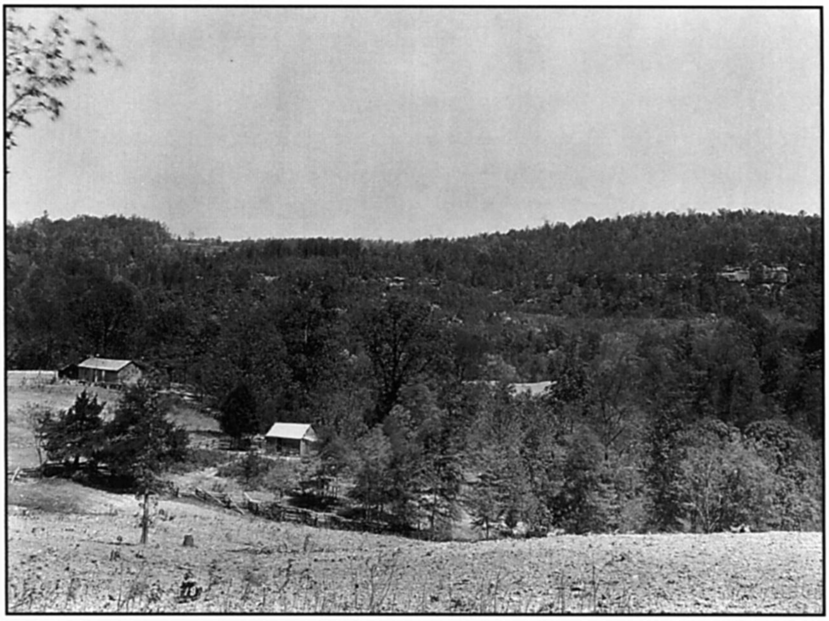
[9] Whitley County, criminal indictments 492-96, 498-501, February 2, 1920, KDLA.

[10] *The Crisis,* April 1921 (NAACP magazine); Everman, "Corbin," 8; *Lexington Leader,* September 26, 1920.

[11] W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Racial Violence, Lynchings, and Modernization in the Mountain South," in John C. Inscoe, ed., *Appalachia and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation* (Lexington, 2001), 302; George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge, 1990), 1.



The Appalachian character of Whitley County, 1920, at Sandstone Cliff at the mouth of Mill Creek near Cumberland Falls.

Appalachia used violence as a tool to define racial boundaries in a region where traditional racial lines were either vague or nonexistent." Areas not accustomed to a black presence used force to establish racial roles. In Appalachia, the chance of being lynched increased in areas with small black populations, whereas in other parts of the South, the chance of being lynched increased proportionately to the size of the black population.[12]

Black workers entered Appalachia in large numbers because rapid industrialization in the U.S., coupled with the increase in military enlistment before and during World War I, created new opportunities for African American workers. Blacks quickly accepted the jobs, lured by the stability of industry and the opportunity to leave the repressive Deep South. The influx of black workers disrupted the social balance of white communities, however, and black workers often found themselves in situations nearly as difficult as the ones they had left.[13]

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[12] John C. Inscoe, "Race and Racism in Nineteenth-Century Southern Appalachia: Myth, Realities, and Ambiguities," in Mary Beth Pudup, Dwight B. Billings, and Altina L. Waller, eds., *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1995), 123; George C. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Vol. 2: In Pursuit of Equality, 1890-1980* (Frankfort, 1992), 1; Brundage, "Racial Violence," 307; Robert P. Stuckert, "Racial Violence in Southern Appalachia, 1880-1940," *Appalachian Heritage* 20 (1992): 38.

