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BLACK BELT POLITICAL CRISIS: THE SAVAGE-JAMES LYNCHING, 1882

by EDWARD C. WILLIAMSON

IN 1868 AND AGAIN in 1872, Florida's Republican Party triumphed over a predominantly ex-Confederate Democratic opposition. The Republican majorities were greatly enhanced by the political organization of the Black Belt. Chief among the political organizers was carpetbagger Dennis Eagan, a native of Ireland, whose particular bailiwick was Madison County and whose political organization survived the debacle of 1876 and the demise of Reconstruction. As late as 1880, Eagan was still delivering sizeable majorities to Republican candidates when in most of the rest of Florida the party was becoming dormant. That majority, for the most part Negroes, was in effect keeping carpetbagger Horatio Bisbee, Jr., of Jacksonville, sole remaining Florida Republican to hold a major elective office, in Congress.

Although the majority of Madison County voters supported Eagan, the county government was dominated by the Democrats. Under the Radical Constitution of 1868, the governor appointed key county officials.¹ Thus after 1876, with a Democratic governor back in office, Democrats controlled the election machinery in Madison County. However, Democratic partisans seem not to have been content with mere legal control; disregard for Negro voting rights mixed with raw tempers produced several serious incidents in the 1880 election. Disputed returns caused a Congressional investigation regarding irregularities in the race of Horatio Bisbee and former Confederate General J. J. Finley. The investigation had been preceded by a grand jury hearing in Jacksonville in the winter of 1880-1881, during which several Negro followers of Eagan accused William T. Forrester, a white Democrat, of stuffing the Madison County ballot box. Forrester blamed Augustus Crosby, a Negro election official, for this accusation, and on February 3, 1881, when he accosted Crosby, a bloody

1. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Florida, Begun and Held at the Capitol, at Tallahassee on Monday, January 20th, 1868* (Tallahassee, 1868).

fight resulted. Both men were arrested. At the trial, presided over by County Judge Robert Witherspoon, Forrester was fined three dollars, while Crosby was placed under a \$300 peace bond and fined seventeen dollars. Realizing the seriousness of the situation and fearing further violence, four of Eagan's Negro lieutenants - Crosby, Charles Savage, John G. Gambia, and Howard James-decided to leave town at once. Immediately after the trial, they took the evening east-bound train to Jacksonville. ²

As it turned out, this relatively minor disturbance had major political implications in so far as Madison County politics were concerned. It was apparent that intimidation and coercion, the two weapons used so effectively in Jackson County, the west end of the Black Belt, in the 1870s, were now present in Madison. But even without Negro subordinates, Eagan was not easily frightened. Holder of one of the state's juiciest federal patronage plums-that of collector of internal revenue-he was not ready to concede defeat. His prestige as a statewide Republican leader was also at stake. To bolster his crumbling machine and to keep Madison County Republican, Eagan continued with arrangements for the Congressional investigation of voting irregularities in the 1880 election. Hearings were scheduled for his plantation two miles outside the town of Madison. However, when S. Y. Finley, representing his father, protested, the hearings were moved to the courthouse at Madison. ³

With his key followers in voluntary exile in Jacksonville, Eagan found himself bereft of witnesses. To alleviate this, he persuaded Savage and James to return to testify. Savage arrived armed and in a reckless mood. He confided to friends that he expected to be " 'Ku Kluxed' or killed." ⁴

On the first day of the hearing, February 7, the fireworks began. Savage, who incidentally was a defeated candidate for the state assembly, accused two prominent local Democrats, Colonel Carraway Smith, Confederate hero at Olustee, and Frank Patter-

2. U. S. Congress, *Bisbee v. Finley*, House Miscellaneous Document 11, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., pp. 886-87, 895, 905, 908-09; M. Martin to W. E. Chandler, February 14, 1881, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress.

