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That Spirit Must be Stamped Out: The Mutilation of Joseph Needleman and North Carolina's Effort to Prosecute Lynch Mob Participants during the 1920s

by

Vann Newkirk*

On the night of April 2, 1925, a dozen men broke into the Martin County, North Carolina, jail and kidnapped Joseph Needleman. While several men held the poor man, the leader of the vigilantes pulled out a knife and ripped out Needleman's testicles. The men then calmly returned to their cars and left the bloodied victim to fend for himself. Needleman had been in jail awaiting trial for the rape of a local woman. According to the surviving court documents, he did not confess to any crime nor did the avenging mob attempt to extort a confession.

The assault on Joseph Needleman presents a classic picture of vigilante justice. Not only did the members of the mob deprive Needleman of his constitutional right to a trial by jury, among other things, they removed him from the hands of legal authorities and administered their own brand of justice. However, in comparison to most acts of mob violence, little about the case was commonplace. For one, the victim was only one of a handful of survivors of such violent crimes. The assault also occurred in a relatively moderate Upper South state where racial fears were not as strong as in the Deep South. However, perhaps the biggest surprise was the fact that the victim was not black, Mexican, nor Native American, but Jewish. These and other factors set the stage for one of the most celebrated legal cases in North Carolina history.

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Jews have long lived in the South. They were attracted to the region by the coastal and Mississippi River trade. On the eve of the Civil War, 13 percent of the country's Jewish population lived in the South.¹ Since they comprised only a small segment of the population, southern Jews generally did not experience a great deal of hostility. Indeed many Jews formed deep and lasting friendships with their gentile neighbors. They also gained a degree of acceptance by filling a specific niche, selling goods and extending credit to white and black farmers.² Yet, acceptance did not always eliminate antisemitism and sporadic acts of violence. As historian Patrick Mason observes, "There . . . existed a pervasive, low-level antisemitism in southern culture that periodically became exacerbated by xenophobia, nativism, and economic downturns. Thus, when southerners needed a scapegoat they were usually able to draw on . . . latent symbols . . . of traditional antisemitism."³

For example, in 1915, anxiety over the perceived Jewish menace contributed to perhaps the most infamous act of antisemitism in American history, the lynching of Leo Frank. Frank, a Jewish factory manager, stood accused of the murder of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan. After a highly charged trial in which the district attorney painted Frank as a sexual pervert, a Georgia court sentenced him to death. Nonetheless, shortly after his conviction, doubt surfaced concerning Frank's guilt, leading Governor John Slaton to commute Frank's sentence to life in prison. Yet, he never served the term. A mob calling itself the Knights of Mary Phagan broke into the prison and lynched Frank. Ironically, the evidence pointed to Jim Conley, the factory's black janitor whom the prosecution claimed only helped Frank dispose of Phagan's body.⁴

There are many similarities between the Needleman incident and the Frank case. For example, both stemmed from the alleged assault on a non-Jewish white woman. Also, both cases highlighted several themes then prominent in southern life including a deep distrust of outsiders and a continuing reliance on yellow journalism, mob coercion, and acts of violence to enforce unwritten social rules.⁵

*Front page of the Raleigh (NC) News & Observer, May 7, 1925.
Images of Joseph Needleman are scarce and the quality is extremely poor.
This is the best picture of Needleman that the journal was able to secure.
(Courtesy of Vann Newkirk.)*

The differences between the Frank case and the Needleman incident are equally important. Although both men were from the North, they differed in class. Frank, an industrialist, identified with Atlanta's Jewish elite, whereas Needleman, the son of a poor Russian immigrant, worked as a traveling salesman. The victims of the men's alleged crimes also differed. Frank's alleged victim, Mary Phagan, was a chaste, thirteen-year-old child, whereas the complainant in the Needleman case was a nineteen-year-old with a somewhat questionable reputation. Finally, the context of the cases differed, urban versus rural—the lynching of Frank taking place in Atlanta whereas the Needleman assault occurred in the small, eastern North Carolina hamlet of Williamston.

The assault on Needleman was not a spontaneous outburst of rage nor was the mob a mindless rabble. Like the lynching of Frank, the attack on Needleman was a well-organized action carried out by community leaders, law enforcement officials, and long-term residents of the county who wanted the act of violence to assume a meaning that transcended the actual act of castration.⁶ For them, the attack served as a powerful and violent instrument of societal control aimed at those who had violated social mores. Perhaps due to these factors, the members of the mob, again as was the case with Frank's lynching, enjoyed a great deal of community support.

