

“A WHITE MAN’S COUNTY”
RACIAL VIOLENCE, VIGILANTE TERRORISM, AND BLACK FLIGHT IN
FORSYTH COUNTY, GEORGIA

by

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(Under the Direction of Scott R. Nelson)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the nightriding campaign in 1912 that led Forsyth County, Georgia to become an all-white county. Following a series of catalytic events including the rape and murder of a young white woman and a mass lynching, a group of white residents terrorized Forsyth’s black community, forcing them to leave the county. By unraveling the social, economic, and racial tensions at play, it becomes clearer why the white yeomen and tenant farmers of Forsyth desired to expel the black inhabitants and keep them out in the following decades. Though similar nightriding campaigns occurred in other neighboring counties, Forsyth’s was the most enduring due to the failure of local police and white elites to end the lawless vigilantism. This thesis also examines the effects of this expulsion on the hundreds of black families forced to flee, and the ramifications of this racial cleansing on Forsyth County throughout the twentieth century.

INDEX WORDS: Forsyth County, North Georgia, Nightriding, Racial Cleansing, Vigilantism, Yeomen, Twentieth Century, Sundown Town, Lynching, Economic Competition, Tenant Farming, Black Exodus

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Introduction

In November of 1980, eighty-six-year old Ruth Mae Jordan sat in her home in Orange Park, Florida and began recording the stories and events she had witnessed nearly seventy years before. Jordan wrote about growing up in the town of Oscarville where she went to school, worked alongside her siblings on her family's farm, and became friends with the girls and boys who lived nearby. Although she was white, she had close friendships with the children of black landowners and tenant farmers, many of whom were "fine people," she wrote. The focus of her account, however, is on the events that occurred in the fall of 1912, events she had been too afraid to recount earlier. "The year was 1912. The month September." Jordan's friend and neighbor, a young white woman named Mae Crow was raped and murdered. The attacker, Jordan asserted, was a dirty, homeless black boy who along with his brothers and sisters spent the previous summer working on the Jordan's farm. She documented the gruesome injuries Mae suffered at the hands of her attacker who "raped her many times, cut and chewed the nipples of her breasts [sic, breasts], and bit her on the legs and almost all over..." Although she recorded the sorrow and pain she felt for having lost her friend, the majority of Jordan's account describes, in re-lived shock and disgust, the way in which the white Forsyth County community responded.¹

¹ Ruth Mae Jordan Berry, hand-written account, November 1980, courtesy of Patrick Phillips.

“It seamed lik all hell had broke loose,” Jordan wrote remembering the nightriding campaigns that shook the county in the weeks and months following the attack on Mae Crow.² Her “family had just gone to bed,” she wrote, when the homes and churches of the black families living in her town and throughout the county “wer set on fire and burned down.” Arson, dynamite, written warnings, and various other threats were used to intimidate black residents and force them out of their homes forever. She ended her letter stating that these attacks “went on at night untill no colord was left in the county,” and that these nightriders were mostly people from Forsyth County. However, she claimed that “she never knew [them] and even if [she] did, [she] would have been afraid to let eney one know that [she] knew.”³

A glimpse at the census records for Forsyth County reveals the overwhelming success of these nightriding campaigns, and their remarkable speed. The 1910 census indicates in the years prior to these events that 1,098 black and biracial people resided in the county, roughly ten percent of the total population.⁴ In 1920, however, eight years after the initial expulsion, records show that the black population had shrunk to a mere thirty. Although the most drastic decline in Forsyth’s black population occurred within the first years following the fall of 1912, this population continued to dwindle until 1990. By 1930 there were only seventeen black residents living in Forsyth, in 1960 there were four, and by 1980 there was only one black person living in the county out of a total population of 27,958. Not only did the bleaching of Forsyth occur quickly and

² In this thesis, ‘nightriding’ refers to the efforts made by small groups of white North Georgian men to expel black people from their jobs and homes.

³ Ruth Mae Jordan Berry, hand-written account, November 1980, courtesy of Patrick Phillips.

⁴ The total population was 11,940; U.S. Census and Bureau, Population by Race, 1910. Prepared by Social Explorer. (accessed Apr 2 13:58:03 EST 2017).

effectively, but it was permanent as well.⁵ Year after year, and decade after decade, Forsyth's identity as a "white man's county" was further solidified and reinforced with determined violence and intimidation.⁶

In 2005, historian James Loewen published the first comprehensive examination of "sundown towns" in the United States. Although thousands of books and academic articles have been written on the topic of racial violence, Loewen argues that outside of the Black Belt, the land of cotton and lynching, racism took on a different form—expulsion—and that this phenomenon has been overlooked by scholars. At the outset of his book, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, Loewen defines a sundown town as "any organized jurisdiction that [keeps] African Americans or other groups from living in it and was thus 'all-white' on purpose."⁷ The term "sundown town" refers to the signs posted on various city and county lines that warned black visitors: "Nigger, don't let the sun go down on you in ____."⁸ Loewen explains that white residents in thousands of American neighborhoods and towns used racial violence such as nightriding along with economic ostracization to control who could, or could not, live within their communities. Throughout this work, Loewen relies on census records and oral histories to prove the existence of towns, cities, and counties that worked for generations to force African Americans out, and to keep them out.

⁵ U.S. Census and Bureau, Population by Race, 1910,1930, 1960. Prepared by Social Explorer. (accessed Apr 2 13:58:03 EST 2017).

⁶ Royal Freeman Nash, "The Cherokee Fires," *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

⁷ James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: Norton, 2005), 4.

⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

Although Loewen reveals that the whitewashing of neighborhoods and other jurisdictions in America was more widespread than most would expect, his work leaves many important questions unanswered, such as what the driving forces for creating sundown towns were, who created them, and how they remained all-white for so long. Loewen attributes the creation of these sundown towns to the growth of racial violence and hatred between 1890 and 1940, the period otherwise known as the “nadir of race relations.”⁹ Although his book is well over 400 pages and filled with examples of towns that physically or economically forced black families out of their homes, his argument that an increase in racism led to the emergence of sundown towns is overly simplistic.

Whereas Loewen cites racial tension and catalytic events, such as alleged black-on-white violence, as the driving force of most expulsions in the United States, Charles Lumpkins challenges Loewen’s argument in *American Pogrom*. Published in 2008, three years after *Sundown Towns*, Lumpkins’s work argues that race riots and racial expulsions, specifically the ones in East St. Louis in 1917, were the results of African American participation and leadership in city politics. Starting in the 1890s, he explains, black men in the city developed “a black political infrastructure independent of white political bosses.”¹⁰ As the black city-dwellers continued to assert their autonomy in politics, white residents became increasingly anxious that these black leaders would not only represent competition in city politics, but that this developing political

⁹ Ibid, 24.

¹⁰ Charles L. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), 45.

equality would lead to overall social equality with whites. Lumpkins therefore claims that this fear of political competition and social equality led white men and women to expel black residents from East St. Louis.

In Forsyth County, Georgia, however, there are no records that indicate that there was political tension between the black and white communities. Although local churches contained various black leaders who had influence on both white and black parishioners, such as Levi Greenlee Sr., the only black member of the Hightower Association, it does not appear that there was racial tension as a result.¹¹ What, then, was the driving force that prompted white Forsyth residents to threaten and attack their black neighbors until they abandoned their homes and left for nearby counties? Of course, racial prejudice spiked by the alleged attack on a white girl was a factor, but it cannot account for the expulsion of approximately 1,100 black men, women, and children. This is evident in the thousands of white communities in the South that did not expel black populations following similar isolated events such as those that occurred in Forsyth County. The central question is, therefore, what was it about the white community, or the black one, that made an all-white county seem favorable to white citizens in Forsyth?

Guy Lancaster's work *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas*, published in 2014, sheds light on other causes of black expulsion and the creation of sundown towns. Lancaster narrows down the possible motivations for nightriding and whitecapping to three main forces: political tension, alleged black criminality, and competition between black and white men in the acquisition of land and jobs. The last of these was certainly at play in

¹¹ Bagley, *History of Forsyth County*, vol. 2, 691. The Hightower Association was a gathering of clergymen from North Georgia. The clergymen would meet to organize events and discuss theology and social issues.