3. *Bisbee v. Finley*, 854, 1195-96

4. *Savage and James v. the State*; 18 *Florida Reports* 909; *Ex-parte Eagan*, 18 *Florida Reports* 194.

son, the young law partner of Madison Mayor Frank W. Pope, of election frauds. According to Savage, Smith had stuffed a ballot box while Patterson had challenged Republican voters on unlawful grounds and had handed out Democratic ballots with duplicates secretly folded inside them. After Savage testified, Eagan, acting as a federal commissioner, rashly appointed him bailiff.⁵

Angered by Savage's accusation, Patterson, the following day, accosted him at the hearing. In the altercation which followed, Savage shot Patterson and killed him. An eyewitness to the incident, A. R. Spradley, later testified that he thought that Eagan called "shoot him again."⁶ Attracted by the excitement inside the courthouse, a crowd of Negroes quickly gathered outside, and an impromptu woman speaker, Vine Stephens, implored the group to be men and not cowards. Meanwhile Sheriff Theodore Willard quickly gathered a posse, entered the courtroom, and arrested both Savage and James. Angry members of the posse threatened Eagan's life, but they were restrained by the sheriff.

Eagan adjourned the hearing to his plantation, and when he left, the crowd of Negroes outside quickly dispersed, a few accompanying him. In Madison angry white citizens began to arm.⁷ The Negro populace, fearing mob action, was terrified. However, white resentment over Patterson's murder was directed more at Eagan than at the Negro community. He was charged with complicity in the killing, and a warrant was issued for his arrest. Forewarned that Sheriff Willard was riding out to his plantation with the warrant, Eagan fled on foot for the Georgia boundary twelve miles north through the woods. Later, he was apprehended at Albany and was returned to Florida. A writ of habeas corpus issued by the state supreme court freed him, however; apparently there was not evidence to implicate him. However, it was now unsafe for Eagan to continue his Madison County residence,⁸ and he moved to Jacksonville where he continued his

5. *Bisbee v. Finley*, 862-64, 868.

6. *Ex-parte Eagan*, 18 *Florida Reports* 194; *Bisbee v. Finley*, 868, 1195-96, Martin to Chandler, February 14, 1881, Chandler Papers; *Savage and James v. the State*.

7. *Ex-parte Eagan*; *Bisbee v. Finley*, 1195-96.

8. *Bisbee v. Finley*, 1032-33, 1196-97; *Ex-parte Eagan*; Martin to Chandler, February 14, 1881, Chandler Papers.

political career as a patronage Republican.⁹ Madison County's large Republican majority was without a leader.

A fair trial for Savage and James was obviously impossible in the heated atmosphere of Madison. The defense was granted a change of venue, and the trial was transferred to Hamilton, a predominantly piney-woods white county on the northeastern boundary of the Black Belt. Circuit Judge Enoch J. Vann, a highly respected jurist, presided over the trial at Jasper, county seat of Hamilton. Judge Vann would have presided even if the trial had been held in Madison since both counties were in his circuit.

To assist State Attorney B. B. Blackwell with the prosecution, the services of Mayor Frank Pope of Madison were procured. The political aspect of the murder trial was emphasized when the defense hired two prominent white Republicans, former Judge A. A. Knight of Jacksonville and Joseph N. Stripling of Madison.¹⁰ Presumably, Eagan arranged for financing defense costs from his own pocket and by soliciting contributions.¹¹

Prominent Democratic Florida politicians also saw political implications in the murder trial. United States Senator Wilkinson Call, in a letter to Secretary of the Navy William E. Chandler, viewed it as evidence of the malign influence of Congressman Bisbee.¹² The latter blamed rioting Democrats for the murder. The House of Representatives by a partisan vote had in the meantime agreed to seat Bisbee.¹³

Savage and James' attorneys put up a spirited defense, but despite this, the all-white jury returned a verdict of guilty, and the court imposed the death sentence.¹⁴ In their appeal to the state supreme court, the defense attorneys claimed that they had

9. *Florida Industrial Record*, September 1901, 5-6.

10. *Motion Docket*, 1873-1905, Circuit Court of Hamilton County, 60-65; transcript, *Savage and James, Plaintiffs in Error, v. the State of Florida, Defendant in Error*, Florida Supreme Court Library, Tallahassee, Florida.

11. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, July 26, 1881.

12. Wilkinson Call to Chandler, February 10, 1881, Chandler Papers.

13. See Chester H. Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest of All the Contested Election Cases in the House of Representatives of the United States from the First to the Fifty-Sixth Congress, 1789-1901*. House Document 510, 56th Cong., 2nd Sess.; *Congressional Record*, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., pp. 4444-45. The Democrats did not vote in an effort to prevent a quorum from being present.

