

*Come as You Are, Hoods Not Required: The 1942 Lynching
of James Edward Person*

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There are no Negroes . . . in the rural community where Person was shot, and in this fact, may lie the key to the killing. This is the old story of the fate of the stranger in the midst of a homogenous culture. A primitive society will not tolerate a newcomer who looks and acts and smells different from its members because he represents a potential threat to their security. Even the rural residents of east-central Illinois should have been more sophisticated. Instead, they reacted typically to the age-old fear.¹

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1. Marjorie McKenzie, "Rumor Caused Mob to Lynch Man," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 14, 1943.

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On October 6, 1942, a missing-person announcement came across the airwaves of WTJS, a country music radio station in Jackson, Tennessee. Three days later, a notice regarding the same missing person appeared in a Kansas City, Kansas, newspaper called the *Plaindealer*. Christopher Columbus Person, the Black man responsible for both the announcement and the notice, was searching for his son James Edward Person, an honorably discharged US Army veteran who resided with family in Somerville, Tennessee. According to Christopher, who had not seen or heard from his son since he left Somerville en route to a relative's house in Jackson on September 19, James was thirty-three years old, six feet tall, and weighed 170 pounds. James's military records suggested that he probably was no taller than five feet five inches; however, dark brown hair and eyes unquestionably complemented his dark brown complexion.²

Before leaving Somerville for Jackson, James Person donned brown wool suit trousers, a brown hat, a brown work shirt, and brown leather shoes. He was mentally ill and in the process of getting a divorce. According to contemporaneous newspaper reports and historian Brent M. S. Campney, some Somerville residents suspected that Person boarded a freight train in Jackson on September 20 bound for Chicago in search of employment.³ Other Somerville residents thought Person planned to seek medical care in Chicago. That Christopher Person wanted to locate and bring James home to Somerville so that licensed physicians could treat his illness was unequivocal. Thus, the worried father offered a twenty-five-dollar reward to anyone with reliable information about James's whereabouts. Unbeknownst to Christopher, his wife Topsy (or Topsyie), and their other children, Julius, Ethel Mae, and Ransom, they never again would see James alive: a White lynch mob slew him in Illinois on October 12.⁴

As one of the earliest twentieth-century lynchings outside the South to result in federal officials indicting and convicting White citizens for violating the civil rights of a Black citizen, James Person's 1942 lynching deserves considerable scholarly attention. The present article relies heavily on FBI reports, local and regional newspapers, public archives, and oral histories. While each one of

2. "Description of a Missing Person," *Kansas City (KS) Plaindealer*, October 9, 1942; Christopher Person, interview by FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766 (hereafter cited as Person-FBI interview), National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland.

3. In *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest* (Urbana, IL, 2019), Brent M. S. Campney wrote that James E. Person traveled through the Midwest in search of employment (177). If Campney was correct, Person followed in the footsteps of countless other Black Southerners during the Great Migration of the 1910s and previous exoduses from the South. My research, however, indicates that Person left the Jackson, Tennessee, residence of his widowed aunt Jimmie (Jimmy, Jimmie) B. Tobridge on September 20, 1942, and headed to Chicago, Illinois, not in search of employment but to escape his mental anguish.

4. Person-FBI interview.

those archival records is a crucial research tool, the FBI reports are indispensable. Prior to the 1940s, federal agents occasionally investigated White citizens for violating the civil rights of Black citizens, but their investigations did not result in trial or conviction. Consequently, historian Kidada E. Williams noted in 2014, most lynching victims not only were isolated from their kin in the last moments of their lives but also in contemporaneous accounts and later histories written about them. The FBI records on Person's lynching facilitate the accurate reconstruction of events before, during, and after the lynch mob took his life.⁵

As a case study, the present article has three main purposes. It comprehensively analyzes Person's lynching, which no scholar has explored in-depth. That purpose underscores the two others. While scholars have devoted much attention to lynch mobs; various social, economic, political, and cultural reasons for lynchings; regions where most lynchings occurred; and the growth and decline of lynchings over time, scholars have not devoted as much attention to lynching victims themselves, that is, their full humanity and personhood, as Williams observed in 2021. By aligning Person's lynching within the broad historical contexts of white supremacy and violence in the Midwest, the article achieves its second purpose. Of equal significance, the article examines the resistance and self-assertion undertaken by Christopher Person and other Black citizens who attempted to hold the White citizens who lynched James accountable for their deadly act.⁶

Geography is of utmost importance to this article. James Person's tragic ordeal began at Libertyville in Vigo County, Indiana; ended in nearby Stratton Township in Edgar County, Illinois; and was based on multiple factors. At the lynching's core was a deeply racist ideology long held by innumerable White people who hated, feared, or criminalized Black people in general and Black men in particular, especially unknown or ostensibly suspicious-acting Black men. The dearth of Black people in the Midwest deepened such racism. According to historian Debra A. Reid, fewer than 159,000 lived in the region before World War II. Their numbers had not increased significantly by the time of Person's wartime lynching even though the Great Migration had witnessed millions of Black people relocating from the South to the Midwest, Northeast, and other regions.⁷

5. Kidada E. Williams, "Regarding the Aftermaths of Lynching," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (December 2014): 856.

6. Kidada E. Williams, "Writing Victims' Personhoods and People into the History of Lynching," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 20 (2021): 148–56. In this article, I utilize Jennifer Sdunzik's description of the Midwest, which includes Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin; *The Geography of Hate: The Great Migration Through Small-Town America* (Urbana, IL, 2023), 7.

7. Debra A. Reid, "The Whitest Occupation? African Americans in the Rural Midwest, 1940–2010," in *The Rural Midwest Since World War II*, ed. J. L. Anderson (Dekalb, IL, 2014), 204–54.

Reid's fellow historian Jennifer Sdunzik concluded that the Great Migration was an impetus for numerous White Midwesterners imagining the region as a location exclusively for them.⁸ In Vigo and Edgar Counties, multiple generations of White people manufactured and then enforced racial norms and mores demanding that all Black people, not simply men, know and accept their so-called natural place: beneath White people. That demand was the quintessence of white supremacy, which legal scholar Frances Ansley described aptly as a "political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings."⁹

White supremacy in parts of 1940s Vigo County—organized in 1818 and named after Italian-American Revolutionary War hero, fur trader, and education advocate Francis Vigo—often manifested itself in acts of racist intolerance grounded in the belief that a non-White person should not be seen or heard unless granted permission by a White person. Similar intolerance existed in parts of Edgar County, which Illinois lawmakers formed out of Clark County in 1823, chartered in 1869, and named after John Edgar. He was an Irish-American Revolutionary War hero, statesman, merchant, and landowner who became one of the wealthiest men in Illinois. Whether Edgar ever visited the county that ultimately bore his name is shrouded in mystery.¹⁰

8. Sdunzik, *Geography of Hate*.

9. Frances Lee Ansley, "Stirring the Ashes: Race, Class and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship," *Cornell Law Review* 74, no. 6 (September 1989): 1024n129. On January 25, 1942, nine months before the lynching of James Person, a White mob in Sikeston, Missouri, lynched Cleo Wright, a Black naval veteran and cotton worker from Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Prosecutors imposed federal statutes on Wright's suspected lynchers. Months earlier, on May 30, 1941, a federal grand jury in Chicago weighed the evidence against Lexington, Georgia, plantation owner William T. Oliver and his Atlanta-based attorney Hamilton McWhorter Sr. for "conspiring to deprive six Chicago negroes of their civil rights under the 13th (slavery) amendment . . . and to return them to peonage after they had escaped from the plantation" on which the Chicagoans had worked involuntarily for free due to the fear of Oliver "lashing them with straps and causing them to be imprisoned or sent to the chain gang if they attempted to escape"; "Flashes: Slave Attempt," *Seattle (WA) Star*, May 30, 1941 (first quotation); "Attorney General Names Two for Cunningham Peonage Prosecution," *Call* (Kansas City, MO), May 1, 1942 (second quotation). The federal government attempted to bring Oliver and McWhorter to trial on two occasions, but two separate grand juries refused to indict them. "Georgians Freed of Peonage Charges," *Dothan (AL) Eagle*, January 14, 1943. For examples of primary and second accounts of the Wright ordeal, see "Negro Is Lynched by Missouri Crowd," *New York Times*, January 26, 1942; and Dominic J. Capeci Jr., *The Lynching of Cleo Wright* (Lexington, KY, 1998).

10. See, e.g., Henry Gannett, *The Origin of Certain Place Names in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC, 1905), 114, 310. Francis (né Giuseppe Maria Francesco) Vigo assisted in developing the Jefferson Academy in Vincennes, Indiana. Today, the academy is Vincennes University.

That many White law enforcement personnel in both Vigo and Edgar were apathetic toward non-White people, especially Black people, during the 1940s is more certain than Edgar's visiting the eponymous county in Illinois. Besides seeking assistance from lynch mobs composed of ordinary and leading White people—or “best citizens,” as many White people of all echelons had contended for decades about such mobs—law enforcement personnel routinely conceded power and authority to those mobs, which according to historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage could be classified as one of four types: mass, posse, private, or terrorist.¹¹ Some mobs included not only the relatives, friends, or associates of law enforcement personnel but also law enforcement personnel themselves.¹² For example, James Person was the victim of a posse lynching: two law enforcement agents led it, and they welcomed any armed White man, woman, or teenager who wished to join them.

