

Remembering Ray Porter  
*A Published Lynching Report and Analysis*  
by Kamryn Gaskin

On August 21, 1891, Ray Porter, a black man, age unknown, was lynched near Clanton, Alabama, by an infuriated mob of white men. Ray Porter was accused of murdering Henry Parr, a 16-year old white boy, with an axe. Parr worked the pump house on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad (L. & N.). He was paid \$20 per month.<sup>1</sup> Parr's parents were James "Henry" Parr and Anna Elizabeth "Bettie" Watson Parr. Supposedly, Porter saw Parr go to work on a Friday morning, presumably to get his wages, and Porter hid behind the pump and watched him. Porter later spotted Parr sleeping under a tree near his home, and quickly took an axe to his throat, cut him from "ear to ear" and then "robbed the corpse of his money, watch, railroad pass and bag, leaving the axe by Parr's side".<sup>2</sup> Parr was found an hour afterwards and search was instituted for Porter. The L. & N. train station, brought news of a lynching taking place as a result of the murder of Parr, near Clanton at 11 o'clock p.m.<sup>3</sup>



Parham, Mattie, photographer. *Railroad and station of scene*. Photograph. Clanton, AL.

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<sup>1</sup> "Horrible Crime: Avenged by a Speedy Lynching: It Is The First Hanging Known to Have Taken Place In Chilton County," *The Chilton View* (Clanton, AL), Aug. 27, 1891.

<sup>2</sup> "Hanged As High As Haman.: Speedy Justice Meted Out by an Alabama Mob," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Aug. 23, 1891.

<sup>3</sup> "Horrible Crime: Avenged by a Speedy Lynching: It Is The First Hanging Known to Have Taken Place In Chilton County," *The Chilton View* (Clanton, AL), Aug. 27, 1891.

There were three local law enforcement officials involved in capturing Porter, Detective Dunn W. Barnes, Detective Ben Williams and Detective John Garner. Detective Barnes<sup>4</sup> arrived at the scene at 6 o'clock. Two hours later, Detective Garner ordered the use of bloodhounds. Detective Barnes and Detective Williams located Porter in a cabin near Verbena, seven miles away from the scene, where he had stopped for the night and had traded Parr's watch for lodging. The belongings that were stolen from Parr's body were said to have been found in his possession. Newspaper articles state that he first implicated other black men in the murder, but no one believed him. He then confessed to the murder. The police then escorted him to a train bound for Birmingham. The articles never mention why the officials were going to Birmingham. As the train approached Clanton, however, a mob of white men boarded the engine and made the engineer stop. They overpowered the officers in charge of Porter, threw him out of the car window into the arms of an angry crowd, which quickly carried him to the scene of his alleged crime, hanged at midnight to an oak tree, and filled with bullet holes.<sup>5</sup> Photographer W.R. Martin captured a photo of the lynching.

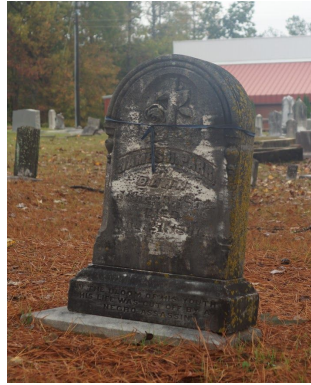
According to our research, a black man named Dan Dejarnette was arrested immediately following Parr's murder and held on suspicion until Porter was captured.<sup>6</sup> The death of Parr was the second death in the family within that year, for his older brother was killed in a railroad collision at Clear Creek. Parr was buried in the cemetery of Providence Baptist Church and his gravestone today reads, "In the blood of his youth his life was cut off by a negro assassin".

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<sup>4</sup> "The Assassins Caught.: The Alabama Murderers Prove to Be an Old Negro Man and His Wife," *The Daily Pig* (Bessemer, AL), Nov. 6, 1891.

<sup>5</sup> "A Lynching In Alabama.: A Negro Kills a White Boy and a Mob Disposes of Him," *The Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), Aug. 22, 1891.

<sup>6</sup> Dejarnette was said to have helped lynch Porter and "rejoiced that his own neck was still sound." There was only one article mentioning this incident, so we question the validity of this information. "Horrible Crime: Avenged by a Speedy Lynching: It Is The First Hanging Known to Have Taken Place In Chilton County," *The Chilton View* (Clanton, AL), Aug. 27, 1891.



Parham, Mattie, photographer. *Parr's tombstone*. Photograph. Clanton, AL.