These areas were changing rapidly in many ways. Industrialization and urbanization altered the character of these towns and once-isolated communities quickly became centers of industry and transportation. When substantial numbers of African American workers entered communities to perform jobs traditionally reserved for white laborers, blacks became an economic threat. Appalachian whites targeted these new black laborers because of their success, essentially for the same reasons that whites lashed out against prosperous blacks in the Deep South. Appalachian historian Robert P. Stuckert notes that "as the pattern of industrialization moved northward into areas with small black populations, so did the wave of violence." Additionally, the stereotypes of African Americans at the time did not present positive images, thus whites feared the morals and values of society were in jeopardy as well. Change in itself is difficult, and these small towns faced many different challenges at the same time, reducing the likelihood of rational racial behavior.[14]

The tensions peaked in 1918-19. During the "red summer" of 1919, twenty-six race riots occurred across the country. Corbin's forced removal, however, deviated from the norm of racial violence, which generally occurred in the form of lynchings. While lynchings and racial violence in general have been examined in depth, scholarship on race removal remains negligible. Wright did devote a chapter of *Racial Violence in Kentucky* to race removals and found a dualistic motive for them. Ousting the black population assured economic gain in white society and kept blacks "in their place." Expulsion from the community forced either specific individuals or entire populations to leave, usually prosperous blacks or those involved in politics.[15]

The media frequently portrayed the aggressors in racial violence as members of the lower class; however, a degree of community approval or acquiescence was necessary for riots and lynchings to occur. Paradoxically, the media recognized the aggressors well enough to generalize their lower-class status, but no one positively identified the participants, although members of mobs rarely took steps to hide their identity. Some rioters posed with the bodies of lynched men and sent the photographs as postcards. Nevertheless, most juries came to the conclusion that victims of racial violence suffered "at the hands of parties unknown" or by "persons unknown to the jury." Frequently, witnesses refused to testify, grand juries refused to hand down indictments, and trial juries refused to convict. In "Pistol Pete" Rogers's trial in Williamsburg, Kentucky, the jury found sufficient evidence to convict Rogers, but he did not act alone. Still, the conviction was a deviation from the southern societal norm.[16]

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[13] Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 489.

[14] Stuckert, "Racial Violence," 39.

[15] Williamson, *Rage for Order*, 256, 126; Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change: The Life of Will Alexander* (Chicago, 1962), 56; Wright, *Racial Violence in Ky.*, 117, 132.

Because of increasing racial problems, southern whites formed the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) after World War I to improve relations between blacks and whites. By November 1920, thirteen states had divisions of the organization; Kentucky had chapters in sixty of its 120 counties. The general repressive and prejudicial nature of the South at this time, however, forced the groups to espouse conservatism in their message. Thus the organization chiefly sought to improve conditions, not to push for equality. Southerners viewed blacks as second-class citizens and seldom endorsed any efforts to improve that status. In Kentucky, James Bond, director of interracial work for the state, often wrote about the goals and actions of the CIC. In a 1925 article, Bond noted:

> The work of the Commission has been along the lines of education, recreation, justice in the courts, and the prevention of lynching, improvement of traveling facilities and health conditions for negroes, and the cultivation of a spirit of goodwill and co-operation between the whites and colored people of the State by removing misunderstanding and unjust and illegal discrimination and establishing proper interracial contacts.[17]

The Kentucky division of the CIC did play a role in the trial of Rogers and his accomplices; in fact, prosecuting attorney J. B. Snyder was chair of the Whitley County branch. In his memoirs,

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[16] Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 295; Wright, *Racial Violence in Ky.*, 113.

[17] George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 207, 268; James Bond, "Interracial Work in Kentucky," *Southern Workman* 54 (1925): 254.