According to historian Edward L. Ayers, there is a direct correlation between lynching bees and apathetic law enforcement systems. A concession of leadership, Ayers explains, bolstered lynchers' belief that they had as much power as—if not more power than—local law enforcement personnel. Regarding James Person, in particular, his lynchers presumed that no police officer, county sheriff, or state's attorney in Indiana or Illinois would enforce criminal statutes against them for slaying a Black man, even an honorably discharged army veteran. Parenthetically, an unintended consequence of modern technology played a key role in Person's lynching: Owing to telephone party, or shared, lines, information about Person's alleged criminality spread relatively fast among White residents in Vigo and later in Edgar. Party lines allowed law enforcement personnel, members of the lynch mob, and witnesses to the lynching to converge on Person's precise location faster than they would have been able to otherwise.¹³

“A RED RECORD”

Ayers, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Manfred Berg, Brent Campney, Christopher Waldrep, and other historians have argued convincingly that early twentieth-century lynching was part of a long continuum of Jim and Jane Crow violence, both mental and physical, that also included threatened and actual incidents of

11. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, IL, 1993), 17–48; “The Unseen Eyes Have Seen,” *Kansas City (MO) Star*, July 31, 1921 (quotation).

12. See Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York, 1992); Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*; and Brent M. S. Campney, “The Veneer of Civilization Washed Off: Anti-Black Posse-Lynchings in the Twentieth-Century Rural Midwest,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 119, no. 1 (March 2023): 3.

13. Ayers, *Promise of the New South*.

homicide, rape, arson, whipping, and related brutalities.¹⁴ Primary sources assembled and archived by the NAACP, NAACP members such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Tuskegee Institute (later University), and numerous other reliable entities and individuals prove that Black people were the victims of most lynching activity. Familiar with that “red record,” to quote Wells-Barnett, Berg estimated that 72 percent of lynching victims were Black.¹⁵ As per sociologist Arthur F. Raper’s estimation, Black people accounted for more than 80 percent of victims.¹⁶ Actual percentages varied by time and place, but the barbarity all victims faced, Campney wrote in 2019, included “house burnings[,] homicides, beatings, floggings, sexual assaults, [and] killings by the police,” among other public or state agents, as well as by private citizens.¹⁷ Decades before Campney, Raper asserted that recurrent scenes of burning, dragging, mutilating, and torturing reflected the “presence of sadistic tendencies among the lynchers.”¹⁸

Utilizing NAACP records and other primary sources, historian Robert Zangrando calculated that lynchers killed more than 4,760 people in the United States between the 1880s and the 1940s, the high tide of post-Civil War and post-emancipation lynching activity.¹⁹ Besides African Americans such as James Person, victims included Asian Americans, Indigenous Americans, and Latino Americans. Lynchings also claimed the lives of European Americans who strove to help erase the color line by supporting social-minority businesses, educational institutions, voting or officeholding campaigns, and related acts or phenomena that lynchers deemed unnatural or unpatriotic. Because there was no unified system to formally track lynching activity in the United States, and racist law enforcement personnel regularly were party to or indifferent toward such activity, the exact number of lynchings throughout the country remains unknown. However, at least 3,200 verified lynchings occurred in the South during the period Zangrando examined.²⁰

14. Ibid.; Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (Chicago, 2011); Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, and W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997); Campney, *Hostile Heartland*; Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (Urbana, IL, 2004); Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1933; repr., Montclair, NJ, 1969); Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York, 2002).

15. Berg, *Popular Justice*, 92; Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892–1893–1894* (Chicago, 1894).

16. Raper, *Tragedy of Lynching*, I.

17. Campney, *Hostile Heartland*, 9.

18. Raper, *Tragedy of Lynching*, I.

19. Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia, 1980), 4–7.

20. Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade Against Lynching*.

Most late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century lynchings took place in the South. As carryovers from chattel slavery, millions of Black people resided in that region. An equal number of White people shared fanatical visions about restoring the antebellum status quo of nearly total White domination in the South. Unreconstructed Confederates, Confederate sympathizers, and their like-minded descendants were the principal restoration fanatics. As one White South Carolinian wrote in 1936, “Who among us of that first post-bellum generation in the South cannot share that simple natural feeling that the Confederate cause is ‘ours?’ A ‘Lost Cause,’ a dead issue, but in our hearts still ‘our side.’”²¹

Since the Union’s 1865 victory, some White supporters of the Confederacy in James Person’s home state of Tennessee, in South Carolina, and elsewhere in the South had attempted to prove that their cause was neither lost nor dead by drafting and passing a cornucopia of discriminatory local, state, and federal legislation. Many others tried to reinforce the thick color line by opposing progressive legislation designed to help shrink, if not eradicate, that line. In 1918, White Republican congressman Leonidas C. Dyer of Missouri, a slaveholding border state during the Civil War, introduced a bill “to protect citizens of the United States against lynching in default of protection by” municipal, county, or state governments by designating lynching as a federal crime.²² Southern congressmen belonging to the Democratic Party—or “the White Man’s Party,” as it was known in Tennessee, South Carolina, and elsewhere in the South—killed Dyer’s bill.²³ According to the Democrats, lynching was a legitimate preventative for rape. Moreover, any law that governed lynching should have reflected local majority, that is, White, opinion. Such beliefs epitomized the state’s rights argument that innumerable Confederates made regarding slavery.

When legal barriers to Black agency and universal equality were insufficient protectors of White rule during the early twentieth century, many White people turned or returned to mental or physical violence, especially in the South. But the lower rate of lynching and similarly tragic forms of White-on-Black violence in other regions was not the result of White people who were less racist or more sympathetic to the plight of Black people than their southern counterparts. Instead, Black social capital and regional differences in both state laws and political economies resulted in Black people outside the South being less subject to White control.

21. “Our Side,” *State* (Columbia, SC), August 10, 1936.

22. *To Protect Citizens of the United States Against Lynching in Default of Protection by the States . . .* (Washington, DC, 1918).

23. “Senator Morgan on the Race Problem,” *Journal and Tribune* (Knoxville, TN), January 12, 1900.

The midwestern lynching of James Person in October 1942 demonstrates that anti-Black violence was not a uniquely southern phenomenon. Ida Wells-Barnett stated as much in a 1909 speech, titled “Lynching, Our National Crime,” that she delivered at the National Negro Conference in New York.²⁴ Nevertheless, relatively few twentieth-century scholars published studies on lynching activity that happened outside the South, particularly in the rural Midwest. Fortunately, pertinent lynching scholarship on nonsouthern regions has grown in the twenty-first century. One scholar, Brent Campney, contended that acts of racial and ethnic violence were as integral to White control of society in midwestern states like Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, and Ohio as they were in Tennessee, South Carolina, and the nine other southern states that officially made up the Confederacy during the Civil War.²⁵

Campney’s contention is provocative; however, both qualitative and quantitative data reveal significant postwar regional differences. For example, in the South, more than in the Midwest, violent White people subjected their Black contemporaries to legal political disenfranchisement, unfair labor practices, unequal wages, and extralegal physical terrorism, among other unjust measures. Such occurrences rendered most southern Black people less powerful at the societal level than many midwestern Black people. Consequently, in the Midwest, where some White people may not have been as threatened by the presence of Black people because cities and towns were somewhat small and overall Black populations were relatively low, White concern about, or outright fear of, Black people tended to manifest itself in ways less violent than fatal lynchings.

James Person’s 1942 lynching was an exception to that general rule about lynching fatalities. His was among the approximately 3 percent of lynchings that occurred outside the South from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, according to data compiled by scholar Sundiata K. Cha-Jua.²⁶ But, as Cha-Jua declared in 2013, “that three percent mattered. It translated into the murder of more than one hundred persons,” including at least seventeen Black persons in Illinois between 1877 and 1943.²⁷ Only one

24. Ida Wells-Barnett, “Lynching Our National Crime,” *Proceedings of the National Negro Conference 1909* ([New York, 1909]), 174–79.

25. Campney, *Hostile Heartland*.

26. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, “‘The Cry of the Negro Should Not Be Remember the Maine, but Remember the Hanging of Bush’: African American Responses to Lynching in Decatur, Illinois, 1893,” in *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South*, ed. Michael J. Pfeifer (Urbana, IL, 2013), 165–89. In the thirteen years since Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua’s “three percent mattered” statement, significant scholarly work on the Midwest has been produced, making these figures unlikely to reflect the current state of the literature.

27. *Ibid.*, 169. Pfeifer’s appendix lists and describes thirty lynching deaths in Illinois from the years 1877 to 1943. Seventeen decedents were Black, eleven were White, one was Italian, and one

of those seventeen was a verified lynching from the year 1942, and Person was the victim.²⁸ Within the past eleven years, there has been a proliferation of scholarship on violence within the Midwest. It proves that the overall numbers of African American lynched is more substantial than Cha-Jua declared.²⁹

JAMES PERSON AND FAYETTE COUNTY, TENNESSEE

James Person was born to Topsy and Christopher Person on September 16, 1909, in Somerville, Tennessee, the county seat of Fayette County. Decades later, after James's death, a close relative remembered Topsy, Christopher, and James's elder siblings Julius and Ethel describing a youthful James as a jokester and a comic, a child who loved to laugh and who enjoyed amusing others.³⁰ Certain occurrences in Somerville were not laughable, however. For example, in the spring of 1915, when James was six, White residents in the town accused a Black farmer named Thomas Brooks of murdering two White prominent landholders and injuring a White deputy sheriff.³¹ As was the case in many former Confederate states, the mere accusation of such criminality was enough for White law enforcement personnel in Somerville to justify arresting and jailing Brooks, who was about forty years old and married.³²

On April 20, 1915, a group of Somerville police officers transported Brooks to a jail in Memphis, approximately fifty miles west, to safeguard Brooks from White vigilantes. About a week later, during the early morning hours of April 28, as a White judge and three White police officers returned Brooks to Somerville for a preliminary court hearing, a mass and terroristic mob composed of 100 to

was of unknown ethnicity. The appendix indicates that James Person died in 1943, not 1942; *Lynching Beyond Dixie*, 261–317, esp. 277–80.

28. *Ibid.*, 277–80.

29. See Campney, "Veneer of Civilization" (adding at least twelve additional lynchings between 1910 and 1930); and Charles Seguin and David Rigby, "National Crimes: A New National Data Set of Lynchings in the United States, 1883 to 1941," *Socius* 5 (2019), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2378023119841780>.

30. Carolyn Person Cooper, interview by Renatto V. Carr, March 14, 2020 (hereafter cited as Cooper-Carr interview). Cooper is James Person's niece. Her father Ransom Person was James's younger brother.

