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Billy Jaynes Chandler

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HARMON MURRAY: BLACK DESPERADO IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FLORIDA

by BILLY JAYNES CHANDLER

North Florida was far from the Wild West, but for a time in the late nineteenth century it ceded little in the notoriety of its outlaws to that famous region. If Harmon Murray, leader of the "north Florida gang," has not taken his place in history alongside Billy the Kid or Jesse James, it was hardly his fault. Though he was soon forgotten, at the time of his death in late summer 1891 Murray's name was known throughout the state and beyond. The reasons for Murray's quick rise to fame had much to do with his skill, courage, and sheer audacity. But his notoriety rested also on the color of his skin. Harmon Murray was a black man in the nineteenth-century American South.

The new generation of African Americans growing into adulthood during this period had little or no direct contact with slavery. To white people these young blacks did not exhibit the deference and fear that had been so much a part of the behavior of their parents. Rising crime, attributed to young blacks, especially alarmed whites. While black crime commonly was directed against other blacks, the image of the black criminal– brazenly armed with razor, knife, and revolver and contemptuous of authority– struck fear among whites.

The desire to control blacks led southern leaders to enact statutes on vagrancy, contract evasion, and convict leasing in the late 1880s and 1890s. More frighteningly, the number of lynchings peaked in this period. The story of Harmon Murray illustrates several of the major patterns of violence in the New South.[1]

Billy Jaynes Chandler recently retired as professor of history, Texas A&M University-Kingsville. The author wishes to thank Neill Macaulay, Paul J. Vanderwood, Shirley A. Lane, Mary Grace Stephens, and the staff of the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History for their support.

1. For a description of the wider southern setting in which Murray lived see Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York, 1984), 185-265; and Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York, 1992), 132-59. On the black outlaw and his image see Frederick William Turner III, "Badmen, Black and White:

Murray's career in crime was centered in and around Alachua County, located in the north central part of Florida. Its county seat, Gainesville, ranked as Florida's fourth-largest city, surpassed only by Jacksonville, Pensacola, and Key West. More cotton was shipped from Gainesville during the 1880s than from any other Florida city. By this time, however, cotton had become the black farmer's crop; more aggressive white farmers were turning to vegetables and tropical fruits for their livelihood.[2]

Blacks made up over one-half of the population of Alachua County after the Civil War, and they participated in the affairs of the whole community. Their political power declined after 1876 when support for Federal troops was withdrawn, but the county's black Republicans in the 1880s– described on occasion by their white opponents as political "demons"– remained a visible contingent.[3] In 1890, before the final onset of legal segregation and nearly total disfranchisement, a black delegate to the county's Republican convention proclaimed boldly: "The white folks used to own the negroes, but in 25 years the negroes will own the whites."[4] Harmon Murray's career as a brigand occurred during this period of racial transition in Florida.

Murray was born c. 1869 at Long Pond in Marion County, just across the border from Alachua County.[5] His maternal grandparents were among Gainesville's most respected blacks. Young Harmon attended Union Academy, the black school established in Gainesville by the Freedmen's Bureau at the end of the war. As his classmates remembered him, he already possessed some of

The Continity of American Folk Traditions" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1965), 325-451; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), 407-20; and John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia, 1989), 171-219.

2. Jess G. Davis, *History of Alachua County, 1824-1969* (n. p., 1969), pt. II, 69, pt. IV, 20.
3. Edward C. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age, 1877-1893* (Gainesville, 1976), 42.
4. Gainesville *Sun,* August 21, 1890.
5. The following sketch of Murray's life (prior to his notoriety) is based, unless otherwise noted, on an extract from the Gainesville *Sun,* September 5, 1892, reporting the Bell interview, reprinted in Davis, *History of Alachua County,* pt. I, 52-53. The factual basis of Murray's life, as presented in this article, is the Florida press, especially the Gainesville newspapers. The white-run Florida press did not tell Murray's story with a consistently high level of impartiality; thus, a degree of skepticism in their reporting is warranted.