Forsyth. Like the various towns that Lancaster examines, a large portion of Forsyth County's white population either owned little land or was caught in the "web of tenancy." Unlike places within the Black Belt, the majority of landless laborers in Forsyth were white. Therefore, the black individuals who rented or owned land, worked for merchants and large planters, or found employment in railroads, lumber camps, and sawmills often became targets of jealous white aggression and whitecapping. The presence of lower-paid black laborers, according to Lancaster, "simply worked against [the white community's] economic interests."¹²

Loewen states that there were thousands of sundown towns, cities, and counties throughout the United States, but he claims that the expulsion of black people from Forsyth in 1912 was monumental because it was the largest in American history.¹³ The story of Forsyth's race riot and mass black exodus has been told many times in various newspapers, books, and even on the Oprah Winfrey Show. In 2016, Patrick Phillips, a former resident of Forsyth County, amateur historian, and poet, published *Blood at the Root*, a book that traces step-by-step the events that transpired in September and October of 1912 in this county. These accounts, however numerous, often focus narrowly on the catalytic events leading up to the nightriding: the alleged rape and murder, the lynching, and the public execution, rather than on the other social and economic factors at play.

More importantly, for generations, Forsyth residents and other journalists and academics have cited the alleged "bad conduct of some bad negroes," as the reason white people forced out nearly all the county's black inhabitants.¹⁴ This narrative ignores the

¹² Guy Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas, 1883–1924: Politics, Land, Labor, and Criminality* (New York, New York: Lexington Books, 2014), 7.

¹³ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 176.

¹⁴ "Local News," *The Dahlonga Nugget*, 29 August 1913.

decisions made by dozens of white residents in Forsyth and blames the victims of this ethnic cleansing. In the weeks following the allegations of rape and murder, white tenant farmers, small landowners, and laborers took advantage of the racial tension, amplifying it in hopes that they might acquire the land and jobs that belonged to their black neighbors. The nightriders' main objective was not to punish the black community or to protect the county from black-on-white violence. Rather, the men who rode across Forsyth County terrorizing the black community did so in an effort to assert control over their own lives. Threatened by new social and economic tensions in the post-war era, these white tenant farmers and laborers sought to eliminate their competition and to create an identity for their county that could match what they individually wished to identity as - that is, white, strong, and unchallenged.¹⁵

The topic of Forsyth's race riot and racial cleansing requires a deeper investigation and contextual analysis than it has received yet—one that is rooted in primary evidence such as land deeds, newspaper articles, letters to the governor, census records, and other documents left behind by former inhabitants of Forsyth County. In addition, by comparing the demographic shift in Forsyth with those of other North Georgia counties that experienced similar nightriding campaigns, it becomes clear why Forsyth actually went white, and how it happened so quickly and permanently.

¹⁵ Adrienne Monteith Petty, *Standing Their Ground: Small Farmers in North Carolina since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). In *Standing Their Ground*, historian Adrienne Petty focuses on yeomen and tenant farmers working in several counties in North Carolina after the Civil War. In this work, Petty discusses the social and economic tensions these small farmers were faced with in the decades following the Civil War, and their struggle to protect their ways of life. Yeomen in Forsyth were faced with similar changes in their communities and experienced similar insecurities.

The Catalyst

Beginning in October of 1912, bands of nightriders swept across Forsyth County resolved to drive out every black resident. This campaign to create and preserve an all-white county was not short-lived. Rather, in the decades following this initial expulsion, white inhabitants of Forsyth used intimidation and violence to prevent black people from returning to the county. Overtime, Forsyth's reputation became known across the state and the country. Forsyth's identity as a sundown county is often described as the result of an attack on a young white girl at the hands of a "sorry negro."¹⁶ This story has been passed down throughout the years and it is often claimed that the black community was driven out of Forsyth by white residents to prevent further black-on-white violence. In September and October of 1912, a series of tumultuous events did occur in Forsyth. Although the county had experienced seventy years of relative peace since its establishment, they shook Forsyth to the core, but were they really the cause of the expulsions that followed? These are the events as they have been told and recounted by other historians.

On the night of September 5th 1912, in the town of Big Creek, Ellen Grice, a 22-year-old white woman, reportedly awoke to a black man in her bed.¹⁷ It was approximately midnight when her husband, John Grice, "found [her], and at once sounded an alarm."¹⁸ While some newspapers only reported that Ellen had been "attacked," others were much more explicit in claiming that she had been raped by an unknown black man who had climbed through her window. Due to the variation in

¹⁶ Royal Freeman Nash, "The Cherokee Fires," *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

¹⁷ "Troops Rushed to Cumming in Autos to Check Race Riot," *Atlanta Journal*, 7 September 1912.

¹⁸ "Two Companies of Militia Prevent a Serious Race Riot," *Macon Telegraph*, 8 September 1912.

accounts and interpretations, it is uncertain what really happened between Ellen Grice, the alleged rapist, and her husband that night. There might have been a rapist, but any black man would surely have known that such an act was suicidal. The same goes for an affair with a white woman. It is unlikely that a man would have entered the Grice's bedroom, attacked Ellen, and escaped before her husband heard her cries and ran to the bedroom. Instead, Grice was most likely beaten by her husband who covered up his act by crying wolf. Nevertheless, none of the local newspapers dared question these claims and raise suspicion surrounding the nature of Ellen and her "attacker's" relationship.

In the early hours of September 6th, Sheriff William Reid and Deputy Gay Lummus of Forsyth County led a posse of white citizens into Big Creek in search of the putative black rapist.¹⁹ By mid-morning on September 7th, Reid settled on five black men who had supposedly been accomplices to the crime. Each of these suspects lived and worked in Big Creek near the Grice's home, and for that reason were "rounded up" by the sheriff.²⁰ The allegations were soon dropped on account of the complete lack of evidence, but by the time Reid and Lummus arrived at the county jail in Cumming, word of the incident had spread throughout the county and a large crowd had gathered in the town square waiting to get a glimpse of the criminals.²¹ Tensions were high. When Ellen's father came into town claiming she was in critical condition, the crowd began to demand access to the prisoners. The mob was unable to reach the prisoners, but violence broke out nevertheless when Grant Smith, a black reverend standing outside of the jail, openly questioned the accusations.

¹⁹ "Troops rushed to Cumming in Autos to Check Race Riot," *The Journal*, 7 September 1912.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Elliott Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Basic Books. 2007), 127.

Although white newspapers did not question the report of Ellen's rape, Reverend Grant Smith was suspicious of the rumors spreading throughout the county. According to several accounts, this pastor referred to Ellen as a "sorry white woman," questioning both her testimony and morality.²² At a time when black-on-white sexual relations were taboo, particularly between black men and white women, the questioning of a white woman's allegations, especially by a black man, was shocking.²³ As soon as the statement was made, the crowd directed its violence toward Smith for having the gall to impugn the victim's character. Witnesses claimed that Smith "probably would have been burned" had Reid and Lummus not wrestled him out of the grasp of the mob.²⁴ The sheriff then decided to place Smith in the basement of the courthouse, where the crowds could not reach him.

The men in the crowd continued to demand access to the black suspects. When Sheriff Reid failed to calm the growing mob, Cumming's mayor, Charlie Harris, positioned himself on the steps of the courthouse and begged the crowd to "go home, eat their dinners, and get cooled off, change their minds, and not disgrace Forsyth County further." A voice shouted in response, "We don't want no dinner, Colonel... we wants nigger for dinner."²⁵ Realizing that he, Reid, and Lummus would not be able to control the mob, Harris phoned Governor Joseph Mackay Brown, warning him that state support and intervention was needed to prevent a lynching and possibly race war. Governor Brown dispatched the Georgia National Guard, led by Major I.T. Catron, to Forsyth

²² "Two Companies of Militia Prevent a Serious Race Riot." *Macon Telegraph*, 8 September 1912.

²³ Madeline Joan Olds, "The Rape Complex in the Postbellum South" (PhD diss., Carnegie-Melon University, 1989), 145.

²⁴ "Two Companies of Militia Prevent a Serious Race Riot." *Macon Telegraph*, 8 September 1912

²⁵ Isabella D. Harris letter to Max Gilstrap, postscript p.1.

County that evening. Escorted by the Guard, the prisoners were led out of the county and into the Fulton County Jail, otherwise known as “The Tower.” With the prisoners relocated to Atlanta, the white residents of Forsyth dispersed to their homes. Journalists who wrote about these events concluded their reports with predictions of peace and quiet for Forsyth County.²⁶

But on the evening of September 8th, one day after the militia left Cumming, a young white woman was reported missing by her parents. Mae Crow, 18 years old, lived at home with her parents and siblings in the little town of Oscarville on the eastern edge of the county. Sometime in the late morning of September 8th, the young woman’s mother asked her to walk to her aunt’s home in a neighboring town to run an errand. Bud and Azzie Crow, Mae’s parents, became worried when evening fell and Mae had neither made it to her aunt’s home nor returned to Oscarville. The Crows contacted Sheriff Reid that night, and soon thereafter the county deputies were aided by many concerned citizens in the search for the missing woman.