Nonetheless, for many North Carolinians the violence proved troubling. As R. E. Powell, a reporter for the *Raleigh* (NC) *Times* put it, "well informed people have not . . . nor have they at any time in the past (had) any sympathy for the mob."⁷ The editor of the *Washington* (NC) *Times* demanded, "No stone should be left unturned to bring to justice all who have participated in the outrage against the peace and dignity of the state."⁸

Major newspapers in the North and West also printed details of the attack, thus providing it a national audience. This, in turn, drew the attention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and several Jewish organizations.⁹ In response, North Carolina launched arguably the most aggressive effort in its history to punish members of a mob.

Yet, despite its significance, few historians, and even fewer of the general population, have ever heard of the Needleman case. Lenwood E. Thomas and Luci Peel Powe vaguely remembered the Needleman case in two fictional accounts: *Cry Wounded Innocence* (1994) and *Roanoke Rock Muddle* (2002). Leonard Rogoff also mentions the case in three publications: "Is The Jew White?: The Radical Place of The Southern Jew;" *A History of Temple Emanu-El: An Extended Family, Weldon, North Carolina*; and *Homelands: Southern Jewish Identity in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina*. However, other than these cursory glances, scholars have largely ignored the incident.¹⁰

Such lack of scholarly attention is particularly lamentable because an analysis of the Needleman episode places a human face on the cruel and inhumane institution of mob violence. As one of only a handful of cases in which the victim of a lynch mob survived, it provides a unique perspective: namely that of the victim. The case also offers insight into the function of lynching and mob violence in North Carolina, a state that despite experiencing hundreds of acts of mob violence nonetheless remains largely outside of scholarly focus.

As a final consequence, the sentences handed down to the mob participants shocked North Carolinians and stunned the nation. More importantly, the sentences allowed North Carolina to cast itself as a leader in the effort to end lynching and mob violence. Thus, an examination of the case provides a means for viewing the reaction of a southern state to violence against Jews during the 1920s.

Williamston, North Carolina

Williamston is located on the right bank of the Roanoke River, sixty miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Starting in the eighteenth century, English entrepreneurs, attracted to the abundance of pine trees from which they could extract naval stores of pitch, turpentine, and resin, established a small settlement known as Tar Landing.¹¹ The village prospered and it became the seat of government upon the organization of Martin County in 1774. Five years later, settlers incorporated Tar Landing

and gave it the new name Williamston, in honor of Colonel William Williams.¹²

The renaming of the village after this wealthy planter relates to the fact that by the late 1700s large plantations dominated Martin County. Numerous slaves worked these plantations producing corn and naval stores. By 1860 slavery was so entrenched that bondsmen made up half of the county's residents.

At the close of the Civil War, the construction of lumber mills made Williamston the leading lumber town in North Carolina. The resulting boom increased the town's population from less than 500 in 1880 to more than 750 ten years later. This number included a small group of Jewish merchants.¹³

As in much of the South, the movement of Jews into North Carolina accelerated during the postbellum era. After the war, thousands of freedmen entered the workforce as wage earners. This development, coupled with the rise of new industries such as lumber and tobacco, breathed new life into many towns and, in some cases, created entirely new communities. Jewish entrepreneurs, eager to harness these new markets, traversed the coastal plain peddling goods. In time, these traveling salesmen opened stores and established permanent businesses. In similar fashion, some German Jewish peddlers established businesses in Williamston, such as Abe Adler and Simon Rutenburg who opened a department store there, which they operated until the great influenza outbreak of 1918 led them to sell the business.¹⁴

By 1925, a half dozen Jews called the town home.¹⁵ However, as with many small-town enclaves, the Jewish community in Williamston was really an extended family, namely the Margolis brothers Frank and Irvin and their kin. The Margolises arrived in Williamston in 1919 when Warsaw, North Carolina, merchants Max Margolis and partner Abe Brooks purchased the retail store formerly operated by Adler and Rutenburg. To manage the store, Margolis convinced his younger brothers, Frank and Irvin, to move to Williamston.¹⁶ From the start, the brothers had a natural knack for business, holding frequent sales and advertising women's dresses for 50 cents and men's Sunday suits for \$1.50. They also imported hard-to-find items such as Boy Scout uniforms and

helped organize the Williamston Merchants Association. By 1925, the Margolis brothers were established members of the community, and the store they operated served as an institution as well as a community gathering place. Yet, the small number of Jews in Williamston precluded the development of Jewish institutions. To escape isolation, the Margolises maintained close connections with coreligionists in nearby Tarboro, which had a synagogue and a robust Jewish community.¹⁷