31. See R. P. Duckworth, "That Fayette Lynching," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), May 2, 1915; "Lynching of Negro Near Somerville," *Chattanooga (TN) News*, April 28, 1915; "Mob Lynches Murderer of Day and Hawkins," *Chattanooga (TN) Daily News*, April 29, 1915; "Negro Slayer of Day and Hawkins Is Quietly Lynched," *Nashville Tennessean*, April 29, 1915; and untitled article, *Fayette Falcon* (Somerville, TN), April 30, 1915.

32. See "Lynching," *Crisis* 10, no. 2 (June 1915): 71–72; "Negro Assassin Lynched by Mob," *Batesville (AR) Daily Guard*, April 29, 1915; and "Negro Taken from Officers; Lynched," *Commercial* (Memphis, TN), April 29, 1915.

200 White men seized and then drove Brooks toward a bridge of the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway. Once there, they hanged him from the bridge's trestlework.³³

The media covered the Brooks hanging extensively. The Batesville, Arkansas, *Daily Guard* newspaper reported: "So quietly did the mob execute its plans that people sleeping only a short distance away from the scene of the lynching did not know of the occurrence until daylight."³⁴ Other papers stated the lynchers suspended Brooks's body "low enough for travelers along the road . . . to reach up and spin the corpse around."³⁵ Yet another paper alleged that "hundreds of kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. . . . Women and children were there by the score. At a number of county schools[,] the day's routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man."³⁶ Hardly able to contain his perverse excitement at the gruesome event, which some White people made a family affair, one White male journalist who wrote for a Somerville paper called the *Fayette Falcon* remarked: Brooks "is gone and this county is better [off] for his taking away. [Such] negroes had just as well learn that this is a white man's country and that negroes of their ilk will sooner or later get what they deserve."³⁷

James Person might have been too young to understand fully the particulars of the Brooks lynching or the symbolism of the despicable pronouncement by the White journalist, but adults Christopher and Topsy Person certainly understood such gruesome displays of race-based violence and vitriol. They also understood how fast and easily, with seeming impunity, White vigilantes could extinguish precarious Black lives in Somerville or virtually anywhere else in the erstwhile Confederacy. Despite blatant racial oppression, which in addition to physical violence entailed massive political disenfranchisement and limited educational or employment opportunities beyond agriculture, a small set of Black families that included the Persons owned large plots of land in Fayette County. At one point, Christopher had at least one hundred acres. As a further testament to his exceptionalism as a Black man in Fayette, he was a school-teacher, minister, and business owner. His Blue Star Café operated as an eatery during the daytime hours and a juke joint at night.³⁸

33. See Thomas A. Gailor, "A Shocking Story to Advertise Memphis," *Vicksburg (MS) Herald*, April 30, 1915; Leon F. Litwack, *How Free Is Free? The Long Death of Jim Crow* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 23; "Mob Lynches Murderer of Day and Hawkins"; and "A Tennessee Lynching," *Chattanooga (TN) News*, April 30, 1915.

34. "Negro Assassin Lynched by Mob."

35. Gailor, "Shocking Story"; "Tennessee Lynching."

36. "Negro Slayer of Day and Hawkins Is Quietly Lynched."

37. Untitled articles, *Fayette Falcon* (Somerville, TN), April 30, 1915.

38. Cooper-Carr interview.

The Persons valued academics, but James stopped going to school after the eighth grade. Extant records do not provide a reason for the stoppage or much else about his teenage to young adult years, but students of all ethnicities routinely had to quit attending school during the financially difficult 1920s to earn money. James worked as a service station attendant at a general store before marrying Somerville native Mattie B. Tucker on December 22, 1931. They separated on August 15, 1933. At some point after their separation, Mattie relocated to Los Angeles, where she labored as a domestic for a prosperous White family: Andrew Z. Meyer, his wife Madeleine R., and their children Andrew D. and Jane. The son of a wealthy merchant, the elder Andrew became a successful insurance broker in Westwood, Beverly Hills, and other affluent places.³⁹

On or about June 19, 1941, while James Person was in the US Army, Mattie Person filed for divorce. In the filing, she claimed that he deserted and then abandoned her years earlier. James signed the divorce papers on July 11. At the time, he was stationed at Fort Oglethorpe in northwest Georgia, a matter discussed later in this article. James agreed to waive all future divorce proceedings, allowing the court to enter a default judgment, if necessary, in absentia. First, the presiding judge served a marriage dissolution petition against James on August 21. James had one year to respond lest the court dissolve his marriage. Whether he ever responded is unknown, but the judge granted Mattie a divorce judgment on October 6, 1942—the same date, incidentally, that radio station WTJS in Jackson, Tennessee, broadcast the missing-person announcement for which Christopher Person was responsible. On October 9, the date a similar announcement appeared in the Kansas City, Kansas, *Plaindealer* newspaper, the presiding judge entered the final judgment of divorce into the court. Neither the judge, Christopher, nor Mattie knew at the time, but James, an army veteran, was facing a battle more challenging and significant than any marital struggle or combat training he faced in Somerville or at Camp Oglethorpe, respectively: James was battling for his life.

JAMES PERSON'S MILITARY SERVICE

In September 1942, a month before a White mob lynched James Person, NAACP secretary Walter F. White quoted a student attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU) in the South. Earlier that year, the student responded to a professor's question about what would happen should Adolf Hitler-led Germany and other Axis powers win the war. The student said the US "Army jim-crows us. The Navy lets us serve only as messmen. The Red Cross refuses

39. See "Meyer Estate Left to Family," *Citizen-News* (Hollywood, CA), June 16, 1943; and "Residential Deals Involve \$30,000," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1939.

our blood. Employers and labor unions shut us out. Lynchings continue. We are disfranchised, jim-crowed, spat upon. What more,” the HBCU student asked, “could Hitler do than that?”⁴⁰

The student’s question was legitimate. As historian and law professor Davison M. Douglas recalled, some Black Americans who were eligible for military service initially refused to enlist voluntarily and protested conscription.⁴¹ Sociologist Horace R. Cayton Jr. added that many Black Americans were “sullen and wished to see their country brought to its knees and made to realize that without them the war could not be won.”⁴² Speaking for that faction, the HBCU student whom White quoted proclaimed: “I am convinced that [an Axis powers triumph] is the only thing that will teach these white people some sense—their knowing what it means to be oppressed.”⁴³ Many more Black Americans did not advocate for the country’s demise, but they did realize that Black Americans faced a two-prong battle to secure “victory over our enemies at home and victory over our enemies on the battlefields abroad.”⁴⁴ Numerous Black Americans were hopeful the “Double Victory” campaign would help bring about long-denied civil rights in the United States and thereby move the country closer to realizing its founders’ oft-repeated democratic ideals.⁴⁵

The undemocratic proclivities of countless White Americans notwithstanding, thousands of Black Americans enlisted in the military during World War II. According to historian John M. Blum, “when blacks began to enlist in 1940, they did so at rates 60 percent above their proportion of the population, [but] the army assigned them almost exclusively to segregated units and trained them almost entirely for noncombatant tasks as laborers, stevedores, and servants.”⁴⁶ James Person registered with the Selective Service System on October 16. He

40. Walter White, “What the Negro Thinks of the Army,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 223 (September 1942): 67.

41. Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865–1954* (New York, 2005).

42. Horace R. Cayton, “An Awakening: The Negro Now Fights for Democratic Rights of All the World’s Peoples,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 27, 1943, and “The Negro’s Challenge,” *St. Paul (MN) Recorder*, August 20, 1943. See also Lee Finkle, *Forum for Protest: The Black Press During World War II* (Teaneck, NJ, 1975), 212.

43. White, “What the Negro Thinks of the Army,” 67.

44. Beth Bailey and David Farber, “The Double-V Campaign in World War II Hawaii: African Americans, Racial Ideology, and Federal Power,” *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 817.

45. James G. Thompson, “Should I Sacrifice to Live ‘Half-American?’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 31, 1942.

46. John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York, 1976), 184.

was thirty-one years old, separated from Mattie, and held a grammar school education. On April 12, 1941, the thirty-two-year-old Person was processed for induction into the US Army. A conscript, not volunteer, James held the rank of private and completed basic and subsequent training at Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia, his first active-duty station.⁴⁷

Private Person remained at Fort Oglethorpe for almost seven months before military officials transferred him to the Enlisted Reserve Corps at Camp Livingston in Alexandria, Louisiana, on November 7. While stationed at the two Lower South military bases, Person found himself immersed in more white supremacy than he had experienced in his hometown of Somerville, Tennessee, in the Upper South. Wherever military officials stationed him, some local, state, or federal law sanctioned racially segregated military facilities. Such laws seemed to affirm the personal thoughts and beliefs of countless White commissioned and noncommissioned military personnel who asserted that their non-White contemporaries were inferior and, therefore, should occupy subordinate positions. Occasionally, those and related thoughts, beliefs, and assertions resulted in violence, both on and off base.⁴⁸

On January 10, 1942, when Person was working as a linesman at Camp Livingston and a month after the Japanese government launched an attack against the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu on December 7, 1941, White military and civilian law enforcement personnel in Alexandria fatally shot or severely injured as many as twenty-eight of Person's fellow Black soldiers during a brutal affair people eventually labeled the Lee Street riot.⁴⁹ One eyewitness recalled: "Bullets were whistling and bricks were flying. The Japs might as well have been attacking as far as I was concerned."⁵⁰ According to Black minister, NAACP stalwart, and World War I army chaplain William Y. Bell Jr., such displays of White domestic terrorism during World War II caused many Black Americans in the armed forces to deem the "lofty aims" of the American war effort nothing more than "verbal eyewash."⁵¹ Beyond the cynicism and

47. FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA. In addition to James Person, US military officials conscripted his older brother Julius and their younger brother Ransom into the army during World War II.

48. FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

49. See "No Deaths as Result of Saturday Night Clash Here Corps Says," *Alexandria (LA) Daily Town Talk*, January 12, 1942; Jerry Purvis Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II: Politics and Society, 1939-1945*, abridged ed. (Baton Rouge, LA, 2020), 134-35; and William M. Simpson, "A Tale Untold? The Alexandria, Louisiana, Lee Street Riot (January 10, 1942)," *Louisiana History* 35, no. 2 (spring 1994): 133-49.

50. "No Deaths."

51. W. Y. Bell Jr., "The Negro Warrior's Home Front," *Phylon* 5, no. 3 (1944): 276.

despair reflected by the preceding quotation, the weight of the discrimination that some Black commissioned and noncommissioned military personnel faced caused them to become “‘cracked up’ mentally,” reasoned Bell.⁵²

Despite the white supremacy prevalent on and around Camp Livingston, James Person performed his linesman’s duties well from November 1941 to January 1942. He amassed an excellent character rating and a satisfactory efficiency rating. On January 24, 1942, twelve days after the Lee Street riot, military officials returned Person to active duty at Fort Oglethorpe. He spent the rest of his tour of duty at the fort before earning an honorable discharge on March 20. At the time of his discharge, he worked in the fort’s reception center and still held the rank of private. A certificate of disability indicated that he suffered from arthritis and venereal disease, but the certificate did not indicate any semblance of mental illness. While traveling home to Somerville, Tennessee, Person wore civilian, not military, clothes “to hide his identity”; however, numerous Black service members dressed that way to avoid being targeted by unpatriotic and violent White people who preferred an all-White military force.⁵³

FORESHADOWING

As soon as Person arrived back home in Somerville, his parents Christopher and Topsy, as well as other family members, friends, and associates, noticed that James’s behavior had changed dramatically since his departure for basic training nearly a year earlier. One person said James was very “restless, nervous, and upset, and he continually advised that someone was going to kill him.” Matt J. Gant, a Black farmer who had been James’s friend for years, confirmed that James’s mind seemed to ramble upon his return to Somerville; worse, James acted as if he were afraid of something all the time. On numerous occasions, Gant explained, James alleged that unknown parties “are after me to try to kill me.” Once, James even threatened to kill his parents, Christopher and Topsy. In addition to those troubling occurrences, he ran inside a house or some other nearby dwelling if certain vehicles drove by. He was especially nervous about army vehicles.⁵⁴

James Person’s mental state deeply concerned his parents. By March 31, eleven days after his honorable discharge from the army, they contacted their physician, John W. Morris, a White graduate of Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Morris diagnosed James with persecution complex, a mental disorder that

52. *Ibid.*, 277.

53. FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

54. *Ibid.*

causes individuals to think their lives are in danger. Morris—an army combat veteran who not only suffered a physical injury during World War I but also was a prisoner of war who treated other prisoners, including Germans—advised Christopher and Topsy to admit James for treatment at the nearest veterans' hospital from Somerville. Heeding Morris's advice, Christopher sent an inquiry letter to administrators at a federally run hospital in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. They, however, did not reply to him. Morris thus suggested that Christopher and Topsy try to get James admitted to a state-run medical facility. As they contemplated their options, James informed his mother that he planned to take a train to Chicago to get away from the unidentified individuals he thought were trying to kill him.⁵⁵

What James Person thought or did from early April through mid-September 1942 remains unknown, but the northward journey he mentioned to his mother in April had taken him to Indiana by late September and from there to Illinois by early October. While in Libertyville, Indiana, Person found himself running for his life from a posse made up of dozens of heavily armed White law enforcement personnel and private citizens. Person committed no crime, but that fact was inconsequential to the posse. He was an unknown Black man ostensibly acting strangely in a majority White town. In the annals of American history, those factors were as innocuous or as serious as White people wanted. In Person's case, such factors ultimately proved fatal.

Why Person disembarked in Libertyville when he was bound for Chicago, more than 175 miles away, remains a mystery. At any rate, soon after he began walking around Libertyville, a rumor immediately spread that an unknown Black man was in the town scaring White women by appearing at their homes and demanding food, among other unsolicited acts. As Manfred Berg pointed out, White people routinely feared Black drifters roaming the roads day and night, looking for opportunities to commit crimes or do other things that made it unsafe for White girls and women to leave their homes without White male protectors.⁵⁶ Historian Khalil G. Muhammad elaborated on Berg's point: "Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the statistical rhetoric of the 'Negro criminal' became a proxy for a national discourse on Black inferiority."⁵⁷ In time, Muhammad concluded, such rhetoric culminated in the revisiting of a seemingly perennial question by certain White people: Were non-White people fit to be American citizens?

55. See "Ames Dog Trial Leader, Dr. John Morris, Dies," *Jackson (TN) Sun*, January 29, 1986; and FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

56. Berg, *Popular Justice*, 96.

57. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.

Regarding the unknown Black man in Libertyville from late September to early October of 1942, a White housewife named Lottie P. Lenderman said she saw him. Lenderman and her family resided in West Terre Haute, Indiana. According to Lenderman, a Black man whom she did not know came to her family's back door, seeking food. Instead of feeding him, Lenderman telephoned the county sheriff's department. The sheriff, a White man named John F. Trierweiler, took immediate action. He, at least six deputy sheriffs, and some thirty private citizens whom Trierweiler essentially deputized—all White and all male—gathered at a bridge about one mile south of Libertyville. While speaking with them, Trierweiler emphasized their need to apprehend the Black man. If necessary, they were to shoot to kill, Trierweiler declared, according to multiple firsthand reports (though Trierweiler later denied issuing the declaration). That some White persons invented and then spread a false rumor about the Black man's molestation desires almost certainly was a more crucial element in Trierweiler's shoot-to-kill declaration than the Black man's confirmed attempts to secure food.⁵⁸

Thelma B. Morris, Libertyville's switchboard operator, was one of the White persons who circulated the molestation rumor. Morris said a "colored man" attempted to enter her daughter's bedroom between midnight and 2:00 a.m. on August 28, 1942.⁵⁹ He left but returned later that morning, Morris said, only for her husband and the girl's father, Cecil G. Morris, who preferred being called by his middle name, Guy, to scare the man away. The two unsolicited visits, Thelma explained, constituted the main reason she was suspicious of and frightened by "strange Negroes" in Libertyville.⁶⁰

If the *colored man* or the *strange Negro* to whom Thelma Morris referred existed or committed the acts she described, he could not have been James Person. Person was in Somerville, Tennessee, on August 28, and he did not leave the state until September 20. Those facts were inconsequential to Morris: Any Black man, regardless of his behavior, could evoke suspicion or fear.⁶¹ Such was the case in early October when a Sandford, Indiana, telephone operator, wife, and mother named Lena T. Denham told Morris that a "colored person had been seen [in Sandford, five miles south of Libertyville, even though]

58. Lottie Lenderman and John Trierweiler, interview by FBI (hereafter cited as Lenderman-Trierweiler-FBI interview), RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

59. Thelma Morris, interview by FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA (hereafter cited as Morris-FBI interview).

60. Ibid.

61. According to Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015), lynchers often did not select their Black victims randomly. For example, Black men born out of state or who stood out were more likely than others to become victims.

there were no negroes living in that vicinity of Western Indiana and Eastern Illinois.”⁶²

Hazel A. Haymaker, another White housewife who resided in West Terre Haute, told a similar story about an unknown Black man. Between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. on October 10, as Haymaker walked from her family’s backyard shed, she noticed a “negro man” in their yard.⁶³ “I must have appeared startled,” Haymaker avowed, “because he said[:] ‘don’t be afraid.’ He then asked if I would give him something to eat.” Unlike Lottie Lenderman, who in August refused to feed an unknown Black man, Haymaker “prepared him a sandwich and gave him something to drink. He sat down in the yard and ate it. He was there about twenty minutes and after he had finished eating[,] he left.” Haymaker described the man whom she fed as “rather small” and said he “made no attempt to enter my home and did nothing out of the ordinary while there.” Haymaker did not say whether she asked the man his name, but it was James Person.⁶⁴

Vigo County sheriff John Trierweiler fielded at least twelve complaints about Person. Most were like Haymaker’s in that the complaints did not reference any attempted assault, molestation, or otherwise threatening behavior. Instead, Person simply walked country roads, strolled through cornfields filching corn, and camped out along creek beds. From time to time, Trierweiler recalled, Person “would stop at farmhouses and ask for something to eat.” All the same, Person’s behavior caused Trierweiler and other law enforcement personnel to believe he “was wanted for something.” Hence, Trierweiler mounted a search party, or posse, composed of full-time, or regular, deputy sheriffs and private male citizens he deputized. Unlike in August, Trierweiler told them not to kill Person because Person had not hurt anyone. Instead of shooting to kill, the deputies and deputized possemen should aim for one of his legs if they demanded him to stop and he ignored their demands. That way, the deputies or possemen could debilitate Person without killing him.⁶⁵

Italian-born Martin Kiado of Shirkieville, Indiana, said he and Guy Morris spotted Person near a hillside in Libertyville, fewer than two miles northwest of Shirkieville, on October 12, 1942. Shortly after, Kiado’s and Morris’s White neighbor Leon R. Eddington saw Morris standing in a roadway with a Winchester pump shotgun. Eddington asked Morris if he was hunting squirrels, and Morris replied: “No, hunting Niggers.” In time, Morris, who was positioned about seventy-five feet away from Person by Kiado’s calculation, fired

62. Morris–FBI interview.

63. Hazel Haymaker, interview by FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA (hereafter cited as Haymaker–FBI interview).