the characteristics that seem to typify delinquents. Headstrong and quarrelsome, he ran away from home when he was about twelve years of age, apparently to Georgia where he may have had relatives. He supposedly spent his teenage years there. Legend indicates that he killed his first victim in Georgia along the Satilla River, in the southeastern part of the state, but little is known with any certainty of his whereabouts and activities during these years.[6]

Sometime in 1888, at the age of nineteen or twenty, Murray returned to Alachua County. He was described as having a light complexion and a smooth face. He was five-feet-seven-inches tall and weighed about 145 muscular pounds. Murray was erect of carriage and, as he demonstrated many times, fleet of foot. He went to work for Hyman Pinkoson in Gainesville and soon fell into trouble, charged with stealing his employer's horse. Murray contended that he was falsely accused because he took the horse only to visit his girlfriend who lived a few miles out of town in Arredondo. He claimed he intended to return the animal to Pinkoson that night and that he was on his way back to town when he learned that a posse was out looking for him. In any case, he left the horse at a friend's house and tried to get away, but he quickly was arrested.

Murray was held in the Alachua County jail for the next several months since there was no fall term of the circuit court in 1888, probably due to a yellow fever epidemic. He was tried in Gainesville on May 14, 1889, and found guilty.[7] The sentence of two years in the state penitentiary for what he claimed was a minor transgression seemed harsh to young Murray.

Life on the prison turpentine farm to which Murray eventually was sent was grim and brutal, and he soon was planning to escape with a band of fellow prisoners. Sometime in early 1890 Murray and his cohort hatched a plan. He concealed an axe blade under his shirt and carried it into the bunkhouse. Muffled by the sounds of the ruckus that his bunkmates created one night, Murray pried a board loose from the floor. After midnight he and eight others escaped. The group included, in part, two blacks– Tony Champion and Alexander Henderson– and an Irishman, Mike Kelly. The escapees first scattered to confuse and elude their pursuers, but at

6. The Jacksonville *Florida Times Union,* May 17, 1891, carried the allegation of Murray's crime in Georgia.
7. Alachua County Circuit Court Records, Full Term 1877-1905, Alachua County Courthouse, Gainesville, entry on Murray's case dated May 14, 1889.

least five of them, including Murray, later came together in Tampa. Murray secured work at a hotel and appeared to be living peacefully, but word soon spread that he was part of a band committing robberies in the city. In mid to late 1890 he returned to the Gainesville area.[8]

Early in 1891 a local newspaper reported that "deeds of such a blood-curdling character as to seriously alarm the whole people of the community" began to occur in and near Gainesville.[9] An assassination attempt was made on a Gainesville citizen, and a gunsmith shop was robbed and set ablaze. On February 16 and 17 the city was attacked. On the first night marauders shot up the courthouse square and chased policemen from the streets. They fired into the home of a doctor, who narrowly escaped death. His silk hat hanging on the hallway rack was shot full of holes, valuable vases were shattered, and his family terrorized. The attackers broke a large plate-glass window in the front of G. K Broome's store and pillaged the premises. All but one of the gang members was black, and Harmon Murray served as leader. Information on the band was furnished by L. T. Timmons, a black private detective known as the "Blue Shirt Boy," whom Dr. Bracey had hired to track down the burglars of his gunsmith shop. In his quest Timmons acquired an informant, Alexander Henderson, who was one of Murray's fellow fugitives from the prison turpentine farm.

Following the night's rampage Henderson told Timmons that the band planned an attack the next night at Millard Station, located on the railroad track just southeast of Gainesville. Their target was a storekeeper, Thomas B. McPherson, on whom Murray partly blamed his 1889 conviction. Timmons immediately set a trap. He told Henderson to lure the gang to a house of prostitution near the Gainesville depot on their way to Millard Station. He also received the cooperation of the sheriff in organizing a posse, which would wait in hiding for the brigands.

The officers had a long night's vigil. The bandits ignored whatever Henderson had told them and went to Millard Station as planned. When two of the men tried to break into McPherson's store, the owner heard them, sprang from his bed, and grabbed his gun. The bandits withdrew, but not far. About ten minutes later

8. Gainesville *Sun,* September 5, 1891.
9. The following description of events is taken from the Gainesville *Sun,* February 19, 1891.