After a night of combing through her hometown and the surrounding forests, the search party found Mae, half-naked, covered in leaves and unconscious in a pool of blood. She was in a secluded spot of the woods and appeared to have been dragged from the main road into a nearby ravine. The back of Mae’s head had been bashed by a blunt object, most likely a rock, and some sources reported that she had lost an eye in the attack.²⁷ The injuries Mae endured were so serious that she was never able to recover—she died two weeks after the attack on September 23rd. News of the rape and murder of a

²⁶ “State Troops Rescue Negroes at Cumming,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 September 1912.

²⁷ “Crime a Diabolical One,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 10 September 1912.

person described as a beautiful white “girl” spread throughout the county and state. Reporters from around Georgia wrote about the story calling it, “one of the most diabolical (crimes) in the history of the state.”²⁸

It remains unclear how Ernest Knox, a poor, black teenager working in Oscarville, was identified as the rapist and murderer. While some newspapers reported that Mae regained consciousness long enough to identify her attacker, other accounts provide a different story.²⁹ The *Gainesville Times* claimed that Marvin Bell, one of Forsyth’s leading men, was responsible for identifying Knox as the perpetrator and bringing him to jail.³⁰ According to the article, Bell recognized the teenager as being the owner of a small mirror that was found at the scene of the crime. It was also reported that the boy confessed his actions to Bell.

In the letter Ruth Jordan wrote describing the events she had witnessed as a child in Forsyth, she shed light on the nature of this encounter between Bell and Knox. According to Jordan, the morning following Mae’s attack, Bell had approached a group of black boys who were watching the commotion and asked if the mirror belonged to any of them. Ernest Knox responded, “Yes sir, it’s mine.” Jordan then explains that Bell asked Knox to accompany him to fetch water from the well, which the boy “gladly” agreed to. “After they had got away from the crowd,” Jordan explains, “the man stopped his car and told Earn [sic, Ernest] to get out. He then told Earn that he knew Earn had done the crime, but he had to tell who was with him.” Jordan writes that Knox denied these claims at first, but that Bell promptly took “the rope of the well and tied it around

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Negro is Rushed in Fast Machine to Fulton Towers,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 September 1912.

³⁰ “Negro Rushed to Tower to Prevent Lynching,” *The Atlanta Journal*, 10 September 1912.

Earn's neck,” and warned the boy that “if he didn't tell the whole thing he would be hung.” In response to this mock lynching, a common tactic used for intimidation and coercion, Knox gave in and confessed to the crime. However, Knox did not name any accomplices.³¹

Not satisfied with Knox's coerced confession, Sheriff Reid and other white residents were convinced that the boy was protecting accomplices. Groups of white men gathered in search of the accomplices and rode from house to house interrogating black families. On the morning of September 10th, one day after Mae was found, three more black residents of Forsyth were arrested when it was discovered that they had spent time with Knox the day of the attack. The suspects were brought to the Forsyth County jail despite the growing danger of a mass mob. According to the *Atlanta Georgian*, “The country roads were dotted with mounted and armed men all hurrying toward the county seat.” “The men of Forsyth,” the journalist wrote, “had been gathering all day, bearing rifles and shotguns under their arms, others with coats bulging where a heavy revolver filled a hip pocket.”³² Reid forced his automobile through a crowd of approximately 2,000 people and safely delivered the suspects to the jail.

Within hours of the men being brought into custody, a mob of white men broke into the small county jail and attacked Rob Edwards, one of the three suspects, a man reputedly notorious for his “bad temper.”³³ Varying accounts make it unclear what exactly happened to Edwards, if he died inside the jail after being hit in the head or if he died later, but all of the stories emphasize the violence and brutality employed to end his

³¹ Ruth Mae Jordan Berry, hand-written account, November 1980, courtesy of Patrick Phillips.

³² “Mob Batters Down Jail Door at Cumming,” *Atlanta Georgian*, 10 September 1912.

³³ *Ibid.*

life. In broad daylight, “farmers known to all the countryside,” the *Atlanta Georgian* reported, “[advanced] without a mask, without the slightest fear of what the future might bring.” The barred doors, “gave way under a few heavy blows and the leaders rushed in, followed by as many men as could crowd into the corridor.”³⁴ After hitting Edwards in the head with some object, dragging him by the neck into the town square, and hanging him in clear sight, “pistols and rifles cracked, and the corpse was mangled into something hardly resembling a human form.”³⁵ Edward’s body hung on a telephone pole in the center of town until Sheriff Reid ordered him cut down. The body was then placed on the lawn of the Forsyth County Courthouse where it remained until the following morning. Although the kidnapping and murder of Rob Edwards occurred in broad daylight with thousands of witnesses, not a single person was brought to justice for these crimes.³⁶

On September 10th, the day after the lynching, the remaining suspects for the attacks on Ellen Grice and Mae Crow were brought to the Fulton County Jail to prevent further violence and lawlessness. Seemingly satisfied with the lynching of Rob Edwards, and the county jail cleared of the remaining black prisoners, white Forsyth County was calm. This period of peace and normalcy was short-lived, however. With the trial of Ernest Knox and one of his alleged accomplices, Oscar Daniels, Forsyth again made headlines throughout the state.³⁷

On October 3rd, 1912, 167 men from four companies of the Fifth Regiment were sent to Forsyth County to accompany Knox and Daniels as they were transported from

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Dr. Ansel Strickland Score Daily Papers,” *North Georgian*, 22 November 1912.

³⁷ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 128.

Atlanta to Cumming for their trial the following day. Judge Newt Morris of the Blue Ridge Circuit court presided over this case, making sure to “expedite in every possible way the trial,” assure peace in the county, and uphold the “majesty of the law.”³⁸ Martial law was declared once more, and the county was put under the power of Major Catron “to preserve order during the trials as great excitement [grew] in the little town.”³⁹ Forsyth residents, neighboring Georgians, and various print media journalists flooded the town of Cumming on October 3rd, which resulted in “a circus day appearance.”⁴⁰ The *Atlanta Journal* claimed that this was the largest gathering of people that Cumming had ever experienced.⁴¹ Governor Brown and Mayor Harris worked to prevent trouble and protect Forsyth’s residents and reputation by enforcing a series of rules and regulations on the day of the trial. No one outside of the police or National Guard was permitted to bring weapons into the courthouse, and passes were required for anyone entering the courtroom during the trial.⁴²

After a day of hearing the testimonies of the defendants and other Forsyth residents including Mae Crow’s father, the court reconvened on October 4th to deliver the verdict. As was expected, both Knox and Daniels were charged with the rape and murder of Mae Crow, and were sentenced to execution by hanging for October 27th, 1912. Journalists and leaders including Judge Morris applauded the four troops for keeping peace during the trial. Furthermore, they commended the behavior of Forsyth residents

³⁸ “Bayonets Guard Blacks as Trial at Cumming Begins,” *The Atlanta Journal*, 3 October 1912; “Trial in Cumming Tomorrow,” *Gainesville Times*, 2 October 1912.

³⁹ “Atlanta Troops Leave for Trial at Cumming,” *The Atlanta Journal*, 2 October 1912.

⁴⁰ “Bayonets Guard Blacks as Trial at Cumming Begins,” *The Atlanta Journal*, 3 October 1912.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

and their “admirable restraint.”⁴³ The *Gainesville News* assured readers that “perfect order was kept,” and that “no violence was attempted.”⁴⁴ But that very night “all hell broke loose” for the black men, women, and children living in the region.⁴⁵

That night, a small group of white men convened after the sun set to continue the violence on the county’s black community. Contemporary newspaper articles and reports made by citizens throughout the county documented the series of attacks these men carried out against the many black families living in or near Forsyth. On the evening of October 4th, only hours after the trial had ended and the troops had returned to Cobb County, a band of vigilantes rode throughout Forsyth’s countryside, burning the homes of several black families and threatening their communities. “A terrible state of affairs exists among the negroes of Forsyth,” the *Atlanta Constitution* claimed. “The recent outrages committed upon white women in the county have so enraged the white people that many of them have determined to drive the negroes, good, bad, and indifferent from the county.”⁴⁶ In the days and weeks following the trial, dozens of nightriders visited black homes and warned the inhabitants to “leave immediately or die.”⁴⁷ Heeding the threats and attacks, hundreds of black men, women, and children fled the county in the late autumn of 1912.