64. *Ibid.*

65. Lenderman–Trierweiler–FBI interview.

an unknown number of rounds at Person. Kiado fired three rounds before Trierweiler ordered him to stop and wait, “if you can, until we [full-time law enforcement personnel can] get there.” That order seemed odd to Kiado, since Trierweiler previously directed county deputies and deputized possemen to shoot Person, if necessary, to debilitate him.⁶⁶

THE LYNCHING, INQUEST, AND BURIAL

After Morris and Kiado fired gunshots at Person, he trekked five miles from Libertyville to Stratton Township in Edgar County, Illinois. White farming couple Hubert R. and Pauline H. Tweedy, Lena Denham’s relatives, quickly informed others in Stratton that an unknown “colored” man was in the area. Eventually, Person, whom Morris and Kiado did not hit, walked onto the property of the Tweedys’ White neighbors James W. and Lona M. Stickler. James was a seventy-three-year-old farmer and justice of the peace in Stratton, and Lona was a fifty-four-year-old housewife. As James exited their home to make sure the man was not outside, Lona locked every door. Once James finished searching a backyard barn, he rounded the front of the home and walked directly into Person, who simply asked for food and water. James went inside the home, got four slices of bread and two apples, and gave those items to Person. Meanwhile, Lona called local telephone operator Thelma Morris, Guy’s wife, to arrange a party line conversation between the three women. After telling Thelma and Tweedy that Person was in her front yard, Lona claimed that she needed immediate assistance even though Person had only made a harmless appeal for food.⁶⁷

In one of the few known pleasant conversations any White person in Stratton Township attempted to have with Person, James Stickler asked him where he was from. Person told him Tennessee. After a brief exchange, Person thanked Stickler for the bread and apples, informed him that he must be going, and proceeded down a road near the Sticklers’ residence. Soon, Person ran back to the residence and informed James that two cars nearly hit him.⁶⁸

Within a short time, numerous cars began to pull up outside James and Lona Sticklers’ residence. Person asked why cars were arriving. Instead of answering that question, James cautioned him not to run. Upon seeing armed White men exiting the cars with weapons, Person ran. According to James, the men shouted for Person to halt before firing gunshots indiscriminately at

66. Leon Eddington, interview by FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

67. Pauline Tweedy, interview by FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

68. James Stickler, interview by Richard Hagan, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA (hereafter cited as James Stickler–Hagan interview).

him as he darted in the opposite direction. Attempting to jump one of the Sticklers' fences, Person lost his right shoe, and a hat he wore fell off his head.⁶⁹

During the next week, participants and witnesses of the events at the Sticklers' place offered varying accounts of what transpired on October 12. John A. Ambers, a White resident of Paris, Illinois, gave one account. On October 16, he attended a schoolhouse meeting in Stratton Township where four or five other White male Edgar County residents discussed the shooting. Ambers, a farmer and World War I veteran born in Edgar, stated: "You fellars are awful shots if you were hunting a nigger and missed him."⁷⁰ Kenneth M. Bozarth, a White seventeen-year-old high school student born in Indiana, replied to Ambers: "When the Negro fell over the fence[,] I went up to him and shot him in the leg."⁷¹ Bozarth, Thelma Morris's younger brother, did not describe the weapon he fired, but someone's shotgun blast filled one of Person's legs with buckshot.⁷²

James Stickler said nothing about Bozarth shooting Person. Stickler, however, did say that Person had fallen in his cornfield but managed to get up and continue running. Lona—whose frenzied telephone call to Thelma Morris and Pauline Tweedy, among other White farmwives, was a central factor in the speed of the subsequent mob activity against Person—claimed to have remained in her home throughout the barrage of shootings. Lona also claimed not to have seen, much less known, a single shooter. A second and older shooter pumped a rifle bullet into Person's right abdomen. Sixty shotgun pellets tore into Person's back. That occurrence verified James Stickler's statement regarding Person running away from gunmen as they fired at him.⁷³

Person lay dead in a field about a half mile or so from the Sticklers' residence for forty-four days before Vertress Shell discovered Person's skeletonizing body in a dense thicket of woods on the evening of November 26, 1942. The next morning, Shell informed Leslie Frye, who resided on the Van Wright property, that he had located a body. Later that day, Ward E. Dillavou, the state's attorney for Edgar County, Illinois, working out of Paris, sent a telegram to Christopher Person in Somerville, Tennessee. Dillavou explained that military identification tags suggested that the dead man was Christopher's son, James. Owing to the magnitude of his body's decomposition, Edgar County coroner

69. Ibid.

70. John A. Ambers, interview by FBI, June 4, 1943, record group (RG) G 68, file 44-31, NARA.

71. Ibid.

72. FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

73. "13 Indicted by U.S. Jury in Death of Negro," *St. Louis Star-Times*, July 14, 1943; James Stickler-Hagan interview; Lona Stickler, interview by Richard Hagan, December 3, 1942, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

Albert H. Lycan had not performed an autopsy; instead, Lycan, a White World War I combat veteran born in or near Paris, Illinois, had recommended an immediate burial. Thus, Dillavou asked Christopher to send James's effects, if indeed James was his son. Curiously, Dillavou did not ask if Christopher and other family members wanted to return James's body to Somerville or delay the burial until they could travel to Paris.⁷⁴

On November 27, the same date Dillavou telegraphed Christopher Person, Lycan and other Edgar County officials convened a coroner's jury for an inquest into James Person's death. Deputy sheriff Early A. Baber testified before the jury. Baber said James's body was in such a decomposed state by November 26 that his face was missing. White funeral director Donald H. Wright testified that James's shirt and trousers had separated, exposing his posterior, and the skin was slipping off James's buttocks. In further testimony, Wright proposed the advanced state of decomposition negated the need to embalm James's body. Yet other testifiers said James's right leg was full of buckshot and much of his body, especially the chest and facial areas, was nearly frozen. The identification tags about which Dillavou told Christopher were in a wallet found in an interior pocket of a sleeveless, black, artificial leather jacket that James took off and used as a pillow. James also had a Tennessee automobile driver's license, a social security card, a separate card containing a poem, and a "colored" woman's photograph.⁷⁵

Despite the lack of an autopsy, the coroner's jury determined that "bleeding from internal hemorrhages" was the cause of James Person's death, according to a report in the St. Louis *Star-Times* newspaper.⁷⁶ The York, Pennsylvania, *Gazette and Daily* newspaper published slightly contrasting information about the jury's determination. Person, that paper reported, died of "exposure" after being shot.⁷⁷ An official death certificate issued by the Edgar County Clerk and Records Office on November 28, 1947, five years after the fatal shooting, was

74. See "13 Indicted as Posse That Slew Negro in Paris," *Decatur (IL) Herald*, July 14, 1943; "13 Indicted by U.S. Jury in Death of Negro"; "Central Illinois Deaths: Dillavou," *Herald and Review* (Decatur, IL), April 28, 1987; Leslie Frye, interview by FBI, RG 68, file 44-32, NARA (hereafter cited as Frye-FBI interview); FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA; and FBI, RG 80, file 44-32, NARA. On November 28, 1942, a day after Ward Dillavou sent a telegram to Christopher Person in Somerville, Tennessee, Dillavou telegraphed military officials at Camp Livingston in Alexandria, Louisiana. Dillavou said an identification card listed a camp, as opposed to a home, address for James Person. The card, however, did not indicate with which company James served or provide the name of his commander.

75. FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA. Leslie L. Frye testified that both of James Person's legs were riddled with buckshot.

76. "13 Indicted by U.S. Jury in Death of Negro."

77. "13 Indicted in Death of Negro," *Gazette and Daily* (York, PA), July 14, 1943.

somewhat vague, declaring only that gunshot wounds caused Person's death.⁷⁸ Likewise, the exact time Person died remains unknown; but, according to physician and professor Isaiah Turnbull, Person could have survived the abdominal wound from the rifle bullet anywhere from four to forty-eight hours without treatment, as, based on the trajectory of the bullet, its entry would have spared most of Person's major blood vessels and organs.⁷⁹ Person, then, feasibly could have lain in an Illinois field, bleeding and exposed to human and non-human animals, vermin, and weather as cold as 38 degrees until October 14, 1942, before dying; however, most sources listed October 12 as the date he died.⁸⁰

Lynched by an inhospitable cross-state community of White Indianans and Illinoisans, Person was buried in the Edgar Cemetery in Paris, Illinois, on November 28. Although the cemetery had a "colored section" until as late as 1968, Person was buried in the potter's field section reserved for paupers. Wright handled the burial. Whether he attempted to contact Person's family or to advise Edgar County officials to afford Person the military honors Person's army service merited is unknown, but lingering curiosities do not stop there.⁸¹ If Person's nuclear or extended family members did not have enough money to afford him a proper burial, whether in Illinois or Tennessee, one could understand why county officials in Edgar interred his body in the potter's field. The Persons, however, were not destitute. Furthermore, the family patriarch, Christopher, was a minister.

THE AFTERMATH

Immediately following James Person's lynching and hasty burial, Christopher Person undertook an act of resistance that numerous scholars have overlooked

78. I ordered James Person's death certificate on October 30, 2019, and am unaware if a government official issued a certificate before November 28, 1947.

79. Isaiah Turnbull is a surgeon and associate professor of surgery at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. I supplied him with Person's autopsy report on June 7, 2023.

80. "Paris Weather in 1942," <https://www.extremeweatherwatch.com/cities/paris-il/year-1942>.

81. Between June 2019 and June 2020, I made multiple attempts to obtain burial information for James Person from the Edgar Cemetery in Paris, Illinois, including an initial email, a follow-up letter, and a certified letter. None of these inquiries received a response until June 30, 2020. In that response, the cemetery's caretaker denied that Edgar Cemetery had ever been racially segregated and asserted that my information was incorrect, further stating that if the Person family lacked funds, James Person would have been buried in Potter's Field. The caretaker concluded by noting that I possessed more information about James Person than the cemetery itself. This assertion is at odds with the Edgar Cemetery's own website, which states that Otis Neal, an African American veteran who died in 1968 "was buried in the southeast section of the cemetery reserved during that time period for people of color." To date, despite repeated inquiries, the caretaker of the Edgar Cemetery has declined to disclose the precise location of James Person's burial.

or underemphasized: He initiated an extensive letter-writing campaign. Unfortunately, neither Christopher, Topsy, nor any one of their relatives made or kept copies of those letters, which also are not located in an FBI file housed at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, that contains information about James's 1942 lynching. However, the FBI file does contain questions and answers by Edgar County officials, various military personnel, and other individuals who conducted interviews or were interviewed about the lynching.