McPherson saw his barn burst into flames. Fire destroyed the structure, corn and hay, and a colt. Sometime later the gang returned and fatally shot McPherson, who was watching the fire.

Meanwhile, the Gainesville posse waited near the house where the bandits had been expected. Near 4:00 A.M. they finally arrived. When the sheriff ordered them to drop their guns and put up their hands, the desperadoes answered with a fierce barrage. White band member Mike Kelly stood on the porch of the house and "defiantly emptied the chambers of his two revolvers" at the lawmen. One of the brigands, Tony Champion, was badly hit in the leg and easily captured. Kelly and Murray got away.

On the same night, Gainesville's Dennis House also went up in flames. A "commodious" lodging and boarding establishment, it was owned by Leonard G. Dennis, a white, Massachusetts-born "carpetbagger," reputed to be the political boss of Alachua County. Dennis was an associate of Josiah Walls, Florida's leading black politician during Reconstruction. The burning of the Dennis House was regarded as the work of Murray and his gang.

Mike Kelly soon was captured– taken by a posse as he walked along a swamp trail outside of Gainesville near Rochelle. When he arrived in Gainesville by train, an angry crowd waited with rope in hand. Only with considerable effort did authorities lodge him in the jail with Tony Champion.[10]

An "onlooker" described what happened next: A crowd estimated at 200 to 300 went to the jail about 10:00 P.M., overpowered the guards, and took the two prisoners. The lynching party traveled approximately one-half mile to "the old Savage lot" where participants hanged Champion and Kelly from two trees. Both men were given a chance to "make their peace with God" before nooses encircled their necks. Before leaving in small groups, the men swore each other to secrecy. The onlooker noted that the lynch mob included whites and blacks.

The next morning streams of people came to view the bodies still suspended from the trees. Tony Champion was a local man. One of the viewers was his father, and he described his son as a "disobedient and unruly boy" who had run away from home seven years earlier. Young Champion, during the short time he was held in jail, had talked about his five-year prison sentence in Orlando

10. Ibid.

for thefts committed in nearby Sanford. In prison he had met the other future members of the gang and had escaped with them. The leaders of the band, he said, were Murray and Kelly, At his execution Champion with great fervor confessed his wrongdoings. Asked about killing McPherson, he stated that he, Kelly, and Murray were all participants.

Mike Kelly offered no prayers and "died game." He said only that he soon would meet his maker and asked that his body not be shot after hanging. Kelly's arrest and lynching attracted widespread attention, if for no other reason than that he was a white man in an otherwise black band. But his identification as a foreign-born Irishman heightened interest in his story. While in jail in Gainesville, he talked about his past. Born Michael Kierens in London, he was a seaman by trade. He served a prison sentence for burglary in Pensacola. He had joined the Murray band only the previous Saturday, but others contradicted this claim.[11]

Other variations of Kelly's story quickly appeared in the press. One report indicated: "Two scoundrels of a widely different type were launched into eternity by the vigilantes of Gainesville last Tuesday night. . . . One was a brutalized ruffian, ignorant, savage, bestial; the other a *chevalier d'industrie,* a man who regarded murder as a fine art, fraud as a profession, and who hid beneath the deep depravity of his later years the polish of a man of the world and the attainments of a scholar. One was reared in the gutter; the other had worn the gown of a collegian in a great institution across the sea. Strange that they should both swing at last from nearly the same limb!"[12]

The newspaper account further claimed that Kelly, tall and slender, sporting a red beard and a "face that would have passed for thoughtful had it not been for a certain wild alertness about his eyes," was really Michael Aries Hurley. He allegedly was born of "gentlefolk" in the north of Ireland and educated in a Jesuit college on the Isle of Jersey where he excelled in classical languages. While in prison in Florida, he still wore around his neck a gold medal that he had won for an essay on papal succession. Intended for the priesthood, he ran away to sea instead. He eventually turned up penniless in the United States, joined the army, fought Indians in the West, and deserted to become a logger in Wisconsin.