14. *Savage and James v. the State*.

not been allowed to cross-examine a key witness. Acting on this plea, Judge B. B. Van Vaukenbaugh, a Republican holdover, granted a writ of error and a retrial was ordered.¹⁵

Eagan, having been successful earlier in interesting fellow Republicans in the cause, formed a committee in Jacksonville to solicit additional contributions for the retrial.¹⁶ Not all of Florida's Republicans were in sympathy with either the defendants or Eagan. General Henry S. Sanford, influential groveman and land developer of Sanford, Florida, in a letter to President Chester A. Arthur in November 1881, described Eagan as a "reckless and unprincipled demagogue" who encouraged Negroes to resort to violence. Sanford, like many other Florida Republicans, envisioned for the state a predominantly white Republican party with a dormant Negro wing. Sanford felt that the actions of Eagan and other Black Belt carpetbaggers only arrayed the two races against each other and encouraged the Democrats to strengthen their party through a compact union of southern whites. If further racial outbreaks could be avoided, the general predicted that a wave of prosperity would sweep Florida; independent tickets would appear in every county; and the Democratic party would begin to disintegrate.¹⁷

Sanford's hope for an easing of racial tensions as a result of the Madison County disturbances failed to materialize. Savage and James had been removed first to Tallahassee to await the outcome of their appeal. Then in late August 1882, Hamilton County Sheriff Sampson Altman and a guard of four men riding a freight train, started for Jasper with Savage and James. Earlier, Altman, fearing an attack on his prisoners when the train went through Madison, had contacted Sheriff S. M. Hankins, who gave assurances that there was no possibility of violence.

Although efforts had been made to keep information of the move secret, news leaked out in Madison that Savage and James were being transferred from Tallahassee. A mob, its members

15. B. B. Van Vaukenbaugh to A. A. Knight, August 20, 1881, Florida Supreme Court Library, Savage and James transcript.

16. Jacksonville *Daily Florida Union*, April 28, 1882.

17. Henry S. Sanford to President Chester A. Arthur, November 19, 1881, original copy in Florida Historical Society Library, Tampa. This letter has been edited by the author and was published in the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXI (April 1953), 279-81. Jacksonville *Florida Sun*, January 16, 1877.

unmasked, quickly gathered at the railroad station to await the arrival of the train carrying the prisoners and their small guard. To prevent Altman from being forewarned, the telegraph wires to Greenville, the station just west of Madison, were cut. Sheriff Hankins made neither an effort to disperse the Madison mob, many of whom were now armed, nor an attempt to notify Altman of what was happening. When the freight carrying the prisoners came to a stop at Madison, some of the mob uncoupled the two passenger coaches, while others forced their way into the car containing the prisoners. Neither Hankins nor any other Madison law enforcement officials were in evidence as Sheriff Altman and his deputies tried to protect the prisoners. The guards were quickly overwhelmed; one was wounded slightly. Both prisoners were then riddled with bullets.¹⁸

News of the lynching spread rapidly and shocked the state. Governor William D. Bloxham was outraged. Elected in 1880, he was a well-meaning, kindly ex-planter who belonged to the old patriarchal school of *noblesse oblige*. After the Civil War he had even operated a school for his former slaves. Many Negroes endorsed him politically, and he had supported the concept of Negro rights. Now he was faced with a real dilemma.¹⁹ Bloxham telegraphed Hankins and ordered immediate arrests.²⁰ Later, he offered a reward of \$5,000 for the apprehension of the mobsters.²¹ His close political ally, Charles Dyke, editor of the *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, also demanded the arrest and punishment of the lynchers, and called attention to the harm that had come both to the state and the county as a result of this brutal act.²²

Other state newspapers echoed the sentiments of the Tallahassee journal. The Jacksonville *Daily Florida Union*, denounced the lynchings as cold-blooded premeditated murders that deserved the reprobation of law-abiding citizens.²³ George R. Fairbanks,

18. *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, August 29, 1882; *Jacksonville Daily Florida Union*, August 26, 1882.

19. Ruby Leach Carson, "William Dunnington Bloxham, Florida's Two-Term Governor" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1945), *passim*.

20. Bloxham to Sheriff Hankins, August 2 [?], 1882, Bloxham Letter Book, Florida State Library, Tallahassee.

21. *Jacksonville Daily Florida Union*, August 27, 1882.