James Stickler underwent at least three separate interviews regarding the lynching of James Person. Richard C. Hagan conducted the first interview on December 3, 1942. He was a White lawyer, university professor, and US Army Reserve field artillery officer whom full-time army officials "called to colors [concurrent] with the national emergency," meaning World War II.⁸² Part of Hagan's wartime service entailed serving as commandant for the Reserve Officers' Training Corps program at Mattoon High School in Mattoon, Illinois, about forty-five miles southwest of Stratton Township, where Person's October 12 lynching occurred. Military officials contacted Hagan to conduct a preliminary investigation because, when Vertress Shell discovered Person's body on November 26, some individuals thought Person might have been "a deserter from the Army."⁸³ A week later, during the December 3 interview, Hagan asked Stickler to identify the shooters. Stickler replied that he was seventy-four years old, hard of hearing, and had bad eyesight; therefore, it was "impossible for him to see [a single shooter] in the darkness."⁸⁴

Stickler's answer was curious. On October 13, 1942, a White neighbor recalled Stickler joking about not understanding why their White associate Edward H. Garwood did not kill Person. Garwood, a fifty-six-year-old farmer and former fireman whose wife told him not to shoot on October 12, was close to Person when Garwood fired a .38-caliber pistol three times at Person. Anyone not wearing a straitjacket should have hit Person, Stickler mused, according to his neighbor's recollection. Even though Stickler claimed his hearing was impaired, he was able to hear thirty to forty individuals preparing to shoot at Person when they told Person to halt. After nine of those individuals fired shots, Stickler saw Person fall over a fence, lose a shoe and a hat, and then get back up and run.⁸⁵

82. "Capt. Hagan to Speak Here," *Macon (GA) Telegraph*, August 21, 1942.

83. James Stickler-Hagan interview. Once military officials learned that James Person was not in the army when his lynching occurred, they ordered Richard Hagan to stop investigating the lynching.

84. James Stickler-Hagan interview.

85. Zella Garwood, interview by FBI, April 27, 1943, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA; and James Stickler-Hagan interview.

Inconsistencies by Stickler and other individuals who participated in or witnessed Person's lynching caused Christopher Person to send a letter to an American Legion post in Jackson, Tennessee. Christopher asked the post's commanders for any assistance they could provide in investigating his son's death. Complying, the commanders not only forwarded Christopher's letter to the US Department of Justice Civil Liberties Unit (later called the Civil Rights Division), but the commanders also filed a formal complaint requesting the division conduct an official investigation into James Person's death. Established in 1939 by White Michigianian William F. Murphy, the Civil Liberties Unit was but one of his many noteworthy professional endeavors. In addition to the unit's establishment and a long history of past meritorious public service on both state and federal levels, Murphy sat on the US Supreme Court and was an Army Reserve infantry officer when a White mob lynched James in 1942. A sociocultural progressive who once served on the NAACP's national board, Murphy considered intolerance the most "undemocratic thing in our life today."⁸⁶

Before 1939, the federal government rarely investigated the lynching of Black Americans even though thousands were lynched. Concurrently, southern congressmen belonging to the Democratic Party filibustered out of existence or otherwise killed antilynching legislation. Without much protection from local, state, or federal governments, millions of Black Americans had to find ways to protect themselves. As they attempted to navigate the precarious landscape of white supremacy, Murphy endeavored to alleviate their seemingly constant state of uneasiness by placing "the FBI on the firing line," historian Kenneth O'Reilly wrote.⁸⁷ In so doing, O'Reilly continued, Murphy further enmeshed the FBI "in the states' rights controversy and virtually [guaranteed] a major role for J. Edgar Hoover and his bureaucracy in the . . . civil rights revolution."⁸⁸ Agreeing with those beliefs, historian Dominic Capeci Jr. credited Biddle and his associates in the Civil Liberties Unit with bringing "the federal government more directly into the protection of blacks and the struggle for racial equality than at any time since Reconstruction."⁸⁹

Taking a pragmatic approach to their work, Murphy and others in the Civil Liberties Unit petitioned the FBI to investigate only seven cases in 1939. During the next year, however, Murphy and his unit colleagues requested that FBI agents travel throughout the country, especially the South, to investigate

86. Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The Washington Years* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1984), 82.

87. Kenneth O'Reilly, "The Roosevelt Administration and Black America: Federal Surveillance Policy and Civil Rights During the New Deal and World War II Years," *Phylon* 48, no. 1 (1987): 19.

88. *Ibid.*

89. Capeci, *Lynching of Cleo Wright*, 192.

lynchings. Excepting Murphy and some other intrepid individuals in Roosevelt's administration, political scientist Daniel Kato argued legitimately, many federal officials did not desire to intervene in local or state efforts to curb anti-Black violence because most federal officials did not want to stir up White animosity or dissension. Another faction in Roosevelt's administration was concerned about foreigners exposing American democracy as a fraud, the impact of lynching on national morale, and depictions of lynching as propaganda by the country's enemies, particularly the Japanese government. Nevertheless, in 1942, the year a White mob in the Midwest lynched James Person, Roosevelt informally directed Murphy and others in the US Department of Justice "to make an automatic investigation in all cases of Negro deaths where the suspicion of lynching is present."⁹⁰

Roosevelt's directive had no bearing on the ability of local and state officials in Indiana and Illinois to postpone or resist conducting formal investigations into Person's lynching death. Suspecting that local and state officials would vacillate or do nothing, Christopher Person expanded his private investigation, which he began as soon as he learned about his son's death. Among other activities, Christopher wrote letters to numerous residents in Paris, Illinois, and across Edgar County. Leslie L. Frye, a self-employed White man from Paris who testified during the inquest, and James Stickler, from whom Frye rented a farm, were two residents who responded. In a letter to Christopher dated December 15, 1942, Frye provided detailed, albeit secondhand, information about the lynching. For weeks after that horrible event, Frye recollected, it was a frequent topic of conversation among White people in Edgar.⁹¹

Frye's testimony and letter were believable. When Vertress Shell discovered James Person's body, Frye was one of five individuals who accompanied White law enforcement personnel to its location. In the letter to Christopher Person, Frye recalled James using a jacket as a makeshift pillow and said he had two empty tobacco sacks beside his body. Frye predicted that it would be difficult for Christopher to receive justice in Edgar County but promised to assist him in every way he could, including financially. Before closing the letter, Frye suggested that Vigo County sheriff John Trierweiler learned the names of shooters, whom Trierweiler admonished for shooting an innocent man. Frye, likewise, encouraged Christopher to contact a "colored" attorney

90. Daniel Kato, *Liberalizing Lynching: Building a New Racialized State* (New York, 2016), 138. See also Capeci, *Lynching of Cleo Wright*; O'Reilly, "Roosevelt Administration and Black America," 16; and Christopher Waldrep, "National Policing, Lynching, and Constitutional Change," *Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 3 (August 2008): 589.

91. Frye-FBI interview; Hagan-James Stickler interview.

in Danville, Illinois, possibly Nelson M. Willis, the first Black graduate of the University of Chicago Law School.⁹²

Primary sources do not reveal if Christopher Person ever wrote to, called, or utilized some other means to contact Willis. But, having read numerous newspaper reports indicating that James Stickler was an eyewitness to James Person's lynching, Christopher did write to Stickler. The FBI file at the National Archives and Records Administration does not contain Christopher's letter, but the file does contain Stickler's January 5, 1943, response:

Dear Sir

Received your letter in regards to the killing of your son. I am awful sorry that it had to happen for I am a father of children and know how you feel. It was late one evening and a colored man came to my door hollering I water[.] I went to see what it was all about and he asked for water and bread, I took him both the water and bread out in the yard and gave it to him[;] he thanked me for it and acted awful nice about it[.] I could not of told there was anything wrong with him. We was standing out in front talking when he saw some car lights coming up the road. You see I am a man 74 years old and don't see very good and it was dark you see[;] I didn't know the officials had been after him that afternoon but my understanding they had been[.,] and as far as me knowing who did the shooting I could not tell for there were about 30 or 40 people there. I am sorry that you didn't locate your son before this happened for I wouldn't of had it happened at my home for anything.

I can tell very little for sure but am glad to tell you all that I know. If I can be of any help to you as for information. Will gladly do so.

James W. Stickler.⁹³

THE EDGAR COUNTY, ILLINOIS, GRAND JURY

On February 11, 1943, the Mattoon, Illinois, *Daily Journal-Gazette* newspaper carried a story that reaffirmed how difficult it was for a Black person to get justice anywhere in the United States and not simply in the South. Days earlier, the all-White, all-male, twenty-one-member Edgar County Grand Jury returned bills of indictment, or true bills, against seven individuals. Not one bill, however, was against an individual whom people in Edgar suspected of participating in or

92. Frye-FBI interview.

93. James Stickler to Christopher Person, January 5, 1943, FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA.

knowing about James Person's lynching death. Ward Dillavou, the state's attorney based in Paris, was partly responsible for the grand jury's inaction. As per one investigatory report, he petitioned the court to impanel a grand jury as a matter of form; he had no intention to actively pursue criminal cases against four White individuals—Errett Bozarth, Edward Garwood, James W. Houston, and Houston's son-in-law Hubert Tweedy—who irrefutably shot, shot at, or witnessed five other White individuals fire at or hit Person.⁹⁴

Dillavou said his deliberate inaction regarding Bozarth, Garwood, Houston, and Tweedy was based on those four individuals being White, well-respected, adult farmers. One of the five other individuals against whom Dillavou was sure he could have filed criminal charges, Kenneth Bozarth, Errett's son, was a teenage student. Instead of pursuing a legal case or multiple cases, Dillavou provided the Bozarth, Garwood, Houston, and Tweedy with an opportunity to give witness testimony before the grand jury. He even offered them immunity for testifying, but they rejected his offer. Dillavou could have issued subpoenas, compelling them to appear as witnesses, and they, in turn, could have invoked the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution to avoid incriminating themselves. That the Bozarth, Garwood, and Houston would have utilized that constitutional privilege was especially likely: their having direct involvement with the lynching death of Person, as opposed to simply being present when it took place, was the consensus among White residents of Paris.⁹⁵

Dillavou did subpoena Edgar County Deputy Sheriff Early Baber, James Stickler, and eight additional White men to testify as witnesses. In a judicial oddity, Stickler also sat on the grand jury despite being a principal eyewitness to James Person's lynching death. And, demonstrating that justice in Edgar was neither colorblind nor sex- or gender-neutral, all twenty-one jurors were White men. Ultimately, they concluded there was insufficient evidence to indict any one of the four individuals whom Dillavou charged with murdering Person (why there were not more defendants remains a mystery). The jurors explained their conclusion and subsequent no true bill by saying Stickler and other witnesses refused to provide the specific information necessary to justify returning a single true bill.⁹⁶

94. "Edgar County Grand Jury Returns Seven True Bills," *Journal-Gazette* (Mattoon, IL), February 11, 1943; FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766.

95. FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766.

96. *Ibid.*

THE FEDERAL GRAND JURY IN EAST ST. LOUIS,
ST. CLAIR COUNTY, ILLINOIS

The Edgar County Grand Jury's decision did not sit well with Person's survivors. Instead of taking the decision lying down, so to speak, they continued to forge ahead with a robust letter-writing campaign. A Black World War I combat veteran, lawyer, and politician named Percy L. Harden Sr. lent his assistance to their campaign. Born in Bolivar, Tennessee, about twenty miles east of Somerville, Harden contacted US attorney general Francis B. Biddle, a White Democrat and former judge. Harden provided Biddle with a synopsis of James Person's lynching death on October 12, 1942, and encouraged Biddle to launch a federal investigation. The attorney general's office then contacted the US Department of Justice Criminal Division (within which the Civil Liberties Unit was housed). On May 25, 1943, the division's head and US assistant attorney general Wendell Berge, a White Democrat from Lincoln, Nebraska, asked the FBI to investigate.⁹⁷

The FBI began investigating on June 5. One facet of the investigation entailed disinterring James Person's body. The FBI also ordered two autopsies, which confirmed gunshot wounds caused Person's death. Thus, on July 13, White US district judge Frederick L. Wham Sr. of the Eastern District of Illinois impaneled a special grand jury. It convened in East St. Louis, a city in St. Clair County (as well as the site of an infamous July 1-3, 1917, racial massacre). Wham, a Marion County native who completed the University of Illinois College of Law, instructed the jury to weigh evidence against thirteen codefendants—Herbert Beasley, Errett and Kenneth Bozarth, James Elliott, Edward Garwood, James Houston, Martin Kiado, Pearl Miller, Guy Morris, Charles E. Price, Ernest Poynter, John Trierweiler, and Hurbert Tweedy—for their probable roles in Person's lynching. While delivering his instructions, Wham told the jurors: "At this time of combat there has never been a time when civil rights are more important. . . . We must be jealous of any invasion of [the] civil rights of an individual safeguarded him by the Constitution and the statutes."⁹⁸

97. See "13 Indicted in Death of Negro"; P. L. Harden to the United States Department of Justice, May 4, 1943, FBI, RD 57838, file 44-HQ-766, NARA; "Hart May Be U.S. Attorney," *Decatur (IL) Daily Review*, July 22, 1943; "New Assistant U.S. Attorney Is Named," *Belleville (IL) Daily Advocate*, January 12, 1937; and *Register of the Department of Justice and the Courts of the United States*, 39th ed. (Washington, DC, 1938), 2-3, 61, 107.

98. "Jury to Investigate Killing by Mob," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 13, 1943. Judge Frederick L. Wham Sr. recommended that a federal grand jury indict Vigo County, Indiana, sheriff John Trierweiler and his twelve codefendants on June 25, 1943; "Freedom from Fear on the Home Front," *Iowa Law Review* 29, no. 3 (March 1944): 427.

White federal attorneys Frank Coleman and Ray M. Foreman announced the indictment, which accused the thirteen defendants of conspiring to violate Section 52, Title 18, of the US Constitution. Coleman served as special assistant to Biddle. Foreman was an assistant US attorney for the Eastern District of Illinois. He also was acting prosecutor with overall responsibilities for the office of the US attorney in Danville, about thirty-six miles north of Paris, a town that, despite James Person's lynching death, did not have a very long or troubled racial history, according to Edgar County resident Elsie H. Jackson.⁹⁹ She was a Black woman who had resided in Paris nearly her entire life. In general, Edgar was a sundown county, but Paris was not a sundown town—at least, not in the sense defined by sociologist James Loewen: “all white on purpose.”¹⁰⁰ As a testament to the latter fact, Paris voters had elected a Black civil rights leader, craftsman, and entrepreneur named Troy Porter as town clerk as early as 1885.¹⁰¹

By the time Person made his only midwestern trip from the South in 1942, Edgar County had become emblematic of how white supremacy typically operated in the rural Midwest, insofar as the Edgar was “invisibly divided by race,” to borrow language from historian Thomas J. Sugrue.¹⁰² Many White residents were anxious about Black and other non-White people residing in the county. Sugrue's fellow historian Anna-Lisa Cox referred to such anxiety as “odd Midwestern racism.”¹⁰³ Public schools in Paris were not subject to de jure segregation, an act the state supreme court and the state legislature banned in 1874; however, de facto segregation was commonplace, observed Jackson, who spent the year 1941 in Champaign.¹⁰⁴ Segregated spaces included beach

99. Elsie Harper Jackson, interview by Luther Harris, September 7, 2020, audio recording in the author's possession (hereafter cited as Jackson-Harris interview).

100. James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (2005; repr., New York, 2018), 4.

101. See “Tuesday's Elections,” *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago), April 9, 1885; and William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland, OH, 1887), 792–93. Paris, Illinois, was no utopia for nineteenth-century Black residents after the Civil War. In December 1865, around the same time that federal lawmakers wrote the Thirteenth Amendment into the United States Constitution, a group of White citizens in Paris accused a Black man of trying to burn down a business establishment called the Tremont House. According to one newspaper report, White officials arrested and then hanged the man, whom the paper did not identify by name, “until he made a confession, implicating a white man, who afterwards proved a good *alibi*”; “Hôtel Burned,” *Evansville (IN) Daily Journal*, December 21, 1865.

102. Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008), 131.

103. Anna-Lisa Cox, *A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith* (New York, 2006), 6.

104. Jackson-Harris interview.

areas, hotels, restaurants, and cemeteries. Furthermore, segregation often restricted Black residents to the lowest-paying employment positions. Women tended to be domestics, while men were custodians, farmers, shoe shiners, or some other type of general laborer. Such norms and mores resulted in a societal environment that was “capricious and frustrating” for many Black residents.¹⁰⁵ In one instance, Person’s, the environment was deadly.

Of the thirteen individuals the federal government indicted for civil rights violations in Person’s lynching death, six—Herbert Beasley, James Elliott, Martin Kiado, Pearl Miller, Guy Morris, and Frank Trierweiler—resided in Indiana. The other seven—Errett and Kenneth Bozarth, Garwood, James Houston, Charles Price, Ernest Poynter, and Hubert Tweedy—resided in Illinois. Trierweiler was the sheriff in Vigo County, under whom Beasley, Elliott, and Miller worked as sheriff’s deputies when the deadly lynching took place (Miller no longer was a deputy by the time of the indictment). Errett Bozarth, Garwood, Houston, Kiado, Morris, Price, Poynter, and Tweedy primarily were farmers. Kenneth Bozarth, Errett’s son and Morris’s wife Thelma’s younger brother, was in high school. If convicted, Errett and Kenneth Bozarth along with their eleven codefendants faced up to two years in prison, a \$5,000 fine, or both prison sentences and fines. As an early twentieth-century federal indictment to make it to trial for a civil rights violation of an African American, theirs was no minor ordeal. That the violation resulting in the indictment and trial proceedings occurred in the Midwest added weight to the ordeal’s significance to American history.

Unlike the Edgar County grand jury, which was all-White and all-male, the federal grand jury in St. Clair County consisted of twenty individuals, split evenly by gender: ten women and ten men, including one Black woman and one Black man. The Austin, Texas, *American* newspaper, among numerous other papers across the United States, confirmed that the indictment accused the thirteen White defendants of circulating “false suspicion and rumor concerning the alleged actions of Person . . . who had received an honorable discharge from the United States [Army]. The indictment also alleged these acts were in disregard of his . . . right as a human being to be free of fear and bodily harm.”¹⁰⁶ A Black-owned paper in St. Louis called the *Argus* reported that Person “was ‘peaceably making his way’ through Vigo County, Indiana, when the thirteen defendants ‘persuaded a mob to hunt him down.’”¹⁰⁷

Referencing the lynching and potential legal consequences for the defendants, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the most acclaimed Black-owned newspapers

105. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 131.

106. “13 Indicted for Stirring Up Citizens Against Negro,” *Austin (TX) American*, July 14, 1943.