11. Ibid.
12. Gainesville *Sun,* February 26, 1891.

He committed a masked robbery and escaped in a two-horse sleigh, was caught and sent to prison, escaped again, and was waylaid and left for dead by a Scandinavian lumberman whom he later tracked down in Manitoba to murder with an axe. Thereafter, he spent a brief interlude as the organist in a Louisville, Kentucky, church. He also spent time shanghaiing sailors in New York and finally drifted southward to Florida where he fell into the company of Murray.[13] Ultimately, he died hanging from a live oak tree in Gainesville.

The notoriety of Mike Kelly and the Gainesville events enhanced the reputation of Murray. Authorities attributed forty crimes in more than a dozen counties to him.[14] Some of these incidents may have been the work of others, but Murray was to leave little doubt about his lawless ways.

"Shot by a Black Fiend" read a *Florida Times-Union* headline on May 17, 1891. Murray had killed Deputy Sheriff Joe Robinson the previous day at Fernandina where one of Murray's sisters lived. Early in the morning a posse organized by Nassau County Sheriff O'Neil surrounded a dwelling on 10th Street where the bandit was allegedly hiding. As the group encircled the house, Murray shot Robinson as he passed in front of a window. The deputy died twenty minutes later. Murray also lightly wounded Fernandina Chief of Police James Higginbotham. Jumping through a window, Murray fired his Winchester rifle and escaped into the nearby woods. Soon a large posse was in pursuit.

Just where Murray went is unclear. The last reliable witness, a black man who encountered Murray departing from the site of the shooting, confirmed a rumor that the bandit had been lightly hit in the wrist and scalp. One rumor placed him near Callahan, some miles to the west of Fernandina.[15]

Murray next appeared in Bradford County where he shot and killed D. L. Alvarez, the city marshal of Starke, and a black barber named Prince Albert. The shootings occurred just after dark on May 30, about two miles outside of Starke. It appears that Alvarez had been informed of Murray's whereabouts by Prince Albert, who told him that he had just shaved a "darkey" who he knew was Murray.

13. Kelly likely invented this story while in prison.
14. Gainesville *Sun,* February 26, 1891; Jacksonville *Florida Times Union,* February 22, 1891.
15. Jacksonville *Florida Times Union,* May 17, 19, 1891.

Alvarez hastily raised a posse of five men and followed Albert to the house where Murray was to spend the night. Emboldened by the posse's presence, Albert went into the house and out onto a small veranda in the back where he told Murray that he had come to arrest him. During the ensuing scuffle Murray reached for his Winchester and shot Alvarez in the stomach. The posse opened fire. By the time the shooting stopped, Albert was dying, Alvarez was dead from a bullet that had entered near his right eye, and Harmon Murray had shot his way free again.

As news of the marshal's death spread through the small town and surrounding area, emotions reached fever pitch. The forty-seven-year-old Alvarez, a member of a large and influential family, had connections throughout the county; and he had left a wife and seven children.[16] Adding to local anger, this was Bradford County's second loss of a lawman to a black criminal in less than two years. The previous year the "notorious" black "gambler and desperado" Frank Forster slew Sheriff H. W. Epperson in nearby Lake Butler. Forster, who boasted of having killed two men in the southern part of the state, had pistols strapped to his sides and a Winchester in his lap when the sheriff and his posse surprised him. As Epperson announced his arrest, Forster, the quick-witted gambler, grabbed the sheriffs pistol and shot him twice before fleeing under a hail of fire. Epperson had become sheriff after the incumbent, his father, was killed under similar circumstances near Valdosta, Georgia, four years earlier.[17]

During the succeeding few weeks, Murray moved around. After the Starke incident he went into hiding on Pumpkin Patch Island in Santa Fe Lake, northeast of Gainesville. He was next reported in Melrose, asking a black man for directions to Interlachen in Putnam County along a route that would avoid the homes of whites. Lawmen in Putnam County tracked him to Lake Grandin, near which he broke into a railroad commissary. Soon thereafter he was back on Pumpkin Patch Island, and when Sheriff Fennel of Alachua County led a force to investigate, they found a recently vacated camp. He was next seen near Green Cove Springs on the St. Johns River, miles from Gainesville. There, a posse was again in pursuit. Soon he returned to Putnam County, running from a 100-man search party. Many believed that his capture was