Antisemitism of the 1920s

Between 1915 and 1930 antisemitic tendencies in American society crystallized. For example, when America entered the Great War nativists attacked Jews, charging them with dodging the draft and profiteering. On top of this, the United States Army charged that the “foreign born and Jews were more apt to malingering than native born” citizens.¹⁸

After the war more shocking claims appeared. Hatemongers held Jews responsible for Bolshevik uprisings in Russia and Germany. Other stories purportedly documented a Jewish-Bolshevik plot to overthrow the United States government. In 1918, *Literary Digest* published “Are Bolsheviki Mainly Jews?” an article in which the author claimed that Jews were prominent leaders in the worldwide Bolshevik movement. The next year, the *Digest* published “American Jews in the Bolshevik Oligarchy.” The author of this diatribe professed to have discovered a sinister connection between American Jews and Russian Bolsheviks.¹⁹ However, the most damning condemnations came from Henry Ford’s newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*.

As one of history’s most innovative entrepreneurs, Ford pioneered the mass production of the automobile. This innovation allowed him to become arguably the nation’s most powerful businessman. Unfortunately, between 1910 and 1920, Ford became increasingly antisemitic as he came to believe in a Jewish conspiracy to control world finances. He also believed that Jews plotted to undermine the financial stability of his company.²⁰ Consequently, the *Independent* published a series of anti-Jewish articles, the most provocative of which, the reprinting of

the notorious fabrication, "Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," declared, among other sinister assertions, that atheism in Europe was a Jewish plot.²¹ As a follow up, in 1920, the *Independent* published the "International Jews, the World's Foremost Problem," that, like the earlier *Protocols*, sought to denounce Jews by maintaining that a Jewish conspiracy planned to gain global hegemony by manipulating world economics.²²

Closely following these developments, Congress passed the Emergency Quota (1921) and the Johnson-Reed (1924) acts that restricted immigration from eastern Europe, including large numbers of Jews. The period also saw the rise of quota systems and restrictive hiring practices reducing the number of Jews admitted to the nation's most prestigious colleges and hired in professional positions such as banking, insurance, and medicine.

In North Carolina, antisemitism manifested itself in a number of ways during the 1920s. For example, hotels such as Grove Park Inn in Asheville adopted policies that banned Jews while the University of North Carolina limited Jewish enrollment in its medical college.²³ As if this were not enough, during the same period, a host of xenophobic traveling evangelists, including Mordecai Ham, Arthur Talmage Abernethy, and Oscar Haywood, invaded North Carolina railing against miscegenation and condemning what they perceived as Jewish efforts to contaminate the white race.²⁴

Such attitudes were not new in North Carolina. Throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, North Carolina had one of the smallest Jewish populations in the Southeast, and hostility toward Jews was deeply rooted. The North Carolina constitution of 1776 forbade Jews from voting. State measures also prohibited Jews from holding public office, although some like Jacob Henry evaded the law. Not until 1868, did North Carolina repeal these discriminatory constitutional provisions and laws.²⁵

In contrast, the postbellum period also saw North Carolinians exhibit a great deal of support for Jews. For example, from the mid-1870s until his death in 1894, North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance delivered his "Scattered Nation" speech declaring that Jews were some of the most remarkable people in

the world. During the same period, the University of North Carolina also conferred an honorary degree upon Samuel Mendelsohn, rabbi of Wilmington's synagogue. Perhaps the most notable expression of support occurred in the early 1920s when North Carolinians contributed \$143,111 for the relief of Jews in eastern Europe suffering from the impact of World War I.²⁶

Unfortunately, a rising tide of antisemitic literature, hiring quotas, and restrictive immigration legislation seemingly overwhelmed the scattered expressions of support. This provided the motor and the backdrop for acts of physical violence against Jews. For instance, in 1916, a mob bound and beat a Jewish doctor and threatened him with death if he returned to Kings Hospital in New York.²⁷ Four years later, Colorado extremists killed one Jew and badly wounded another after quarreling over a horse.²⁸ In 1921, a mob in Fort Worth, Texas, kidnapped a Jewish plumber, tied him up, and beat him with sticks until he agreed to leave town.²⁹

Several acts of aggression against Jews also occurred in North Carolina. In 1921, Klansmen in Roland sent a threatening letter to Jewish merchant Phillip Leinwand warning him away from white women.³⁰ Later that same year four masked men in nearby Saint Pauls whipped an eighteen-year-old Jew named Mitchell Epstein and threatened to lynch him if he refused to stop dating a certain young woman.³¹ The next year, the manager of the Durham public utility physically assaulted a Jewish grocer named Harry Murnick for attempting to pay his water bill with a roll of pennies. When Murnick attempted to flee, the manager slapped him and called him a "Goddamned Jew."³² However, the most noteworthy act of violence of the period occurred on a cool Carolina night in April 1925: the mutilation of Joseph Needleman.