22. *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, August 29, 1882.

23. *Jacksonville Daily Florida Union*, August 26, 1882.

in his Fernandina *Florida Mirror*, claimed that “the majesty of the law had been defied and trampled.” Nor did the action by the Madison mob escape notice by the northern press. The *New York Times* described the lynching as “a piece of daring brutality” by ruffians.²⁴ It seemed that instead of being punished as criminals for their misdeed, Savage and James were now becoming martyrs to their political principles. It was said they were shot because they were colored and Republicans.²⁵ In Madison County opinion was sharply divided. In the town of Madison, Mayor Pope, taking a moderate course, called a mass meeting of whites and Negroes to be held at the courthouse. Judge Vann, who presided, asked the world not to judge us by the crimes of a few desperadoes.” Several of the town’s ministers publicly denounced the crime as a gross and bloodthirsty act by irresponsible persons.²⁶

Whether the lynchings would be punished depended on the findings of the coroner’s jury. Savage’s widow and another Negro claimed to be eye witnesses to the murders and named Hugh Patterson, brother of Frank Patterson, and four others as members of the mob that did the shooting. Nonetheless, the jury brought in the verdict that Savage and James came to their deaths at the hands of unknown parties.²⁷

To Malachi Martin, carpetbag leader of the Republicans in the Black Belt, the failure to bring in an indictment was “a case in point.” Writing to D. B. Henderson, secretary of the Republican Congressional Committee, Martin complained that often after fraud and ballot box stuffing investigations, Negroes who had given evidence were later ruthlessly murdered. No jury, however, would even be impaneled to punish the assassins. The continuance of such a state of affairs, Martin felt, meant the end of the Black Belt Republican Party. “Unless we can get some of the southern white men with us,” he bluntly stated, “elections in the South are worse than a farce.”²⁸

Governor Bloxham made another effort to bring the mob members to trial. Promising State Attorney Blackwell “hearty

24. Fernandina *Florida Mirror*, September 9, 1882, quoting the *New York Times*.

25. Fernandina *Florida Mirror*, September 9, 1882.

26. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, August 29, 1882.

27. Fernandina *Florida Mirror*, September 2, 1882; Jacksonville *Daily Florida Union*, September 7, 1882.

28. Martin to D. B. Henderson, September 23, 1882, Chandler Papers.

and vigorous" cooperation, he promised Circuit Judge Vann a military guard for his court if one was needed. It would not do, the governor asserted, for it to be stated that Florida could not protect witnesses.²⁹ From Bloxham's statement and the failure of the jury to indict, it is obvious that the mob members were in a strong position in the county. It is also apparent from the evidence that Sheriff Hankins was guilty of dereliction of duty, and perhaps of complicity in the lynching. That the governor did not remove him suggests that Bloxham, despite his outrage, was unwilling to interfere with local police powers, at least in this instance.

Scholarly George Fairbanks editorialized in his *Fernandina Florida Mirror* that the Madison lynching was of far greater importance than just the race issue; it was a question of which would prevail: "law or anarchy."³⁰ With Bloxham's refusal to take any further action, the initiative rested with Madison police officials. It was their decision to let the matter rest and not to press for a trial. Their rejection of Bloxham's demand for law and order, together with his refusal to appoint new county officials or a special prosecutor, left the lynching of the two Negro Republicans an unpunished crime. The state's Democratic press failed to censure Madison officials for their blatant dereliction of duty. Truly a Negro could say of Madison, "there is no part of justice in the court there for colored people."³¹ On the other hand, when State Senator John B. Dell of Alachua County requested the removal of Sheriff J. W. Turner, Bloxham promptly complied.³² His policy regarding law enforcement strongly indicated that he had given *carte blanche* to the Democratic county leaders. He had made his decision as to which road to take at the fork.

29. Bloxham to B. B. Blackwell, September 16, 1882, George P. Raney to Blackwell, October 12, 1882, Bloxham Letter Book.

30. *Fernandina Florida Mirror*, September 23, 1882.

31. *Bisbee v. Finley*, 896.

32. Bloxham to J. W. Turner, January 8, 1883; Bloxham to L. W. Bethel, January 25, February 1, 1883, Bloxham Letter Book.