16. Gainesville *Sun*, June 1, 1891, reported the killing of Alvarez.
17. Starke *Bradford County Telegraph*, January 24, 31, 1891.

imminent. Murray announced that he would turn himself in after killing two more men. One of the remaining tasks of his vendetta was a "Mr. Flewellen," who, he charged, was one of those responsible for the lynching of his "pals" a few months earlier. According to a black man with whom Murray talked in the Hammock Ridge area near Gainesville, the bandit set out to waylay Flewellen, but the man warned him and thus saved Flewellen's life.[18]

In mid June Florida Governor Francis P. Fleming authorized a reward of $250 for Murray's capture. The Gainesville *Sun* complained that the offer was late. Alachua County commissioners, it noted, already had asked for a reward after Murray killed his first man.[19]

The cunning, daring, and deadly Harmon Murray, with a reward on his head and posses on his trail, had achieved statewide notoriety. Notwithstanding, one enterprising and well-known Gainesville citizen, Postmaster James Bell, hoped to meet him face to face for an interview. When this offer was conveyed to him, Murray understandably was wary, but his suspicions soon were allayed. The postmaster was an appointee of Republican President Benjamin Harrison and, as such, had friendly relations with area blacks, some of whom helped him make contact with the bandit. There was also an offer of money to make the meeting worth Murray's while– money that came not only from Bell but also from others hoping that the interview could be sold for profit.

The postmaster and the brigand met in a black Baptist church in northeast Gainesville on August 5, 1891. Several of his confederates accompanied Murray. Much of the surviving information about Murray comes from what he told Bell that night. He admitted some of the killings but blamed the McPherson murder entirely on Kelly and Champion. He readily confessed to slaying his former associate Alexander Henderson in High Springs. Ever since Henderson informed to the police, Murray had borne a deep grudge. Moreover, he wanted the cost of betrayal to be known.[20]

The evident ease with which Murray could move– even into Gainesville– impelled authorities, now under heavy criticism, to

18. Gainesville *Sun,* June 12, 1891; *Alachua Gazette,* July 2, 1891.
19. Gainesville *Sun,* June 18, 1891; Minutes of the Alachua County Board of Commissioners, May 6, 1891, Office of the County Board of Commissioners, Gainesville.
20. On the Bell interview see also the *Alachua Gazette,* August 6, 1891.

increase their efforts to capture him. They maintained that his survival outside the law rested on the support he was receiving from fellow blacks.[21] Accordingly, they intensified their harassment and surveillance of persons thought to be his supporters. In one instance, Sheriff Fennel took a posse of seven men to Orange Heights where Murray had whipped a black man who disobeyed him. Although they did not find Murray, they forced several of his friends to lead them to the home of Andy Ford, who helped Murray in the assault. The sheriff found Ford hiding under a bed. Following his arrest and incarceration in Gainesville, Ford admitted his guilt. The Gainesville press concluded, "By the time five or six of these miserable scoundrels who are aiding Murray are put in the penitentiary things will begin to get more settled and secure."[22]

Some county residents were not content to let matters rest with authorities. On August 24, three days after his arrest, a lynch mob suspended Andy Ford from the same limb used to hang Tony Champion. The lynching allegedly occurred so quietly that people who lived nearby claimed they heard nothing. Authorities believed the lynch mob, some twenty or thirty in number, came from outside the city. One member tricked the jailer into opening the jail, claiming that he had brought prisoners from High Springs to be locked up. Once in, he overpowered the jailer and took Ford.[23]