Causes of the Racial Cleansing

The crimes allegedly committed by Knox and Daniels triggered the lynching of Rob Edwards—there is no doubt about that. But the upsurge in acts of racial hatred and

⁴³ “Governor is Pleased with Militia,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 October 1912.

⁴⁴ “Two Negroes Convicted in Forsyth,” *Gainesville News*, 9 October 1912.

⁴⁵ Ruth Mae Jordan Berry, hand-written account, November 1980, courtesy of Patrick Phillips.

⁴⁶ “Negroes Flee from Forsyth,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 October 1912.

⁴⁷ Interview of the family of J.C. Beard, audiocassette, 1987. Forsyth County box, The King Center Archives, Atlanta, Georgia. Found in Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 130.

the effort to rid the county of its black population cannot all be traced back to Mae Crow's murder. Many black men were lynched across the South, especially around the turn of the 20th century, but few lynchings led to mass expulsions of black people from their communities. To understand the racial cleansing that occurred in Forsyth, an examination of the county's social, economic, and racial background is necessary. By analyzing the various tensions at play in Forsyth preceding these events and contextualizing the nightriding campaign, we can reach a deeper understanding of why the expulsion occurred.

Forsyth County was established by Section 22 of the Georgia Laws of 1832. Located just south of the Appalachian Mountains and surrounded by hilly, broken terrain, Forsyth County never experienced economic development comparable to those counties located within the Cotton Belt in the 1800s and early 1900s.⁴⁸ Forsyth's development was further hindered by the lack of a railroad in close proximity.⁴⁹ Unable to produce large quantities of cash crops such as tobacco and cotton, and isolated from other regions in Georgia, the county's farmers were mostly unable to participate in markets beyond Forsyth.

Although antebellum Georgia is known for its prosperous plantation owners who harvested cotton and tobacco, most men and women who settled and raised their families in Forsyth are most accurately described as "yeomen." Unable to depend on a stable production of cotton, residents of Forsyth focused their effort on raising livestock and on

⁴⁸ Terrence Lee Kersey, "A Small Place in Georgia: Yeoman Cultural Persistence." Master's Thesis, Georgia State University, 2009. 43. Kersey provides a detailed breakdown of Forsyth's economy between 1850 and 1870. He explains that Forsyth's location made it difficult for farmers to depend on cotton, the principle staple crop of Georgia. In 1860 Forsyth County produced less than 100,000 dollars on cotton production; on the other hand, counties within the Cotton Belt in Georgia made anywhere from 330,001 to over 650,001 dollars on cotton production.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 49. Kersey refers to the region that lacked railroads as "Transportation Black Hole."

small-scale farming. These Upcountry yeomen were one or two horse farmers who owned small plots of land on which they grew corn, sweet potatoes, and wheat. The crops they produced were used to feed their families, and all leftover production was sold to local country stores.⁵⁰ Prior to Emancipation, most residents, were either non-slaveholders or owned between one and two slaves. Despite moderate success in farming and mining, Forsyth lagged behind neighboring counties in terms of industrial development and manufacturing at the turn of the century. Leading up to the twentieth century, Forsyth yeomen were largely isolated from the surrounding world geographically, economically, and socially. These white farmers were characterized by their sense of independence, their work ethic, and their suspicion of “modernization” which they feared would undermine self-sufficiency.⁵¹

The census of 1840 indicates that the total population of Forsyth was approximately 5,500 at its founding, and that ten percent was black. Like most counties in the Upper Piedmont region of Georgia, Forsyth’s racial makeup maintained a stable composition from 1840 to 1912. Accordingly, by 1910 the county had grown to approximately 12,000 citizens, with just under 1,100 black residents. Of the 2,243 farms located in Forsyth in 1912, 172 of them were owned or rented by black families.⁵² Historian Edward Ayers explains that black individuals were much more successful in procuring land in regions such as Forsyth where “concentration on cotton was the lowest and where blacks made up a relatively small part of the population.” The land they did

⁵⁰ Ibid. 63-67.

⁵¹ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 20, 36, 67.

⁵² U.S. Census and Bureau. Farms by Race by Nativity, 1910; In Forsyth County, 15.7% of black people owned land. Out of the total white population 19.1% of farms are recorded as “white farms” in the 1910 census.

own and work, however, were what he calls the “backbone and spare ribs” of what was available in the county.⁵³ Although black residents experienced relative independence in Forsyth based on the rate of landownership, most of the black men and women worked for white individuals and families inside their homes, in the fields, and in various mills such as the sawmill.⁵⁴

The black and white residents of Forsyth lived in relative peace after the Civil War. Compared to other Georgian regions, the Upper Piedmont experienced much lower rates of racial violence. By 1912, it had been more than fifty years since a black person had been lynched in the county. Before Emancipation, most slaves in Forsyth County had lived under the same roofs as their masters in a one-room house, and slaves and masters often worked in the fields alongside each other.⁵⁵ This pattern continued after the war, and consequently the Georgia Upcountry differed significantly from Cotton Belt regions when it came to labor control. In Forsyth, where most tenants were white, employers looked for non-violent methods of controlling their labor force since there was, in the words of historian Fitzhugh Brundage, the “absence of a rigid line separating landlords from tenants.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, in areas where black populations were relatively small, fear of black insurrection and the urgency to prevent them were not as widespread among white Southerners.⁵⁷

⁵³ Edward Ayers, and Robert Kenzer. *Southern Crossing: A History of the American South, 1877- 1906* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35.

⁵⁴ Royal Freeman Nash, “The Cherokee Fires,” *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

⁵⁵ Kersey, *A Small Place in Georgia: Yeoman Cultural Persistence*, 63-65

⁵⁶ Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 122. In 1910, 1,167 white residents of Forsyth were tenant farmers—89.4% of all the tenant farmers in the county.

⁵⁷ Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 198.

Before the events of the fall of 1912, economic and social factors had already triggered jealousy and anger among the poor whites living in Forsyth. The black and white citizens of the county worked alongside each other in the field, factories, and mills, and were paid between \$.75 and \$1 a day. The black workers' advantage according to a NAACP journalist, was that "no one would hire a cracker for farm labor or teaming when he could get a Negro."⁵⁸ Though the white population of Forsyth was nearly ten times that of the black, employers almost always chose to hire black workers as they were perceived as more "industrious and reliable."⁵⁹ Black women also had a monopoly over household positions in wealthy white homes throughout the county. Adding to the annoyance of the white tenant farmers, the journalist claimed that "the independent Negro farmers had established credit with the bank and the stores to a much larger degree than the crackers" in Forsyth.⁶⁰

The fact that 172 farms, approximately 7% of the total in Forsyth, were owned or rented by black residents also may have been point of indignation among the white community. It was during the early 1900s that many black individuals successfully purchased land and made substantial profits from the crops they produced. For example, by 1900 Joseph Kellogg, a black Forsyth resident, owned 200 acres of farmland which put him in the top 5% of the landowners in the county.⁶¹ In the Georgia Upcountry where land was the most prized possession, black landowners not only caused economic

⁵⁸ Royal Freeman Nash, "The Cherokee Fires," *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ U.S. Census and Bureau, *Farms by Acreage*, 1900.

insecurity for whites, but social and class tension as well. Exacerbated by the presence of successful black individuals such as Kellogg, by 1912 falling cotton prices escalated frustration among what Brundage calls “worn down, land-hungry white farmers.”⁶²

It was these demographic factors that explain the nightriding in Forsyth. Whereas black people in the Cotton Belt were generally exploited for labor by white people, black workers in the Upcountry often competed with white people for work and land.⁶³ Therefore, while violent tactics such as lynching were employed to keep black workers and communities “in their place,” historian Donald Grant claims that nightriding was used “primarily to remove blacks as competitors of poorer whites.”⁶⁴ Thus, the alleged attack on white women provided the justification needed for struggling white farmers and residents to begin forcefully reclaiming control of their county. The result of this campaign was the expulsion of 1,098 black individuals who resided and worked in Forsyth County.

Forsyth Nightriders and the Mass Black Exodus

In 1987, hundreds of descendants of these black families shared the stories of their parents’ and grandparents’ flight from Forsyth County. The recordings of these accounts and interviews, now stored in the Atlanta King Center’s basement, are filled with memories of the terror and agony that shook Forsyth’s black community in 1912. A descendant of Spencer Thornton, one of the county’s black landowners before the expulsion, claimed that the nightriders “came and knocked on every door.” They warned the Thornton family, and many other black residents: “Nigger, you got to move—Niggers

⁶² Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 24.

⁶³ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 70.