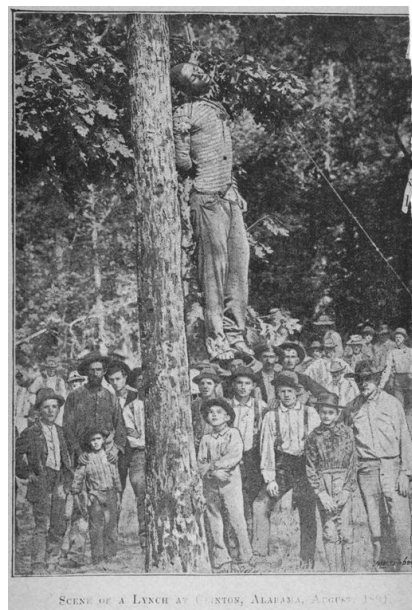
Who was Ray Porter? Well, even after months of research, I wonder the same thing. Who really was Ray Porter? Was he tall or short? Left handed or right handed? A father or a brother? Maybe he was both. But will we ever know? Truthfully, there's not much I can say when it comes to who Ray Porter was aside from the man that white reporters depicted him to be. According to several articles, his lynching was recorded as "the first lynching that took place in Chilton County"<sup>7</sup>, but this information was false. Ray Porter was the third out of fourteen known lynchings in Chilton County. Several white people in the town were, reportedly, upset with Porter's punishment, not because he deserved a fair trial but because they believed he deserved a "higher degree of punishment" than being lynched.

While uncovering the lives of people whose lives weren't meant to be exposed, it was very difficult to trust the sources that I consulted. I know what I know about this case because my group and I spent months taking morsels of information, that were often times redundant, and slowly put the pieces together. The most valuable sources were probably our newspapers and our visuals. The newspapers gave us a foundation and because we had plenty of articles that spread across several states, we were able to analyze the rhetoric of the story and find common threads of word use. I trust certain sources and not others, because of the intent behind the person writing the story. For instance, Ida B. Wells wrote about lynchings in her book, *The Red Record: Alleged Cases of Lynching in the United States*, in a way that humanized the victims, in which

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<sup>7</sup> "Horrible Crime: Avenged by a Speedy Lynching: It Is The First Hanging Known to Have Taken Place In Chilton County," *The Chilton View* (Clanton, AL), Aug. 27, 1891.

Ray Porter was one of the many she highlighted.<sup>8</sup> Not only did she visually display Porter's lynching, she reminds the reader that his story was written through the lens of white supremacy. On the contrary, the white journalists during the time typically celebrated these lynchings as a means to terrorize black people and, in many cases, drive them out of towns. My group didn't find the age of Porter, which I believe was completely purposeful at the time. The reporters didn't care to display any humanistic quality of lynching victims, even something as simple as their age. All we know is that he was older than Henry Parr. There weren't any census records of Porter, but one could make the assumption that his last name was his occupation, a railroad "porter", we aren't sure. Future researchers should try to find where Porter worked and lived, but again, it's very challenging when nothing about him was meant to be discovered. Lynching victims are so much more than the crimes they commit, or were accused of committing. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that we won't ever truly know the full story, but even the smallest truth of discovering who he was as a person is far more than what white people back then ever cared to know.



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<sup>8</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1895), 98.

Martin, W.R., Photographer. *Scene of lynching at Clanton, Alabama, August 1891*. Photograph.  
Clanton, AL.

Terror is the first word that comes to mind when thinking about the black community during this time of turmoil. I can't seem to fathom the extent of the emotional commotion that was stirred by the hanging of black bodies, especially when it was a brother, father, sister, mother, or child. It gives me chills to think that humans have the ability to muster that much hate in themselves, to then release that senseless anger on people who they didn't even consider to be people.



Parham, Mattie, photographer. *Ray Porter's soil sample*. Photograph. Montgomery, AL.

In a country that preaches democracy and freedom, as a black person, it's easy to fall into the idea of thinking that equity and justice should be unquestionable, but when the law was written, black people were considered to be property, not human beings. So the legacy of these victims, many of which could have been my ancestors, live through those who hope to unveil the truth about their lives. But more importantly, their spirits live throughout this nation. This is why

the soil samples of these victims are so powerful. I believe the soil serves as a parallel to the ashes of a loved one. It's more than just dirt in a jar, it's marking a territory that sheds light on the broken foundation of this country, in the hope to collect a sample of that victim's DNA.

Throughout this research I found myself constantly asking God why tragic things happen to good people. I don't think there's a clear answer, but God revealed to me that sometimes bad things happen, to see how much faith we have to see it through, because change always comes. It just so happened that it took decades for Ray Porter's story to be told.