There is little doubt that the Alachua County lynch mobs really wanted Murray. When Murray died, however, he was not hanging by his neck from an oak tree. Authorities ultimately devised a two-pronged strategy to kill him. Believing that the outlaw relied on support among fellow blacks to elude capture, law officers resolved to put pressure on the rural black community. The campaign of harassment reputedly reduced "the whole county to a state of terror" and diminished support for the bandit.[24] On a second front, various officials joined forces to increase the reward for Murray. Governor Fleming authorized the state's contribution, the Alachua County government offered $500, and the county sheriff matched that amount. Several Starke citizens and Gainesville residents sub-

21. A letter from an Alachua County resident published in the Gainesville *Sun,* August 26, 1891, emphasized that Murray's large network of kinfolk and friends made his capture difficult.
22. Gainesville *Sun,* August 23, 1891.
23. Ibid., August 26, 1891.
24. *New York Daily Tribune,* September 6, 1891.

scribed several hundred dollars more. The rewards ultimately totaled close to $1,500.[25]

A young black named Elbert Hardy attended a Gainesville rally against Murray and conceived of a plan to collect the reward. He lived in the Long Pond area, the place of Murray's birth and present residence of three of the desperado's brothers. Hardy saw the bandit often, and Murray trusted him as a neighbor and fellow black. Hardy's chance came the night of September 3 when Murray asked him to come to nearby Archer because he wanted to "kill some crackers." Murray was in a dangerous, angry mood and threatened to kill some of his relatives. He mistrusted everybody, including his "own damned Daddy."

When Hardy told Murray he had no gun, the pair collected a double-barrel shotgun from Hardy's brother-in-law. On the way to Archer, Murray carelessly took the lead. Within moments Hardy emptied both barrels into the back of his companion's head at close range. Murray dropped without a word. Hardy rushed back to tell his brother-in-law what he had done, and together they went to Archer to report the event. They returned, picked up the body, and brought it into town where an excited crowd of blacks and whites looked on. The dead bandit had on his person a stolen watch, his Winchester, a pistol, and 142 rounds of ammunition in his cartridge belt.

News of Murray's death soon reached Gainesville, and information that the body would arrive on the morning train spread like wildfire. A crowd of hundreds, "in the white heat of excitement," gathered at the station; as the train slowed down coming into town, both blacks and whites struggled to jump aboard to see the body. When the pandemonium had subsided sufficiently, the body was placed on the courthouse lawn. Sheriff Fennel led the hero of the hour, Elbert Hardy, to the courthouse steps. Following his introduction to the crowd amid loud cheering, the seventeen-year-old youth told how he had slain the notorious outlaw. After Hardy's remarks, the sheriff announced that Murray's body would be embalmed and placed on public exhibition for three or four days.[26]

25. Minutes of the Alachua County Board of Commissioners, May 6, September 1, 7, 1891; Gainesville *Sun,* September 30, 1891.
26. See Gainesville *Sun* and Jacksonville *Florida Times Union,* September 5, 1891.

Commentary on the significance of Murray necessarily includes, among other matters, his varied and complex relationships with other blacks. Not all members of his race supported him, and many who gave him aid did so out of fear. Black mothers used his name to threaten their errant children. If they were bad, the young ones were told, Murray would get them.[27] Such a practice lends credence to Lawrence Levine's argument about blacks' images of their outlaws. Levine contends that the major element was danger. Blacks tended not to sentimentalize their outlaws but rather to see them realistically as just bad. The legendary Stagolee, for instance, was bad, as was Railroad Bill, the 1890s train robber in southern Alabama. The original image was that of the badman; generations that had not known him added alleged generous qualities later.[28]

Another scholar of African-American hero-creation patterns argues convincingly that all segments of the African-American community did not see black outlaws in the same way.[29] Those who aspired to middle-class status saw little in bandits that was admirable, and much to fear. In their view outlaws dishonored the race and violated the Christian values that the middle class professed. For them Murray was an embarrassment. Among lower-class blacks, on the other hand, there well may have existed some admiration for Murray– his attacks on whites and appropriation of their wealth. Yet few saw his path as one that they would choose to follow.