Corbin resident Thomas Gallagher recalled Snyder's zeal. He remembered that the prosecutor made many accusations in excess of the twenty-six indictments handed down by the grand jury. Gallagher, named in an indictment, said he did not participate in the riot. He argued that Snyder targeted him only because of a previous vendetta. Snyder presented almost forty witnesses before the grand jury to secure the indictments. In Rogers's trial, the commonwealth compensated twenty witnesses for their testimony. The witness list included several of the blacks forced out of town in October. Whether Snyder acted in a questionable manner, and whether his actions may have been perceived as suspect by Corbin society, he did gain two convictions. No justice would have been obtained without forceful prosecution.[18]

Historians frequently cite Corbin's removal as an example of an attempt to assure white economic gain, but those reaching this conclusion invariably do so by confusing the 1919 removal with a subsequent incident. During a 1922-23 railroad strike, a crew of white strikebreakers arrived from the South. Soon after they reached Corbin, animosity, fueled by economic concerns, erupted into violence. Lucille Baker, who was only a child at the time, remembered joining in the chant of "scabs!" A boarding house in town housing some of the strikebreakers was dynamited on January 20, 1923.[19]

Soon after, on February 1, a gun battle on Main Street left two peole dead, police officer George Yaden and a striking railroad employee, J. C. Barker. A second officer and another rail worker were wounded. That incident reflected the peak of violence and tension, which had been mounting for weeks. A unit of ten special police officers, aided by existing city forces, had been assigned to Corbin for the two weeks preceding the incident, patrolling day and night. After the gunfight, the special police did not seem sufficient, and Corbin mayor J. A. Gilliam asked Governor Edwin P. Morrow to dispatch state troops to Corbin. Morrow agreed and a cavalry company of the Kentucky National Guard from London came to the city. The unit, and the regular police force, enforced an 11 p.m. curfew. Local labor leader derided the military presence as an insult, and in an open city council meeting, several people supported a measure to impeach the mayor. The violence did end, however, although the strike continued for several months. According to the recollections of then-resident D. G. Nelson in the *Corbin Daily Tribune's* special edition on Corbin history, the 1922 strike was the worst in Corbin's history as many employees lost their seniority, or even worse, permanently lost their jobs.[20]

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[18] Gallagher, *Memoirs,* 99; *The Crisis,* April 1921; Whitley County, *Commonwealth Order Book 47,* 1919-21, p. 410, KDLA.

[19] Lucille Baker, interview by author, August 25, 2001, in possession of the author.

Three years separated the two incidents, but they had many similarities. Both involved violent reactions to railroad crews shipped in from the South, and residents perceived each group as a threat to society. Additionally, when reflecting on events almost a century old, the three-year time span becomes more negligible, especially for the elderly individuals recounting them. In an examination of oral histories compiled in 1977, most subjects dated the race removal in 1921, closer to the date of the strike. One maintained that L&N brought the black crew in as strikebreakers in 1922, prompting the race riot. The two events had merged in his mind, and likely in others.[21]

As a blanket accusation, critics often have blamed economic competition and reluctance of white workers to work alongside black laborers as motivations for racial violence. Contemporary accounts of the Corbin incident never listed this as a reason; newspapers always blamed increasing crime rates. Additionally, the L&N needed the black workers because of a labor shortage. Blacks could not have taken jobs from Corbin whites because the crew would never have been requested if the city could have supplied the labor locally. The removal did take place immediately following an alleged violent attack, after a perceived increase in crime. Thus, seen in that context, the threat of the blacks to the values of white society clearly becomes the primary motivation.

Another frequently cited misconception is the allegation that the mob permanently removed all blacks from the town in 1919. Substantial evidence disproves this assertion. According to U.S. Census data, the black population did stand at only two in 1920, but African Americans accounted for twenty of the 8,036 Corbin residents in 1930 and twenty-three of 7,893 citizens in 1940. The

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[20] *Corbin Times*, February 2, 9, 1923; *Corbin Daily Tribune*, February 23, 1963.

[21] Interviews by Dennis Pennington, all on deposit at Bennett Center: Zester and Mae Prewitt, June 29, 1977; Bill Early, June 28, 1977; Oscar Little, June 25, 1977; Alfred Walker, June 28, 1977; Ted Trosper, June 28, 1977.