⁶⁴ Donald L. Grant and Jonathan Grant, *The Way it was in the South: The Black Experience in Georgia* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 169.

now out of Forsyth. Take everything you got and leave or don't take anything but move."⁶⁵ This account along with many more reveal the motives and tactics used by the nightriders, and the perilous circumstances black Forsyth residents found themselves in.

The nightriders conveyed their message in multiple ways. While some of the men visited black homes and spoke with the families face-to-face, as in the case of Spencer Thornton, the nightriders quickly adopted other methods of communicating their demands. Written notices were placed in mailboxes, posted on trees, and thrown into people's yards. When the black residents did not leave immediately, their homes were often burned to the ground or destroyed with dynamite. In one instance, the nightriders "tied a family's cow to a stake in the yard, piled wood and brush around it, and burned the animal live."⁶⁶ One account claims that these vigilantes went so far as to dig up the bodies laid to rest in black cemeteries and mutilate them to incite terror in the black community.⁶⁷ Although there are no records to indicate that any black men or women were killed during these raids, the threat of murder was certainly conveyed, leading hundreds of families to abandon their homes, livestock, jobs, and communities by the end of 1912.⁶⁸

Mobilized under the cover of nightfall, the nightriders of Forsyth County worked in secrecy. Although various accounts claim that these vigilantes were ordinary men who worked throughout the county as tenant farmers, none of their names were ever

⁶⁵ Interview of the family of Spencer Thornton, audiocassette, 1987. Forsyth County box, The King Center Archives, Atlanta, Georgia. Found in Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 130.

⁶⁶ Interview of the family of J.C. Beard, audiocassette, 1987. Forsyth County box, The King Center Archives, Atlanta, Georgia. Found in Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 130.

⁶⁷ Document labeled Charlie Harrell's Will, black history file cabinet, Historical Society of Cumming, 101 School Street, Cumming, Georgia. Hereinafter cited as HSC.

⁶⁸ "Negroes Flee from Forsyth," *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 October 1912.

published. In addition, if there was ever a leader in the organization of these campaigns, he was never made known. It is clear, however, that nightriding demonstrated the white residents' desire to control the policing of their community and Forsyth's legacy. Raised with what historian Sally Hadden describes as a "long standing tradition of self-help" that values independence above all else, Forsyth's white yeomen and workers resorted to vigilantism to police their county and transform the racial policy of Forsyth.⁶⁹

In the summer of 1915, a journalist for *The Crisis*, Royal Freeman Nash, visited Forsyth County to investigate the racial cleansing that had taken place almost two years prior.⁷⁰ Nash was white and therefore had no difficulties in navigating the county to interview multiple white residents. In his expose titled, "The Cherokee Fires," he helped clarify who the nightriders were, what their motives were, and whether or not they were successful in their aims. "The nightriders," he wrote, "were poverty-stricken cowardly crackers who hoped to drive the Negroes out to be able to rent whatever land they desired, and to command their own price for labor." He noted as well that, according to a Forsyth resident he interviewed, not one of these marauders paid more than \$2 in taxes per year prior to these events.⁷¹

Various Forsyth leaders and wealthy residents, such as Sheriff Reid and Dr. Ansel Strickland, were quick to blame the nightriding on 'mountaineers' from neighboring counties in North Georgia. The vigilantes, however, were in fact white tenant farmers born and raised in Forsyth County who were most likely supported by several upper-class residents. Although the names of men who participated in these activities are not

⁶⁹ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 209.

⁷⁰ *The Crisis* was established in 1910 as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's official magazine. Reporters and participants of the NAACP were both black and white.

⁷¹ Royal Freeman Nash, "The Cherokee Fires," *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

recorded, several newspaper articles from towns surrounding Forsyth give insight into who these men may have been. On October 16th 1912, the *Gainesville Times* published the names of five men who were arrested for chasing black workers out of a workshop. Although Forsyth County records indicate that these five men were tenant farmers in 1910, the article claims that bonds were given at \$200 each, and that all of them were paid.⁷² Therefore, it is likely that these men were encouraged and supported by a few wealthy residents in Forsyth. Dr. Ansel Strickland, for example, a wealthy resident of the county, may have supported the nightriders. In 1912, Strickland submitted a letter to the editor of the *North Georgian* newspaper. In this three-page letter that was published in the paper, Strickland displayed his strong support of Forsyth's racial cleansing and the county's newly established identity as an all-white county.⁷³

The Nightriding Campaign in North Georgia

As it turns out, Forsyth was not the only “sundown county” in Georgia—nor was it the first. Approximately seven counties just north of Forsyth and surrounding it experienced similar demographic shifts between 1910 and 1920. Towns and Union Counties were the first of these counties to experience the nightriding campaigns in 1910, and there is no evidence to indicate that alleged black criminality triggered the white-on-black violence. Rather, economic tension and competition between black workers and poor whites, as well as the perceived “uselessness” of black labor in those counties were responsible for these expulsions.⁷⁴

⁷² “Five Men Arrested,” *The Gainesville Times*, 16 October 1912.

⁷³ “Dr. Ansel Strickland Scores the Daily Papers,” *North Georgian*, 22 November 1912.

⁷⁴ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 138, 139.

Following the events that transpired in Forsyth in 1912, poor whites in multiple counties began threatening black laborers living within their communities just as Towns, Union, and Forsyth had before them. In December of 1912, the *New York Times* reported, “an organized effort is being made to drive every negro out of North Georgia counties...Hundreds of negroes have fled from the state while those who are remaining live in a state of constant dread.”⁷⁵ These counties included Dawson, Hall, and Jackson. Although the following counties experienced these demographic shifts at differing rates based on their local policing, from 1910 to 1920 all underwent a decrease in the black population due to nightriding.⁷⁶

County	1900 (Black population)	1910 (Black population)	1920 (Black population)
Towns	36	15	0
Union	55	64	46
Forsyth	494	1,098	30
Dawson	73	152	0
Hall	1,396	4,030	3,493
Jackson	3,285	8,613	6,982

*Social Explorer Dataset(SE), Census 1900, 1910, 1920, Digitally transcribed by Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Edited, verified by Michael Haines. Compiled, edited and verified by Social Explorer.

⁷⁵ “Georgia in Terror of Night Riders,” *New York Times*, 26 December 1912. Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 139.

⁷⁶ It is possible that the decrease in African American inhabitants was due in part to the Great Migration that began in 1915. Beginning during World War I, millions of black Southerners migrated to cities in the North in search of jobs and to escape the Jim Crow South. In the counties being examined, however, it is much more likely that the decrease in the black population was caused by the nightriding campaigns. This is evident in the fact that most black refugees fleeing these counties moved to other Georgian counties such as Fulton which experienced a 21% increase in its black population from 1910 to 1920. Furthermore, dozens of newspapers, including the *New York Times*, followed the nightriding campaign through the winter of 1913, describing the black exodus taking place in these counties.

The black population in Jackson County, for instance, dropped by 1,600 between 1910 and 1920, a loss of approximately 20%. The *Atlanta Journal* in 1912 reported that, “a band of unknown men who operate[d] under the cover of darkness” were posting warnings throughout Jackson County, “warning all negroes to leave under severe penalties.” The newspaper claimed that the black residents in Jackson were “terror stricken and leaving there in large numbers.”⁷⁷ It was Forsyth County, however, that experienced the most severe losses. With a 97.3% decrease in the black population, Forsyth became the “epicenter” of the racial cleansing in North Georgia.⁷⁸

Dawson, the county directly bordering Forsyth to the north, had talked of expelling their black community for a number of years. Though only 152 African Americans lived in the county and were regarded by some white business owners as an “unusually industrious, responsible group,” it appears that many white Dawson residents were suspicious of their black neighbors and wanted them out.⁷⁹ In the summer of 1903, a journalist lamented that a railroad commissioner had been prohibited from hiring the black men in Dawson: “People say the negroes ought to be sent out of the county, yet when a man comes after them he is arrested.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, as in other parts of the state, whites in Dawson were adamant that if black people were to stay in the county, they should be careful not to go out when the sun went down. If black Dawson residents challenged the “sundown rule,” newspapers assured that they would become “as scarce as ’possums on a moonshiny night.”⁸¹ It appears that the catalytic events in Forsyth

⁷⁷ “Gov. Brown Urged to Protect Negro Laborers,” *Atlanta Journal*, 16 December 1912.

⁷⁸ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 140.