Still, to the population, Murray's qualities as a bandit early set him apart from the common sort. People saw him as "cunning like a fox and fleet as a deer." His outdoor skills were equal to the "woods-craft . . . of an Indian." He built a support network among people of his race who were "bitterly" and "persistently" determined that he not be caught. In a land where guns were highly valued, his marksmanship was "splendid" and employed with a startling fearlessness and daring.[30] He was so fearsome a man that one suspects few whites ever called him "boy," although they used much harsher epithets to describe him. And, even at the last, authorities unwittingly accorded him honor by failing to capture or

27. Gainesville *Sun,* June 12, 1891.
28. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness,* 410-11; A. J. Wright, "Railroad Bill, A Fallen Star in Alabama," *Quarterly of the National Association and Center for Outlaw and Lawman History* 10 (Spring 1986), 16. On the Stagolee stories see Turner, "Badmen, Black and White," 365-77.
29. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman,* 171-219.
30. Gainesville *Sun,* August 26, 1891.

kill him "in a fair fight." As in the case of so many other bandit heroes, they had to buy Murray's life from someone else.[31]

The national press also recognized Murray's exceptional nature when they reported his death. The *New York Times* called him "a noted desperado," and the *Atlanta Constitution* referred to him as "the notorious colored outlaw."[32] But it was the *New York Daily Tribune* that carried the longest and most appealing account of the life and death of this young black Florida outlaw.[33] His story, the *Tribune* thought, challenged "comparison with that of any desperado in our history. The story of Jesse James and his gang of thieving cutthroats seems vulgar and commonplace beside that of the solitary negro boy." A long story in the *Tribune* boldly portrayed Murray as an avenger: "Murray was undoubtedly a bad boy– or man, for he had just about reached the age of manhood. Who made him bad is a moot question. His undisputed history begins with his being, as not only he but others believed, unduly punished for some fault. He felt that sterner judgment was meted out to him because he was a negro than would have been meted out to a white man offending. He saw, moreover, acts of gross iniquity heaped upon the people of his race, all about him. These things enraged him, and he rashly resolved to become an avenger of the wrongs of his people. So he became an outlaw."

The *Tribune* reported Murray's honesty, cleverness, and love of justice in order to enhance his image further. In one story he appeared suddenly and well armed at a black church supper that advertised a full meal for a quarter. When the nervous servers, perhaps hoping to hasten his departure, gave him smaller portions than he deemed just, he demanded more food. Their reaction was to offer him his money back and beg him to leave. Angered, he fired two shots into the ground. When the whole crowd fled, Murray ate his fill. Before leaving he added another quarter to the collection pot.

A second story told of a man who offered fifty dollars to see Murray so, he said, that he could shoot him. Murray heard of the boast and confronted the fellow. "Now you see me, don't you?" he

31. Kent L. Steckmesser, "Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 79 (1966), 348-55, outlines the characteristics of the bandit hero legend.
32. *New York Times* and *Atlanta Constitution,* September 5, 1891.
33. *New York Daily Tribune,* September 6, 1891.

asked, then demanded the sum offered. He got his money and left the braggart unharmed. A similar tale told of Murray going to a store to purchase cartridges. The storekeeper recognized him and tried to get to his own gun. Murray beat him to the draw, forced him to hand over the cartridges, and retrieved the money he had placed on the counter for payment: "If you had sold them to me like a gentleman, I should have paid you for them," Murray exclaimed, "but you've acted so mean that, curse you, you shan't have a cent."[34]

A final episode in the *Tribune* related Murray's reaction upon hearing that a black woman had been badly mistreated by a white man. Her "transgression" was to ask that he pay the wages he owed her. When the bandit swore publicly to kill the white man, he left the area and did not return, or, at least, not until Murray had died.

The source of the *Tribune's* stories is not stated. It appears that no other press reports carried them or similar accounts. In the Florida papers journalists emphasized Murray's fearsome qualities– not whatever good ones he may have exhibited. In view of white fears that he would become a hero to blacks, the press could not have been expected to describe any of his good qualities.