The Assault on Joseph Needleman

On the evening of March 16, 1925, Effie Griffin, a nineteen-year-old store clerk from Williamston, agreed to accompany Joseph Needleman to see a movie in the nearby community of Washington. Griffin's sister Rosa and Rosa's boyfriend, Coy Robertson, accompanied them. They planned to

leave Needleman's car at Smithwick Baptist Church and ride in Robertson's car. However when they reached the church, Needleman claimed that he ought not leave his company car at such an isolated location.³³ Instead, he decided to follow Robertson to Washington. What happened next is subject to controversy. Griffin claimed that after leaving the church she and Needleman followed Robertson for a short distance. Then Needleman turned around and drove back toward the church.³⁴ When they reached a lonely spot in the highway, Griffin alleged that Needleman pulled his car to the side of the road, tore off her clothes, and raped her. Then, according to Griffin, Needleman pulled a gun and threatened to kill her if she disclosed the rape to anyone. Nonetheless, a week after the incident she broke down and told her mother. The next day a magistrate issued an arrest warrant for Needleman.³⁵

Questions surround the young woman's account. According to Needleman, on the way to the theater, he and Griffin drove to a secluded spot where they had consensual sex.³⁶ Griffin's behavior appears to substantiate this version of events. For example, in the hours after the alleged assault, several people, including Rosa Griffin, Coy Robertson, and the owner of a gas station, saw Griffin. None of them noticed any torn clothes or sign of rape. In addition, Farris Nassef, the owner of the store where Griffin worked, stated that in the week following the incident, Needleman came into his establishment several times and spent considerable time chatting and joking with Griffin. "During none of these visits did Griffin contact authorities, even though she knew the police were searching for Needleman."³⁷ Why Griffin failed to contact authorities is unknown. Perhaps she feared that if local authorities arrested Needleman, he would reveal intimate details about their relationship. This would have raised questions about her virtue, something socially damaging in a small town like Williamston.

Nonetheless, a week after the alleged assault authorities arrested Needleman in Edenton, North Carolina. They brought him to Williamston and placed him in the county jail for a preliminary hearing. However, the next day authorities abruptly canceled the hearing when Griffin claimed she was sick and could

not testify. Several hours later, she married twenty-one-year-old Furnie Sparrow, Jr.³⁸

Even without a hearing, a large number of white men assumed Needleman had raped Griffin, and a host of curious townsmen traveled in and out of the jail to see and hurl insults at the man who had raped one of "their" girls. For example, R. J. Peele, the clerk of court, told Needleman "you are the damned man that came down here and ruined one of our Martin County girls.³⁹ You ought to be shot lying right there where you are and I'd like to do it myself."⁴⁰ Several citizens subsequently asked the sheriff to hire someone to guard the jail.⁴¹ The sheriff laughed the matter off.⁴²

Yet this was no laughing matter. The Martin County jail had been the site of three infamous jailbreaks. In 1887, a mob forced its way into the jail, seized, and lynched Benjamin White for an alleged assault on a white woman. Fifteen years later, another mob broke into the jail and hung Jim Walker for poisoning his boss.⁴³ Then, in 1923, perhaps the most inept attack came when a mob of more than fifty men stormed into the building only to learn that the man they had come to murder was not in the jail.⁴⁴ Despite a history of attacks, the sheriff left the jail unguarded for the night.

The assault on Joseph Needleman began shortly after midnight when a throng of men broke into the jail. As soon as the men reached Needleman's cell, he turned on his light. He immediately recognized one of the men and shouted, "Paul Sparrow what in the hell are you doing here?"⁴⁵ The fact that Sparrow was one of the attackers is extremely important. Paul Sparrow was a nickname of Furnie Sparrow, Jr., Effie Griffin's new husband. Almost one year earlier, Needleman met Sparrow and the two were friends. Sparrow, in turn, introduced Needleman to Effie Griffin and encouraged the salesman to call on the woman. Sparrow's subsequent marriage to Griffin suggests that the attack on Needleman possibly evolved from a dispute over Griffin's affections. Whatever the case, after Needleman identified Sparrow, according to the *Williamston Enterprise*, a voice snarled back "we are going to take you where your father's money will do no good."⁴⁶ Then, with guns in their hands, two men forced Needle-

man into the back seat of a car. As they sped away, one of the vigilantes yelled, "We have come after your sexual organs, which do you prefer, to give them up, or your head?"⁴⁷ "Do as you please, as you are the doctor," Needleman allegedly replied.⁴⁸