⁷⁹ Royal Freeman Nash, “The Cherokee Fires,” *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

⁸⁰ “Local News,” *Dahlongega Nugget*, 4 June 1903.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

produced just the momentum poor whites in Dawson needed to commence their attacks on black neighbors. “A gang of about a dozen crackers,” wrote Royal Nash, “took advantage of the situation in [Forsyth] and began serving notice on the Negroes in Dawson.”⁸² On the night of Knox and Daniels’s trial, a black church was burned in Dawson. In the following weeks and months, every black person was forced to flee the county, leaving Dawson “lily white.”⁸³

Black families living in Hall County endured similar threats and attacks. On October 16th, 1912, the *Gainesville News* reported that “persons unknown” had burned black churches, left intimidating notices on black families’ doorsteps, and even threatened them at their work sites. The article described that Gainesville had the “unwarranted spectacle of a crowd going into a building in the course of erection and ordering negro workers off the job.” Not only were black residents threatened in Hall County, but every white property owner who employed them was “given a written notice that he must order the negro tenants to vacate at once.”⁸⁴

Although the nightriding in Forsyth endured until all but thirty African Americans had fled the county, the movement to racially cleanse Hall County was short-lived, and ultimately unsuccessful. In October of 1912, a local newspaper published the names of several men who were arrested for chasing black workers out of a workshop in Hall County, thus violating section 126 of the code: “the charge being interfering with persons engaged in lawful pursuits.”⁸⁵ Hall County’s Sheriff Crow worked in collaboration with white farmers and employers to end this criminal activity and asserted that they would

⁸² Royal Freeman Nash, “The Cherokee Fires,” *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

⁸³ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 178.

⁸⁴ “Local News,” *Gainesville News*, 16 October 1912.

⁸⁵ “Five Men Arrested,” *Gainesville Times*, 16 October 1912.

“break this thing up [themselves].”⁸⁶ On one occasion, Raymond Carlile, a white landowner living in Flowery Branch met the Hall County nightriders “as all like marauders ought to meet with—a shot gun at the hands of property owners.” Carlile was successful in capturing one of the five riders, and with the help of Sheriff Crow, secured the names of the rest.⁸⁷ By arresting several of the nightriders, Crow ensured that the group would not continue to grow, and made it clear that extralegal policing would not be tolerated in Hall County. Royal Nash claimed that, “Hall realized that it couldn’t afford to let the poor whites meddle with its colored labor supply. Therefore, word went out...to spend ten thousand dollars if necessary to crush the thing in its infancy.”⁸⁸

The Aftermath of the Nightriding Campaign in Forsyth County

The lives of hundreds of black men, women, and children were turned upside down during the fateful weeks following the race riot in Forsyth when the nightriding campaign began. Most were given twenty-four hours to leave their homes, some were given up to ten days, but all were forced to leave behind the lives they had built, and the communities they loved. Although some landowners were able to sell their land, though for extremely low prices, every black person driven out of Forsyth was robbed of their property, peace, and freedom. For many years, these Forsyth refugees were too afraid or ashamed to give their accounts of the expulsion. Several generations after the mass exodus, however, many of their descendants shared their stories of leaving Forsyth, resettling in new counties, and their hope for justice.

⁸⁶ “Arrest is Made in Race Trouble,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 31 January 1912.

⁸⁷ “Nightriders Arrested,” *Gainesville Times*, 16 October 1912.

⁸⁸ Royal Freeman Nash, “The Cherokee Fires,” *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

In 1987, the *Gainesville Times* published an article in which Dorothy Byrd, the daughter of former Forsyth resident Oliver Byrd, reflected on the stories her father had told her about his life as a black man in Forsyth. “Every so often,” she stated, “he would sit on the doorstep and talk...He would always sit with his chin in the palm of his hands and the tears would run down his sleeve.” She attempted to relate the inexplicable sense of loss and grief her father had endured at the time and in the following years. Dorothy recalled that her father had “cried many a day,” reflecting on what his family had left behind in Forsyth: “drums of syrup, canned goods, family keepsakes, and most important, farmland.”⁸⁹ Like Oliver Byrd, many of the black landowners in Forsyth were the children of former slaves; they and their parents had worked tirelessly to possess “that little piece of land [and] to erect a humble home, and dwell in peace and security at his own free will and pleasure”—that was “their idea, their desire and their hope.”⁹⁰

Forsyth County’s tax role in 1912 provides the names of fifty-seven black residents who owned land within the county, adding up to approximately 1,900 acres of land.⁹¹ However, of these fifty-seven, all of whom had to leave Forsyth in the weeks following the trial of Knox and Daniels, only twenty-four were able to sell their property according to county records.⁹² Unfortunately, most of these black landowners had no

⁸⁹ “Tears Flowed Years After Forced Exodus,” *Gainesville Time*, 22 January 1987.

⁹⁰ A. Warren Kelsey to Edward Atkinson, September 8, 1965, Atkinson Papers. Found in Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*

⁹¹ The 1912 census indicated that there were 172 “black farms” in Forsyth County. The 1912 Tax Roll, however, only provides the names of fifty-seven. A possible explanation to this discrepancy is that the census includes black farmers who were tenant farmers or worked on inherited farmland but did not possess the land deeds.

⁹²Forsyth County. *1912 Tax Roll*. Georgia State Archives, Atlanta. Found in Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 307-309.

choice but to sell their land at 25% or less of its value.⁹³ Alex Hunter, for example, was forced to sell the property he had just bought three months prior to the expulsion. Though he had bought the property for \$1,500 in December of 1912, he was forced to sell it for \$550 in March of 1913.⁹⁴ Most of the Forsyth refugees were unable to accomplish even this and were expelled from the county with only the clothes on their backs. With their churches burned or sold to white Forsyth residents, their homes threatened or destroyed, and their fields plundered, the black men and women fled to Hall and Fulton counties. There they hoped to find work and shelter, but many were forced into “shanties and dwelling houses [that] sheltered as many as six or more families.”⁹⁵ Charlie Harrell, a white citizen of Forsyth, wrote in his will the great sympathy he felt for the “darkies” who were unjustly run out of the county. “They were forced to take a loss that can never be repaid.” He lamented that their loss, “was written in the skies, in the winds and hearts of thousands of human beings.”⁹⁶

Although practically every white inhabitant of Forsyth was enraged by the crimes committed against Ellen Grice and Mae Crow, many believed that the threats and violence inflicted upon the black community were lawless and unjust. Reflecting on the events that transpired in September and October of 1912, a white merchant working in Forsyth confessed to Royal Nash, “those of us who should have known better looked on and said the niggers deserved to be killed.” He continued, “we didn’t mean it though, we didn’t foresee the consequences—but that low-gang took it as seriously as they do the advice of

⁹³ Grant, *The Way it was in the South*, 170.

⁹⁴ Forsyth County. 1912 Tax Roll. Georgia State Archives, Atlanta. Found in Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 136.

⁹⁵ “Trouble Brewing in Hill County,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 October 1912.

⁹⁶ Charlie Harrell's Will, black history file cabinet, HSC, Cumming, Georgia.

Tom Watson.”⁹⁷ These “low-gang” nightriders took it upon themselves to rid the county of every black person, using any means possible, even if that meant threatening other white citizens. In many cases, both in Forsyth and in other counties such as Hall and Dawson, white farmers and employers became the targets of nightriders too. “Leading white farmers,” the *Atlanta Constitution* claimed, “[were] given notices that their houses and barns would be burned or dynamited if they did not get rid of their negro tenants and their negro laborers at once.”⁹⁸ Whenever these white men and women refused to dismiss their black laborers or evict them from their land, the marauders followed through on their promises. Several homes of white residents were attacked, and one country store went up in flames when the owner did not dismiss his black employees.⁹⁹

Once the hundreds of African Americans who worked the fields, in the stores, and tended to the homes of white Forsyth residents were gone, white citizens remaining in the county faced many social and economic hardships. In the weeks following the execution of Knox and Daniels, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that “negro tenants fled by the score,” and that many white farmers were “practically without negro labor.”¹⁰⁰ Although the agricultural production of cotton and other cash crops was not on the same scale as that in the Cotton Belt, many white landowners nevertheless felt the sting of losing their black labor. Citizens in Cumming complained that they were forced to employ white laborers who charged much more than black men and women had and did less work. One townswomen, Mrs. Gober, reported that the white women taking over black jobs in well-to-do white homes demanded up to \$2.50 per day, whereas the black women were paid

⁹⁷ Royal Freeman Nash, “The Cherokee Fires,” *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

⁹⁸ “Negroes Flee from Forsyth,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 October 1912.

⁹⁹ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 131.

¹⁰⁰ “Ask Aid to End Crime in Forsyth,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 October 1912.