107. “Hearing Is Held in E. St. Louis.”

in the United States, wrote that two years in prison and a \$5,000 fine were small penalties for causing or contributing to the death of a man traveling “through the countryside and molesting no one.” All the same, the *Courier* reasoned, those potential penalties were “better than no penalty at all, and should serve as a deterrent to other lynch-minded citizens. Considering the locality in which the crime occurred, there is a fair chance that the men will be convicted if their guilt is proved beyond doubt . . . to the satisfaction of the Federal jury.”¹⁰⁸

Federal court officials in Danville, Illinois, held in-person arraignments for twelve of the thirteen indictees on July 15 and 19, 1943. The thirteenth indictee, Kenneth Bozarth, registered for the military draft when he turned eighteen years old on January 11 and thereupon enlisted in the US Navy; thus, court officials did not summon him to Danville for arraignment or indicate whether his naval service would shield him from being indicted or prosecuted. Vigo County sheriff John Trierweiler, speaking to a news reporter before his own indictment, proclaimed: “Neither I nor any one of my deputies ever saw this negro,” Person.¹⁰⁹ For about ten days before October 12, 1942, Trierweiler went on, the deputies and he fielded telephone calls about a “wild [Black] man” roaming Vigo, frightening White women and children.¹¹⁰ “We answered these calls and searched the woods,” Trierweiler averred, “but never caught sight of the negro.”¹¹¹ Trierweiler said White farmers throughout the county were “aroused over the situation and I warned them specifically not to do any shooting if they encountered the man.”¹¹²

After posting bail and being granted a preliminary hearing date of July 28, 1943, Trierweiler and other defendants in the lynching death case of James Person had ten days to file demurrers and prepare arguments.¹¹³ Eventually facing one unified indictment charging them with conspiring to violate the Constitution by “wantonly and recklessly [raising] a hue and cry against” Person, the defendants demurred.¹¹⁴ They argued that indictment was “insufficient to constitute a valid charge and . . . that the acts complained of are not shown to

108. “Lynchers Can Be Punished,” *Pittsburg Courier*, July 24, 1943.

109. “Former Sheriff Is Pleading Not Guilty to Shooting Negro,” July 16, 1943, *Clarion Ledger* (Jackson, MS), July 16, 1943.

110. *Ibid.*; “Fine 9 Farmers \$200 Each for Killing Veteran,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 1946.

111. “Former Sheriff Is Pleading Not Guilty to Shooting Negro.”

112. *Ibid.*

113. “Defendants Given Ten Days for Filing Paris Demurrers,” *St. Louis Star-Times*, July 19, 1943.

114. “13 Members of Mob Arraigned in Illinois: Must Stand Trial for Lynching of James E. Person, War Veteran,” *Call* (Kansas City, MO), July 23, 1943.

have been those of the state or of its agents,” in the personages of the Vigo County, Indiana, sheriff John Trierweiler and the deputies Herbert Beasley, James Elliott, and Pearl Miller.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, they and other defendants claimed that the indictment contained “merely conclusions of the pleader in the latter respect,” meaning the principal direct involvement of Trierweiler, Beasley, Elliott, and Miller.¹¹⁶

Walter C. Lindley—a Neoga, Illinois, native and University of Illinois College of Law graduate who served as a judge for the US District Court for the Eastern District of Illinois—overruled the demurrer on October 18, 1943. In a case styled *United States v. Trierweiler et al.*, Lindley confirmed that statutory law in Indiana authorized Trierweiler to pursue Person. Trierweiler also had the authority to call not only on deputies Beasley, Elliott, and Miller but also on a “posse to assist” them in their pursuit of Person. Even so, Lindley opined that Trierweiler’s “action constituted misuse of legal authority ‘made possible only because’ he ‘was clothed with the authority of the state law.’”¹¹⁷

To support his opinion, Lindley drew from a January 6, 1943, ruling by an appellate court in a case styled *Catlette v. United States*.¹¹⁸ Lindley declared: “The notion that an officer can divorce himself from his official capacity merely by removing his badge of office before embarking on a course of illegal conduct, and thereby blithely absolve himself from any liability, is wholly without legal basis. [As the appellate court ruled,] ‘We must condemn this insidious suggestion that an officer may thus lightly shuffle off his official role. To accept such a legalistic dualism would gut the constitutional safeguards and render law enforcement a shameful mockery.’”¹¹⁹ Lindley then stated: “I am of the opinion that the indictment sufficiently discloses to the defendants the charge against them.”¹²⁰ Even though “the averment that the acts were done under color of state authority, standing alone, might be said to be merely the conclusion of the pleader,” Lindley concluded, “it is to be considered with the further averments that defendants were acting as state officials charged with preserving the peace and with arresting persons violating the law and that they were engaged in such duties and did all this under color of law and of the state authority and, when so considered, the indictment is sufficient.”¹²¹

115. *United States v. Trierweiler et al.*, no. 16006, District Court, Eastern District of Illinois (October 18, 1943).

116. *Ibid.*

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Catlette v. United States*, no. 4992, US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit (January 6, 1943).

119. William C. Lindley, in *United States v. Trierweiler et al.*, quoting *Catlette v. United States*.

120. *United States v. Trierweiler et al.*

121. *Ibid.*

Court proceedings in the lynching death of James Person spanned the rest of World War II and beyond. On July 8, 1946, almost a year after Japanese government officials surrendered formally on September 2, 1945, American federal officials dismissed the charges against John Trierweiler, Pearl Miller, James Elliott, and Herbert Beasley. Trierweiler was strident after the dismissals. Ignoring his crucial role in organizing the mass mob whose members lynched Person, Trierweiler insisted that he was innocent. According to him, Miller, Elliott, and Beasley and he were not present when as many as forty White possemen whom Trierweiler deputized fired multiple rounds at Person, causing him to die. White defense attorney William M. Acton made comparably bigoted, nonsensical, or romanticized statements. While speaking about the eight White adult farmers and the one White teenage student-turned-adult naval serviceman who for years were codefendants in the federal Person case—Errett Bozarth, Kenneth Bozarth, Edward Garwood, James Houston, Martin Kiado, Guy Morris, Ernest Poynter, Charles Price, and Hubert Tweedy—Acton described them as “the cream of the community.” According to Acton, the Bozarth and their seven vigilante associates “would have been ‘mice, not men,’ if they hadn’t tried to apprehend the man who frightened their women and children.”¹²²

While Trierweiler, Miller, Elliott, and Beasley probably were not proximate to their White contemporaries who fatally shot Person in Edgar County, Illinois, on October 12, 1942, that probability altogether ignores Trierweiler’s directing deputies Miller, Elliott, Beasley, and the possemen Trierweiler deputized to pursue Person. Lindley, nonetheless, accepted *nolo contendere* pleas from the Bozarth, Garwood, Houston, Kiado, Morris, Poynter, Price, and Tweedy. Lindley’s acceptance permitted him to convict them without their admitting guilt. A \$200 fine was the sole penalty that each one of those nine codefendants faced. Lindley fined them on December 9, 1946. He seemed to judge the value of Person’s life to be a mere \$1,800. In contrast, the life of every White man Lindley fined was invaluable. Like countless other perpetrators of White-on-Black crime, Person’s nine lynchings were too meaningful to incarcerate or be given substantial fines. Unlike Person, the nine were free to go back to their homes in Vigo or Edgar and surround themselves with family, friends, associates, and all other living beings they chose.

Based on years of research, the thirteen original codefendants in the Person case rarely spoke in public about his lynching death after December 9. It is possible that they and others who served as accomplices by shielding the actual lynchings from justice-seeking officials by lying or saying nothing about the codefendants’ roles, among other dishonorable acts, spent the rest of their lives in denial, hypocrisy, or some other state of make-believe. Maybe all

122. “Drops Charges in ‘42 Slaying,” *Indianapolis Star*, December 10, 1946.

involved in the lynching, whether directly or indirectly, tried to convince themselves that shooting Person in his abdomen, back, and leg as he ran away from as many as forty pursuers was justifiable or perhaps necessary. Of course, such ideas are conjecture. That all involved—from the persons who phoned the Vigo County Sheriff's Department; to those who gathered at the Libertyville, Indiana, bridge; to those who stood in the middle of the road armed; to White community members in Vigo and Edgar Counties who searched, chased, or fired shots at Person; to those whose fatal shots hit Person near James and Lona Sticklers' residence—were all culpable is a fact. Nevertheless, they had the luxury of putting the slaying behind them and hoping it would fade from historical memory, while Person's family members lived and relived the lynching for decades.

CONCLUSION

James Person's ultimately tragic story is a familial and community account of American hope and horror shared by scores of Black people—blood and adopted, nuclear and extended, home and neighborhood. During his childhood and teenage years, Person's friends and associates in Somerville, Tennessee, provided him with adoration, guidance, and solace. After his conscription into the army, Person never regained that sense of belonging. Quite the opposite, he returned to Somerville fighting personal challenges, including a divorce from his wife, that active military service in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and Alexandria, Louisiana, exacerbated.

Christopher, Topsy, Julius, Ethel, and Ransom Person worked hard to help their beloved James readjust to civilian life. When James left Somerville for Chicago to avoid increasing mental anguish and went missing, Christopher contacted radio stations and newspapers, seeking to locate his son. Once a White mob lynched James in Stratton Township, Illinois, Christopher wrote letters to American Legion commanders in Jackson, Tennessee, as well as to public and private citizens elsewhere in the country. As a grieving parent, Christopher sought not only answers but also justice. Through his determination and effort, the commanders he contacted brought James's lynching death to the attention of the US Department of Justice, whose administrators facilitated an FBI probe that resulted in one of the first indictments and trial proceedings of terroristic White citizens in the Midwest who violated the civil rights of a Black citizen.

Neither James Person's White lynchers nor the White men and women who spurred the lynchers to action by spreading rumors and telling lies about a Black bogeyman harassing or trying to molest White women and girls were brought to justice. Justice also evaded Person's survivors. His violent death at the hands of an extralegal mob engaged in racial terror, coupled with a lack of genuine

accountability by local, state, and federal governments, prevented amends from occurring. Today, Person's descendants continue to seek answers regarding his deadly lynching and related occurrences. At a minimum, they want to know the specific area in the potter's field of the Edgar Cemetery in Paris where county officials interred Person before federal officials exhumed his body to perform autopsies. If county or federal officials did not reinter Person in the same section, then his descendants want, and indeed deserve, to know where he is interred, so they can give him a legitimate military burial with full honors. Afterward, they can lay Person to rest in a Veteran Affairs cemetery close to Somerville, his birthplace.