Construction on Dix River Dam, mid-1920s. The project created Herrington Lake. At the time of its completion in 1927, it was the largest rock-filled dam in existence.

black residents, who had been protected by white citizens during the riot, continued living side by side with white families for many years on Depot, Main, and Florence Streets and in the Wilbur Hotel—all scattered in different areas of town. Howard Nolan, a black resident, held stock in First National Bank, the largest bank in Corbin. When John "Denes" Berry died in the 1937, his obituary appeared on the front page of the newspaper. It read: "He was one of the few to survive the raid made against the negroes here. Well known as he was and highly esteemed by many local people, his death is grieved by many."[22]

An event similar to Corbin's race riot occurred in Mercer County in 1924 at the construction site of Dix River Dam. It developed under almost identical circumstances, but the response differed significantly and offers a perspective on Corbin's reaction. The segregated labor camp at Dix River blamed black workers, literally and symbolically on the fringe of the camp, for an increase in robberies. Tensions culminated when two black men allegedly shot, stabbed, and robbed a white worker, Edward

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[22] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census . . . 1920*; idem, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930* (Washington, 1932); idem, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940* (Washington, 1943); 1929 Corbin City Directory, in possession of Alan Dizney; Dizney interview; undated *Corbin Times* clipping (Berry died June 13, 1937).

Winkle. Winkle only lived fifteen minutes after the attack, but before his death, he accused two black men of the crime, and two witnesses corroborated his story. Angry white laborers decided to seek revenge. First, they tried to seize the two suspects, but law enforcement protected the men and took them into custody. Next, the armed mob raided the black section of camp and marched the black workers through the cold November night to Burgin, the closest town. In doing so, the mob injured at least a dozen men. Others suffered from exposure, for many were not dressed warmly enough for the cold winter night. After a four-and-one-half mile trek, the mob reached the Q&C depot, intending to put the blacks on the first train out of town. It seemed like Corbin all over again.[23]

At that point, however, the sheriff and the marshal promised justice and convinced the mob to relinquish control of the situation. The small town of Burgin did not have facilities to house the 300 to 400 African American men, so law enforcement gathered them in a rock quarry and guarded it. The quarry provided some protection from the cold winds, and fires created some warmth. In February, a jury convicted the two black men of murder. The grand jury released eleven whites arrested for inciting an unlawful assemblage, citing lack of evidence.[24]

When the L. E. Meyer Company, in charge of the construction project, learned of the riot, officials contacted the governor and requested a national guard unit. The company promised to compensate the blacks for any property damages and offered protection if the laborers chose to retain their job. Most blacks did return to work the following day. The militia remained at the camp for one week, without incident.[25]

If the L&N and the Corbin government had handled the 1919 riot as efficiently as Mercer County and L. E. Meyer did the Dix River Dam incident, Corbin might not still be scarred by the lingering memories of the removal incident. The L&N did not handle racial violence well there or elsewhere. Another incident involving black L&N railroad workers occurred in 1920, shortly after Corbin's riot. Whites in Ravenna, Kentucky, forced African American laborers to leave their jobs and the town. The L&N's

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[23] *Harrodsburg Herald*, November 14, 1924.

[24] Ibid.; Wright, *Racial Violence in Ky.*, 151.

[25] *Harrodsburg Herald*, November 14, 1924.

only response, as in Corbin, was by stopping the dispatch of black workers to the town. George Wright examined L&N documents and found no reference to the Corbin incident whatsoever. The unconcerned company seems to have chosen inaction as their policy preference.[26]

Fault for mishandling the situation also belongs, in part, to Corbin's government. City officials neither called for state troops nor deemed it necessary to report the incident to state authorities after the violence ceased. The failure to request a national guard unit is significant, as Corbin officials did call for troops during other times of crisis in the era. Unable to control much of the other lawlessness in town, Corbin's government during this epoch cannot be considered strong. In fact, historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage maintains that weak governments made incidents such as this more likely. He argues that racial violence peaked in areas characterized by industrialization and economic change. Government in areas such as these did not develop as quickly as industry, thus few forceful institutions combated racist ideas and actions.[27]