\$0.75. Furthermore, these white workers refused to fulfill certain tasks such as bringing in the fire wood and drawing water from the well. Likewise, a white dealer in fertilizer who had worked six teams of black drivers remarked that the “crackers were so shiftless and so touchy” that he couldn’t work them.¹⁰¹

Although the nightriders driving the mass exodus in 1912 were successful in achieving an all-white county, many white people in Forsyth actively opposed the violent campaign. Among those opposed to the expulsion and lawlessness were the white farmers and business owners that had employed black workers prior to 1912. There were most likely other white elites in Forsyth in addition to Dr. Ansel Strickland who supported the expulsion, but records indicate that many other white residents voiced their concerns regarding Forsyth’s deteriorating reputation throughout Georgia. Mayor Harris also feared that the nightriding would hinder Forsyth’s development into an industrious railroad county.

Several years before these affairs, in 1908, Harris was successful in winning a corporate charter to have the Northeastern Railroad built. There had been attempts to construct this railroad since the 1870s, but it was not until Harris became mayor that major steps were taken to start funding and construction. Political and civic leaders of Forsyth hoped that this railroad would connect the state capitol with the little town of Cumming to foster its industrial and economic development. In 1910, the *Atlanta Constitution* predicted that, “the line which is to be built from Atlanta to Cumming will prove one of the greatest developers of a great section...When that time comes millions

¹⁰¹ Royal Freeman Nash, “The Cherokee Fires,” *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

of dollars will be added to the taxable values of Georgia, and hundreds of thousands of people to north Georgia.”¹⁰² With his railroad in mind, as well as the continuous criticism Forsyth received from city newspapers, Harris strove with other concerned citizens to end the nightriding and reclaim a peaceful Forsyth.¹⁰³ Consequently, three weeks after the nightriding had begun in Forsyth, Mayor Harris presided over a meeting with citizens in which they sought a resolution to the nightriding problem and drafted a letter to Governor Brown. The letter petitioned the governor and Judge William T. Newman to investigate the “lawless parties” whose threats were, “unlawful and detrimental to the interest of the common people.”¹⁰⁴

Other letters were sent to the governor as well, asking for his intervention. A.J. Julian, a friend of the governor and resident of Forsyth, wrote: “I desire to call to your attention [to] the protection of the citizens of Ga. & especially of Forsyth...There is a gang of night marauders...that have run off about all of the Negroes & they are bold in their operations.” Julian ended his letter warning, “hundreds of acres of land...will not be cultivated [this year], which will be a loss in taxes both to state & counties. Labor now cannot be found to hire or rent. Is this state of affairs to go on? It will end in race war if some check is not put on these outrages.”¹⁰⁵ Despite Julian’s concerns, and those of the mayor and many other Forsyth citizens, Brown failed to place any ‘checks’ on the nightriders. Although Brown had shown force in preventing mob violence and disorder in the weeks between the attacks and the trial, he left it up to local leaders and the police force to handle this particular situation. The governor responded that he had no authority

¹⁰² “Trolley for North Georgia,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 1910.

¹⁰³ Phillips, *Blood at the Roots*, 9-11.

¹⁰⁴ Resolution of the Committee, found in Don Shadburn’s personal notes, courtesy of John Salter.

¹⁰⁵ A.J. Julian to Joseph Mackey Brown, 22 February 1913. Found in Phillips, *Blood at the Root*.

to take any steps “until the local authorities advise that they are unable to enforce the laws and properly protect life and property.”¹⁰⁶ The sheriff in Forsyth, however, never requested help in arresting the nightriders or ending the black expulsion.

Unlike Sheriff Crow in neighboring Hall County, Sheriff Reid of Forsyth never arrested a single nightrider within the county. On this note, Julian commented that “the sheriffs [were] cowards and fearful” in Forsyth.¹⁰⁷ Although Reid and his deputies were not capable of controlling the mob that lynched Rob Edwards, it is likely that they could have defeated the smaller group of nightriders. That is, of course, if the sheriff and deputies themselves were not members of this group. Evidence reveals that Reid most likely sympathized with the nightriders. Not only did he grow up with many of these farmers and white tenant workers, but in the 1920s he became a member of Sawnee Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan alongside many of them.¹⁰⁸ His membership in this organization demonstrates his racial ideology as well as his approval of vigilantism and extralegal policing. Had the police attempted to stop this lawlessness in 1912, the expulsion of black residents from Forsyth may have ended within the first few days as it had in Hall. Mr. Gober, a Forsyth resident, claimed: “If we could have gotten a few detectives sent in here right at the start and obtained the evidence to convict one or two of them, the rest would have been frightened out.”¹⁰⁹ As a result of Reid’s inaction, the

¹⁰⁶ “Mssrs. C.L. Harris & J.F. Echols,” October 21, 1912, Correspondence of Governor Joseph Mackay Brown, Georgia Archives, Morrow, GA. Found in Phillips, *Blood at the Root*.

¹⁰⁷ A.J. Julian to Joseph Mackey Brown, 22 February 1913. Found in Phillips, *Blood at the Root*.

¹⁰⁸ Don Shadburn, *The Cottonpatch Chronicles*, (Cumming, GA: Pioneer-Cherokee Heritage Series, 2003), Appendix H, 478-79.

¹⁰⁹ Royal Freeman Nash, “The Cherokee Fires,” *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

violence against black people continued until there were virtually none left in the county. This tolerance for vigilantism and nightriding reemerged whenever black visitors dared to cross the county line in following years.¹¹⁰

In February of 1913, three black former residents of Forsyth attempted to return to the county. Several days later, at about 3:00 am, “three separate explosions aroused practically the entire town...The concussion shook many buildings.” Ophelia Blake, Frank Smith, and Alex Graham, the first black people to try returning to their homes, were absolutely “terror stricken,” by the attack and left Forsyth forever. After this violent episode, no other black man or woman ever attempted to re-enter Forsyth.¹¹¹ Nearly a year after the nightriding campaigns commenced and five months after the three blacks’ homes were destroyed by dynamite, “Old Man Roper’s” black servant John Woolsey was falsely identified as “Forsyth’s only negro.”¹¹² In the first weeks of August 1913, Roper had received warnings from local “boys” to “get shet of him,” but Roper depended on Woolsey for everything and refused to comply with the nightriders’ demands. As a result, the nightriders cut the telephone lines, “put a stick of dynamite under [Woolsey’s] house...and blew him clean through the roof.” According to one white farmer, the attack did not kill him, “but it started him for Hall [County] right smart.”¹¹³

In *The Crisis*’ article on Forsyth, Nash claimed that, “the bleaching of Forsyth in no respect benefited the poor whites who drove the negroes out.”¹¹⁴ These nightriders had

¹¹⁰ Phillips, *Blood at the Roots*, 174-198.

¹¹¹ “Dynamite Exploded Under Negro House in Town on Cumming,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 February 1912.

¹¹² “Local News,” *Dahlonega Nugget*, 15 August 1913. The paper claimed that Woolsey was Forsyth’s last black resident, but the census of 1920 reports that there were 30 remaining in the county.

¹¹³ Royal Freeman Nash, “The Cherokee Fires,” *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

expelled their black neighbors from the county to eliminate competition in the labor pool, but in the aftermath of the mass exodus, these white tenant farmers and laborers were economically punished by wealthier Forsyth residents. Nash reported that the “small (white) capitalist class hit below the belt” after the expulsion, “retaliated on the active instigators of the “pogrom””. The nightriders were unable to rent from these wealthy landowners, store owners refused to give them credit, and many employers rejected them as day laborers. According to an interview Nash had with a Forsyth merchant, many riders were “starved” out of the county following the mass exodus because they were unable to find work and were shunned by white community leaders. Forsyth County’s economy and reputation as a whole suffered, as well. The cashier of the bank at Cumming told Nash that “Forsyth ha[d] no credit with the outside world.” Atlanta bankers refused to do business “in such lawless parts,” and insurance rates on properties in Forsyth skyrocketed.¹¹⁵ The circumstances in Forsyth grew so bleak that various business owners and wealthy citizens left for other counties where order was kept and black labor was available.¹¹⁶ As for Mayor Harris’s plans to develop the county by building a railroad, the charter ultimately fell through in 1915 after wealthy white families and their black chauffeurs were chased out of the county during the Seeing Georgia Tour.¹¹⁷

In the decades following the expulsion of 1912, white locals in Forsyth upheld the county’s racial policy. Every ten years or so, Forsyth would make state news headlines,

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ “Local News,” *Dahlonge Nugget*, 7 November 1913.