The *Tribune's* depiction of Murray was overdrawn and, at best, true only in part. Even if he were not totally depraved, which Florida newspapers grudgingly admitted, he was more of a common badman than the *Tribune* allowed.[35] But descriptions of Harmon Murray as an avenger parallel many of the views of English historian Eric Hobsbawm. In his book *Bandits,* he wrote of a particular class of outlaw that he called social bandits.[36] Avengers were among them, but the purer type comprised noble robbers. These were peasant outlaws who were admired, supported, and protected by fellow peasants and, as in the legend of Robin Hood, shared their loot. What united bandits and peasants was a kind of class consciousness in opposition to the landlords and governmental authorities that oppressed them. The avenging bandits, as distinct from the noble robbers, were notable not so much for their generosity as for their terrible acts of retribution against their oppressors. Vengeance motivated their actions.

34. Ibid.
35. Jacksonville *Florida Times Union,* September 5, 1891.
36. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York, 1969), especially, 41-69.

Hobsbawm's hypothesis has not been widely applied to American conditions. Perhaps its theoretical framework, so heavily resting on peasantry and class struggle, has restricted its use. Classic banditry in America occurred west of the Mississippi most often in the late nineteenth century where neither a peasantry nor a class struggle in any clearly delineated way existed. A notable exception to the sparse use of Hobsbawm's arguments is the analysis of postbellum Missouri outlaws, especially the James Gang. Some historians agree that the actions and admiration they aroused were a type of social protest or resistance. Yet speculation on the motives of Jesse James and his cohorts does not shed much light on Murray, whose life circumstances were very different from theirs.[37]

In the sense that Murray fell into a transient class of young males tied by race and kinship to the South's rural and often landless black population, he closely approximated the attributes of a peasant. [38] Certainly it is also possible to view his violence against the lives and property of prosperous whites as resistance to oppression and to imagine that his fellow blacks felt satisfaction from these attacks. Thus a depiction of Murray as a social bandit– a voice of primitive protest– has some attraction. But not enough is known about Murray's motivations to justify firm conclusions. To interpret his rather common crimes– albeit often committed with an uncommon flair– as peasant resistance and to lionize him even as a subconscious freedom fighter in the struggle for African-American liberation strains credibility.

If Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry does not readily accommodate Murray, where does he fit within the overall history of banditry? Any effort to answer this question must deal with his uniqueness as a prominent black bandit in the late nineteenth-century South. In contrast to the same period in the American West– which furnishes a sufficient number of outlaws on which to generalize– the South had few, and fewer still were black. Among Mur-

37. The standard work on Jesse James is William A. Settle, Jr., *Jesse James Was His Name* (Columbia, MO, 1966). Scholars who have used Hobsbawm's ideas in their interpretations of James and his cohorts include Richard White, "Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border: American Social Bandits," *Western Historical Quarterly* 12 (October 1981), 387-408; David Thelen, *Paths of Resistance: Tradition and Dignity in Industrializing Missouri* (New York, 1986), 70-77; Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War* (New York, 1989), 260-63, 268; and Paul Kooistra, *Criminals as Heroes: Structure, Power & Identity* (Bowling Green, OH, 1989), 43-73.

38. Hobsbawm, *Bandits,* 33-35.

ray's fellow black criminals, only Morris "Railroad Bill" Slater, south Alabama's train robber and desperado, stands in his class. This paucity seems to limit African-American banditry in the South as a general subject of study and renders moot the question of constructing a model to explain Murray's behavior.[39]

What is left, then, is a black outlaw in Florida who is historically important less as a representative of a significant type than as almost one of a kind– interesting and deserving of attention in his own right. His story has the drama, danger, suspense, and bravery that usually attracts broad and seemingly instinctive appeal. His career also calls to mind a time in America when white antagonism toward blacks was perhaps at its worst. Whatever he was, for better or worse, Harmon Murray deserves to be remembered in Florida history.

39. This, the writer's conclusion, is based on the African-American outlaws found in Turner, "Badmen, Black and White," 325-451; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness,* 407-20; Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman,* 171-219; and Ayers *Vengeance and Justice,* 223-55. The black criminals described in these works, other than Railroad Bill, had little or nothing in character or actions to set them apart from the common sort. None of the authors apparently knew of Murray.