Many events much more terrible than Corbin's incident occurred across Kentucky and the South. In April 1911, for example, Will Porter, a black man accused of initiating a barroom brawl, died on the stage of the opera house in Livermore, Kentucky. Instead of giving him a trial, an angry crowd had placed Porter on the stage and allowed all men sitting in the front of the building to shoot at the captive target. Eighteen men were indicted for participating, but a jury acquitted them. In Paducah in 1916, a mob numbering more than 5,000 broke into the local jail and removed a man accused of assault and robbery. When another black man tried to intervene, the angry mob hanged, shot, and burned both men. The local government made no formal investigation into this flagrant display of racism and hatred.[28]

These events represent only a small sample of the violence in this era, yet places like Livermore or Paducah do not retain the reputation that Corbin does. The one marked difference was that most of the incidences of racial violence occurred in the form of lynchings, rather than the removal of an entire black population, thus a substantial black population remained in the other cities after the violence. Corbin did retain a small population until the 1940s, but once the black residents who remained in town after the incident died, Corbin did not have a viable black population. Socially, the towns that maintained an African American community grew and matured as society evolved from its prejudicial, repressive forms of the 1920s. Corbin was not afforded this opportunity. For more than eighty years, it has been viewed as an all-white town. Stories of the race riot have continued to dissuade African Americans from moving into the town, thus maintaining the white complexion. Bound by those circumstances, the very nature of the town perpetuates its condition.

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[26] Wright, *Racial Violence in Ky.*, 146.

[27] *Lexington Herald*, November 1, 1919; Brundage, "Racial Violence," 312.

[28] William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell, eds., *Blacks in Appalachia* (Lexington, 1985), 65.

The legacy still affects the city today in areas other than population. Isolated racially motivated incidents still occur across the country today, but any such event in Corbin quickly becomes magnified, given its reputation. In the 1980s, a black football player from nearby Middlesboro, Kentucky, moved to Corbin to play for the city's successful team. He stayed with a local white family, and before summer practices ended, the household received several threatening phone calls. Fear motivated the player to return to Middlesboro before the season started. Rumors still circulate that a cross was burned in the family's front yard as well.

At other times, the city has avoided living down to its reputation. In the late 1990s, the Ku Klux Klan scheduled a march for downtown Corbin. Given the town's reputation, reporters and spectators gathered, perhaps expecting to see Corbin's residents fall in line and walk in the parade. The marchers numbered less than a dozen.[29]

But the past continues to harass the present. Robert Henson's 1990 documentary, *Trouble Behind: A Film About History and Forgetting*, once more brought the town's violent history to regional attention. It publicly indicted Corbin for possessing the same racist attitudes of its ancestors. Featuring comments made by high school students while drinking at a party, among other things, the controversial film inflamed the town, sparking formal action by city leaders. Many Kentucky newspapers featured the opinions of local leaders and citizens. Fearing possible economic repercussions from the negative attention, the Corbin Chamber of Commerce drafted a position paper on racism.[30]

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[29] Timothy Owens, telephone interview by author, August 27, 2001.

Corbin was not an innocent victim of circumstance. Racial violence undisputedly occurred in 1919. But the particular circumstances of the riot left Corbin singled out as a bulwark of racism. Limited by the conditions created by the L&N and its own government's inaction, the town did not have the opportunity to transition from the prejudice and violence that defined society in the 1920s. Instead, Corbin has still been unable to escape its history.

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[30] *Trouble Behind: A Film About History and Forgetting,* prod. and dir. Robert Henson, Cicada Films, 1990; *Louisville Courier-Journal,* December 15, 1987; *Corbin Times Tribune,* December 15, 1987, June 2, 1989; *Lexington Herald-Leader,* June 9, 1990.