¹¹⁷ Phillips, *Blood at the Root*, 174. In 1915 a group of wealthy Southern men and women traveled throughout Georgia touring the various cities. Mayor Harris invited the group to visit Forsyth. Upon their arrival in Forsyth, white locals launched rocks at the vehicles since the chauffeurs were black. The tourists quickly fled Forsyth and news of this incident added to the defamation of the county.

with reports of attacks and threats that the county's residents made on black men and women who were visiting or simply passing through the county. For the most part, however, black people throughout Georgia, even throughout the country, were aware of Forsyth's racial identity as a "sundown county" and kept away from it. In the years following the exodus, when white employers strove to procure black labor once more, black workers responded that they would not move up there "for a thousand dollars."¹¹⁸ Similarly, when navigating through the state, black travelers avoided passing through Forsyth at all cost, even if it meant adding an hour or two on to their trip.

In 1915, a Forsyth resident told Nash "you see, the young fellers [in Forsyth] are growing up sort of with the idea that this is a white man's county."¹¹⁹ In the decades following the initial nightriding campaign, the "racial purity" of the county remained central to the identity of Forsyth residents. Though most inhabitants were negatively affected by the black exodus both socially and economically, the county remained effectively all-white until the turn of the twenty-first century. The local economy staggered, its reputation spread throughout the country, and Forsyth missed many opportunities for development due to its racial policy and vigilante impulse. Regardless, many white men and women living in the county took pride in Forsyth's white character and employed violence whenever necessary to preserve it. Seventy-five years after the race riot of 1912 and the subsequent black exodus, hundreds of North Georgians flooded into Forsyth to reaffirm their support for the county's culture of intolerance.

¹¹⁸ "Local News," *Dahlonega Nugget*, 5 June 1914.

¹¹⁹ Royal Freeman Nash, "The Cherokee Fires," *The Crisis* II.I (1915).

Conclusion

In January of 1987, civil rights leader Hosea Williams traveled to Cumming, Georgia with hundreds of white and black activists to raise awareness of Forsyth's status as "a white man's county." The goal of Williams's Brotherhood March was to demand that civic leaders at the state and local level protect African Americans who wished to move in to the county. Although black men and women had avoided Forsyth for decades, by the end of the 1980s many felt that Forsyth could no longer be permitted to operate as an all-white county controlled by racist residents and the Ku Klux Klan. The civil rights activists who traveled from Atlanta to Cumming, Georgia on January 17th, 1987 were determined to replace the county's "violence and intimidation," with "brotherhood and understanding."¹²⁰

It was predicted that the Brotherhood March of 1987 would be a simple, non-violent march, so when the activists drove into Forsyth County they were shocked by the hundreds of protesters that awaited them. These counter-protesters were primarily white men who lived in or near Forsyth, but sprinkled throughout the mob were women and young children jeering at the activists, as well. Dozens of men were dressed in their white-hooded cloaks. Stones and other objects were hurled into the crowd of activists, and signs reading "Niggers, Go Home!", "Keep Forsyth White," and "Racial Purity is Forsyth's Security," were dispersed throughout the crowd.¹²¹ Many of the Brotherhood participants were injured during the event, including Hosea Williams who was hit in the

¹²⁰ "Thousands in Civil Rights March Jeered by Crowd in Georgia Town," *The New York Times*, 25 January 1987.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

head with a rock.¹²² Present as well were dozens of journalists and broadcasting teams that captured the day's events for the world to see.¹²³

Americans throughout the country were shocked as they read newspaper articles and watched the newsreels revealing the violence that occurred in Forsyth County. Headlines such as, "Klan Group Stones Marchers in All-White County of Georgia," appeared in major newspapers throughout the nation.¹²⁴ A month after the march, Oprah Winfrey brought even more attention to Forsyth by traveling to the county and filming an episode in which she interviewed dozens of citizens—many of whom were opposed to integration. Ultimately, because of the Brotherhood March and the widespread media coverage it received, Forsyth was forced to reevaluate and change its racial policy. Supported by the state, Hosea Williams's demand to establish a biracial committee in Forsyth was accomplished.¹²⁵ This committee of thirteen worked to "study the racial attitudes and practices in Forsyth," and to encourage black migration into the county by creating a more hospitable community. Many white families and businesses in Forsyth supported these efforts, believing that it was "time for change," and hoping to redeem Forsyth County's reputation throughout the United States.¹²⁶

In the months and years following the Brotherhood March of 1987, Forsyth's black population gradually increased. Numerous black families migrated into the county's neighborhoods hoping to participate in Forsyth's rapidly developing economy.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Phillips, *Blood at the Root*, 207-220.

¹²⁴ "Klan Group Stones Marches in All-White County of Georgia," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 January 1987.

¹²⁵ "Demands issued by Civil Rights Leader to an All-White Georgia County," *The New York Times*, 31 January 1987.

¹²⁶ *The Oprah Show*, "Oprah Visits a County Where No Black Person Had Lived for 75 Years." Episode 25. Directed by Joseph C. Terry. Oprah Winfrey Network, February 1987.; "It's a Battleground for "us" and "them"", *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 February 1987.

Despite this intentional improvement, Forsyth's racial composition has remained overwhelmingly white. Following the events in 1987, the county's black population grew from one African American resident in 1980, to 684 by the year 2000. These 684 black inhabitants, however, made up less than 1% of the county's total population. The last decennial census in 2010 indicates that the black population in Forsyth increased to 4,510 residents. The county's racial makeup was 85.4% white and only 2.6% black.¹²⁷ Likewise, many counties throughout northern Georgia that underwent the nightriding campaigns of the early twentieth century remain essentially all-white to this day. These counties include Dawson, Towns, and Union, which do not contain black populations that exceed 0.5% of the total.¹²⁸

The countless stories of racial cleansings that occurred throughout the United States in the twentieth century help to make sense of what America looks like today. In thousands of towns and counties spread across the nation, few if any African Americans are present. As with the case of Forsyth, many of these counties in Arkansas, Missouri, Kentucky, and Indiana have remained predominantly white over the span of several generations.¹²⁹ Many of these sundown counties were established as the result of nightriding campaigns that forced small black populations into neighboring cities and towns. Historical examinations of all-white communities in America debunk the commonly held notion that many places are predominantly white "coincidentally," or

¹²⁷ Social Explorer Tables (SE), Census 1990, 2000, 2010, population by race, Census Bureau; Social Explorer.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Robby Henson. *Trouble Behind [video-recording]*. (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1990).

because black people choose to live elsewhere.¹³⁰ Rather, Forsyth’s racial past and those of other sundown towns reveal that these white jurisdictions did not emerge accidentally, nor were they the result of black criminality or misbehavior.

Just as the history of nightriding and racial expulsion help reveal the nature of all-white jurisdictions in America, this history also explains many of the economic and social tensions experienced by many African Americans today. In the documentary *Banished*, NAACP lawyer Sherrilyn Ifill explains the long-term ramifications of racial cleansings on black families. “The loss of land was really devastating,” she claimed— “It was not something that (they could) easily recover.” Furthermore, Ifill explains that many black individuals were forced to start their lives over “once, twice, and sometimes three times,” as a result of racial violence in the mid-twentieth century.¹³¹ Not only did this vicious cycle take a toll on black families and communities psychologically and socially, but it affected their economic futures as well. Whereas most white farmers were able to pass down land to their descendants, and other white citizens left their families property and economic security, black refugees forced from sundown towns were often robbed of their ability to “hand down a legacy.”¹³² Although many of the descendants of these black individuals have created rich and successful lives for themselves and their families, there is no doubt that this disturbance in their ancestors’ pasts has affected their lives today.

Further examination of nightriding, black expulsions, and sundown towns is required. Throughout the United States, there are thousands of towns that attribute their

¹³⁰ Ibid. This documentary focuses on Corbin, Kentucky—a sundown town. In 1915 nightriders expelled black workers from the town, similar to the nightriding in Forsyth County, Georgia.

¹³¹ Two Tone Productions, *Banished: American Ethnic Cleansings*, Film, Directed by Marco Williams. (2007, New York: Corporation for Public Broadcasting).

¹³² Henson, *Trouble Behind*.

all-white status to coincidence or some black crime or race riot that occurred decades before.¹³³ As was the case with Forsyth, however, most of these communities went white not because of a single episode that occurred in the past. Rather, these towns, cities, and neighborhoods have remained forcibly white for various political, economic, and social reasons which resulted in prolonged struggles to keep minority groups out. By examining the whitewashing of counties that occurred throughout the country, another form of racial violence and injustice is brought to the forefront—one that continues to affect the United States to this day.

¹³³ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 175.

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