About a mile from the jail, the ringleader of the mob stopped the motorcade. Within seconds, an agitated crowd of men swarmed around the doomed man jockeying for position to watch the action. Then, while several men held the victim, the leader of the mob pulled out a dull knife and hacked at Needleman's genitals. As Needleman shrieked in pain, the vigilante made two small incisions, forced his fingers inside the slits, and ripped out the poor man's testicles. Then, as Needleman lay in a pool of his own blood, a member of the mob told him to "get out of the county as quick as you can."⁴⁹ He also warned that should Needleman report the crime, or "get on the stand and swear against an American girl he would be killed."⁵⁰

That a member of the mob issued such a statement served to remind Needleman of the uncertain place Jews occupied in southern society. As Eric Goldstein put it, "Jews remained racially ill-defined within Southern society, treated as probationary whites who had all the civic privileges of whiteness but were often excluded from social and cultural venues where their uncertain status might undermine the assertion of white racial purity and integrity."⁵¹

Whatever the case, Needleman's torment had not ended. He bled profusely and his clothes clung to him like oilcloth. When he walked to several nearby homes, homeowners refused to render aid, forcing him to hobble nearly a mile and a half to the Britt Hotel before receiving help. Doctors, however, believed Needleman had but hours to live, and they summoned Sheriff Thad Roberson.⁵²

Roberson embodied the affable, "good old boy." In office for eight years, he ran Martin County as his personal fiefdom, controlling political appointments and liberally granting favor to his supporters. According to rumors, he accepted bribes from moonshiners.⁵³ By all accounts, whites in the county regarded him highly. However, when Roberson arrived at the Britt Hotel,

Needleman claimed that he could not identify any members of the mob. Only after doctors encouraged the sheriff to leave did Needleman make a surprising turnabout giving the names of his attackers to his physicians.⁵⁴ Even more shocking, Needleman survived.

Roberson's refusal to protect the jail at night, his power and influence as sheriff, and Needleman's actions in the hours after the attack suggest the possibility of police involvement. As Jerome Skolnick points out, lawmen frequently participated in mob attacks as participants, or "more often as approving observers."⁵⁵ In the attack on Needleman, Sheriff Roberson likely may have been at least in collusion with the mob if not a member of it. In an article published by the *Raleigh News & Observer*, Roberson claimed that shortly before the mob seized Needleman several vigilantes visited his home. Although he refused to hand over the keys to the jail, Roberson maintained he could not follow the mob or sound the alarm because his daughter had passed out when she saw the strange men.⁵⁶ Tellingly, two years earlier when another mob visited the sheriff's home, he single-handedly dispersed it.⁵⁷

Roberson's excuse was not the only one that rang hollow. D. R. Gurganus, who served as the night policeman in Williamston, said that on the night of the assault, he noticed several cars near the courthouse. Instead of going over to investigate, he claimed he went to the sheriff's house. During his absence, the mob seized Needleman.⁵⁸

Reaction to the Assault

In the days after the assault, news spread across the nation. Antilynching forces reacted immediately.⁵⁹ On the national level, the NAACP sent a letter to Governor Angus McLean and several Jewish groups offered a reward of ten thousand dollars for the capture of Needleman's attackers. The Jewish groups also hired two attorneys to help North Carolina prosecute the case.⁶⁰

On the state level, Governor McLean offered a four hundred dollar reward for each person arrested for the crime. He also ordered Dornell Gilliam, the Martin County prosecutor, to

vigorously investigate and “bring to justice all parties that are responsible for this terrible crime against the laws of our state.”⁶¹ The motivation for the governor’s prompt action had little to do with Needleman and more to do with concern that failure to act would raise the ire of northern bankers and investors.

In the decade before McLean became governor, North Carolina’s textile industry underwent unprecedented growth brought about by demands for American products during World War I. Accordingly, the number of mills increased from 293 in 1914 to 343 in 1921. The value of the state’s textile output grew from \$90-million in 1914 to \$191-million in 1921.⁶²

However, in the period following the war, oversupply, weak demand, and high transit costs caused by the state’s poor roads sent the textile industry into a tailspin. To revive the industry, McLean convinced several mill owners to convert their mills to new products such as synthetics and terrycloth. Two of the leading owners in this effort were Jewish industrialists, Julius and Bernard Cone. Through their ownership of Cone Mills, the brothers controlled a textile empire that operated six mills, employed four thousand North Carolinians, and housed more than fifteen thousand of their dependents. However, for textile mill owners like the Cones, the decline in the fortunes of the state’s textile industry, coupled with limited local capital and the state’s poor highways, threatened plans to diversify production. To resolve the financial issues, McLean launched a campaign to attract potential investors.⁶³

On top of these developments, several years earlier the legislature passed the Highway Act. This law authorized a bond issue of \$50 million to construct a modern highway system.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the state only sold \$17,700 of the securities. To launch construction, state officials negotiated a loan of \$5 million from a syndicate of New York banks.⁶⁵ This sum, however, only represented a fraction of the amount needed to build the highway system. As a result, McLean’s predecessor Cameron Morrison negotiated the sale of high yield bonds to a syndicate of Wall

Governor Angus McLean, 1925.

(Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.)

Street investment banks including the Jewish-owned investment houses of Lehman Brothers, Kauffman, Smith, Emert & Company, and Curtis & Sanger.⁶⁶ Since the investment banks and the Cones played major roles in efforts to revive the textile industry and improve road infrastructure, it is plausible that state leaders reasoned that failure to prosecute Needleman's attackers

would adversely affect the state's ability to secure badly needed resources from the North.⁶⁷ Hence, the identification and prosecution of Needleman's attackers became major priorities.

Also possibly influencing the decision-making of state leaders was the Matthew Bullock case. In 1922 the state attempted to extradite Matthew Bullock, a young black man from Canada, for attempted murder. Although the extradition should have been routine, the fact that Bullock's brother died at the hands of a lynch mob rallied Canadians to his defense. Major newspapers picked up the case, and the NAACP launched a campaign to keep Bullock in Canada by highlighting North Carolina's lynching history.⁶⁸ More importantly, the furor raised by Bullock's supporters embarrassed North Carolina leaders and raised anxiety that federal antilynching legislation sponsored by the NAACP would gain approval in the U.S. House of Representatives.⁶⁹ To prevent similar embarrassment and potential fallout in the wake of the Needleman attack, Governor McLean placed the full apparatus of state government at the disposal of the prosecutor.

In taking such an aggressive stance, the governor confronted a difficult task. Needleman faced charges of sexual assault on a non-Jewish, white woman in an area where fears of miscegenation had long colored the social and economic fabric of the community.⁷⁰ This meant that the members of the mob benefited from the support of a large segment of the community including many potential jurors. Frequently in such an environment, prosecutors faced great difficulty in arresting, prosecuting, and convicting mob participants.

In addition, North Carolina had an extremely low rate of conviction for mob participants. Between 1865 and 1924, the state convicted three people for acts of lynching and mob violence while at the same time more than 150 North Carolinians died at the hands of mobs.⁷¹ Perhaps no case better illustrates this reality than the 1891 trial of the men charged with lynching Hezekiah Rankin, a twenty-eight-year-old African American. In the days following the homicide, North Carolina officials held a grand jury hearing during which half a dozen witnesses identified four white railroad employees as the men responsible for Rankin's death.⁷²

Authorities arrested the men and scheduled a trial for the next session of criminal court. Nonetheless, the judge dismissed the case declaring witness testimony insufficient to prosecute the men.⁷³

Fifteen years after the Rankin debacle, North Carolina launched its second attempt to prosecute a lynch mob. In May 1906, a mob of Anson County farmers broke into the county jail and lynched John V. Johnson, a forty-two-year-old white male.⁷⁴ Following the murder, authorities arrested twenty-two men and charged them with lynching. To ensure that the defendants did not exert undue influence on the jury, the state moved the trial to nearby Union County. Nonetheless, this made little difference, as a jury failed to convict the men. Throughout the trial, the prosecution based its case on the 1893 statute that defined the crime of lynching as an act in which a victim(s) had to be in the hands of the law before the state considered it a lynching.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the prosecutor failed to review the 1905 revisions that, while maintaining the essence of the older law, nonetheless altered the 1893 provision. The most important difference between the two codes was the failure of North Carolina to define lynching in the revision. This was extremely important because several years earlier the state's highest court had ruled that a "crime had to be defined within the body of law for prosecution to be valid."⁷⁶ Due to this technicality, the men charged with the Anson County lynching escaped conviction.

In prosecuting Needleman's attackers, North Carolina officials were determined that this case would end with the conviction of the members of the mob. Hence, before arriving in Williamston, the prosecutor carefully reviewed North Carolina's lynching codes. Then he hired several special police officers and removed the investigation from the hands of local authorities.

A week after making these changes Gilliam got his first break. John Jones, a local farmer, claimed that on the night of the jailbreak he noticed a crowd of men standing near Skewarkee Church. When he stopped to investigate, the men drove him off. However, Jones recognized several of the men and gave their names to the prosecutor.⁷⁷

*Skewarkee Primitive Baptist Church, Williamston,
site of the Needleman attack.
(Photograph by Vann Newkirk, September 2007.)*

One day later Gilliam received additional information. Throughout Williamston rumors circulated that the night policeman in Robersonville, a town about ten miles from Williamston, was a member of the mob. When this report reached Gilliam he brought the officer, John Coltrane, in for questioning. At first, Coltrane claimed that he had no knowledge of the crime. Yet, when threatened with arrest, he made a full confession. According to Coltrane, on the night of the assault, Dennis Griffin, Effie Griffin's cousin, Julian Bullock, and Tommy Lilley asked him to join them in the attack on Needleman. Although he refused, he lent the men his gun. After the assault, Coltrane said that Julian Bullock told him that they had "fixed that damn Jew so that he won't bother any more women."⁷⁸

This was an important statement since evidence suggests that several of the ringleaders of the mob were members of the Ku Klux Klan, and many others harbored strong anti-Jewish biases.⁷⁹

For example, during the assault several members of the mob proclaimed, "that damned Jew got exactly what was coming to him." Supporting the belief that the attack was racially motivated, a reporter from the *New York World* placed the blame on the Ku Klux Klan and Sheriff Roberson's antipathy for Jews.⁸⁰ The *Kinston, (NC) Daily Free Press* maintained, "reports that the mutilation mob was promoted by members of the Ku Klux Klan and that Klan members enticed boys to take part in the affair by representing that it was nothing more than a flogging party are current here."⁸¹ Closer to home, the *Williamston Enterprise* printed an editorial which held Klan ideology responsible for the assault. "The Needleman case . . . was (caused by) the reflex or backwash of the Klan. A fair analysis of the case seems to warrant the belief that certain members of the Klan or those who had been members participated."⁸²

Whatever the case, on the heels of Coltrane's confession, a judge issued arrest warrants for John Griffin, Effie Griffin's brother, and John Gurkin, her brother-in-law.⁸³ Authorities also arrested twenty-one-year-old Furnie W. Sparrow, Jr., Effie Griffin's husband, as well as thirty-two additional suspects including Furnie W. Sparrow, Sr., Effie Griffin's father-in-law, and the pastor of Skewarkee Primitive Baptist Church, Edward Stone, Griffin's stepfather.⁸⁴ Mob member Tommy Lilley was noticeably absent. As news of the arrests spread, Lilley grabbed his .22 caliber rifle and put a bullet into his head.⁸⁵ Few believed that he would recover, although he did survive.

Trial for the mob began on May 6, 1925, with the selection of twelve all-white male jurors. Without question, attorneys for the accused felt that the makeup of the jury offered the defense the upper hand.⁸⁶ Consequently, they decided to employ a strategy of having their clients plead not guilty. To support this argument, they planned to use a mixture of testimony from the defendants and a handful of character witnesses to shore up their clients' alibis. Although the use of such tactics might seem risky today, in 1925 the lawyers had good reason to be optimistic. In trial after trial of lynch mob participants, almost any alibi supported by witness testimony was

enough to garner an acquittal. Moreover, all-white juries notoriously refused to convict white defendants charged with attacking blacks, Jews, and members of other minority groups.⁸⁷

The prosecution, however, came prepared. In the days before the trial, the prosecutor targeted twenty youthful members of the mob and two of the alleged ringleaders, John Gurkin and Edward Stone. The confessions thus obtained allowed the prosecution to uncover the roles played by each of the thirty-six defendants.⁸⁸ It also fit squarely into Gilliam's strategy of targeting the ringleaders in the belief that their convictions would make it easier to secure guilty verdicts for the remaining mob members.⁸⁹

When the trial opened on May 7, 1925, the prosecution called John Gurkin as the first witness. In a lengthy testimony, Gurkin named Dennis Griffin as the leader and organizer of the mob. He also identified Furnie Sparrow, Sr., Julian Bullock, and Furnie Sparrow, Jr., as the men who restrained Needleman while Dennis Griffin performed the castration.⁹⁰ Then he revealed that several of the men had intended to lynch Needleman and dump his body in the Roanoke River.⁹¹ Gurkin, however, claimed that he persuaded the men to spare Needleman's life. In cross-examination, the defense attempted to unnerve Gurkin by demanding to know why he had confessed. He calmly replied, "the truth never hurt anybody that I knows [*sic*] of."⁹²

Following Gurkin, the prosecution called its star witness, Joseph Needleman. Pale and weak, Needleman presented a pitiful picture. He was unable to walk or speak beyond a whisper, and deputies lifted him into the witness stand.⁹³ Trembling with emotion, Needleman gave a damning testimony. On the night of the attack, Needleman stated, a strange noise awakened him. When he turned on a light, he saw several men standing nearby.

At this point, Needleman rose from his chair, extended his arm, and pointed at Dennis Griffin, "and that man is sitting right

*Martin County Courthouse where the trial took place.
The jail where Needleman was held was a separate
building to the rear of the courthouse.
(Photograph by Vann Newkirk, March 2008.)*

there, he's the guy." For a brief moment, Needleman and Griffin glared at each other while hundreds of spectators, tense with curiosity, held their breath. According to the *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, this unnerved Griffin, and he began to sweat and move anxiously. Needleman next described how Furnie Sparrow, Jr., Furnie Sparrow, Sr., and Julian Bullock held him while Griffin tore off his

underwear and performed the castration. The stress of this testimony overcame Needleman and tears began to streak down his face.⁹⁴ As tears choked his speech, Needleman finished his testimony by claiming that Griffin threatened to kill him if he told anyone about the assault. Then in an attempt to raise doubt about the identity of the person responsible for the mutilation the defense limited its cross-examination to one brief question about the source of his injury.⁹⁵ Needleman replied by pointing at Griffin.

Other prosecution witnesses also offered damaging testimony. Edward Stone testified that Dennis Griffin told him that "something should be done to Needleman and that a crowd could be gotten together from different towns to lynch or castrate Needleman."⁹⁶ Alfred Gurkin and Roy Gray also identified Griffin as the leader and organizer of the mob.

The next day the defense opened its rebuttal by calling Furnie Sparrow, Sr., who claimed he was at home at the time of the attack. According to Sparrow, he closed his store around 12 AM and then drove home. To corroborate his alibi, William Croom, a Kinston police officer, declared that he saw Sparrow between 10 PM and 12 AM. He also claimed that he saw Sparrow's car at Sparrow's home at 1 AM. Two other Kinston police officers gave virtually the same testimony. Upon cross-examination, however, the state seriously weakened the officers' credibility when the prosecutor revealed that Sparrow's nephew was chief of police in Kinston and that the officers owed their jobs to him.⁹⁷

After Sparrow, the defense called Dennis Griffin. Dennis Griffin denied involvement in the assault. However, he admitted that he met John Gurkin and Tommy Lilley at a hardware store where they told him of the plan to get Needleman out of jail.⁹⁸ After this stunning admission, Griffin acknowledged, "if I quivered when Needleman pointed at me yesterday I did not know it, yet such an accusation against anyone guilty or innocent would make anyone shudder."⁹⁹ He closed by claiming his innocence. However, few in the courtroom took this claim seriously since a host of witnesses as well as Needleman had placed Griffin at the center of the crime.

The next morning lawyers presented closing arguments. Defense attorney Vernon Cowper compared the trial with the crucifixion. "Give us Barabbas the crowd before Pilot [*sic*] cried. . . . [The] state in a like manner today is seeking the crucifixion of Griffin, being willing to release Barabbas in order to get Griffin."¹⁰⁰ Cowper declared, "in trying all of the cases at one time the state seeks to bundle all of the defendants into the vortex of stripe and bonds without regard to the separate stories of the men."¹⁰¹

The most dramatic moment of the closing, however, happened when Prosecutor Gilliam spoke. First, he provided a summary of Needleman's testimony. Then he attacked the alibi given by Furnie Sparrow, Sr., by asking the jurors if they would not know how a man looked who had held them while they were being tortured. Finally, in an obvious reference to the remaining mob members, Gilliam declared that, "any man who is mean enough to stand by and see a crime like that committed is mean enough to commit it himself."¹⁰² With that, Judge N. A. Sinclair instructed the jury to convict anyone who encouraged, counseled, or advised the perpetrators of the crime as an accessory. Four hours later the jury returned verdicts of guilty with malice against Julian Bullock, Dennis Griffin, and Furnie W. Sparrow, Sr., and a verdict of guilty without malice against Claro Heath.¹⁰³ The remaining defendants including Edward Stone, Johnny Gurkin, Alfred Griffin, and Furnie Sparrow, Jr., pleaded guilty to the charge of accessory to the crime. After these proceedings the prosecutor announced that the state did not have enough evidence to prosecute Needleman for rape.¹⁰⁴

That the Needleman verdict did not raise any objections from local authorities and supporters of the defendants in the mutilation trial almost certainly stemmed from Effie Griffin's actions following the alleged assault. As indicated earlier, she kept the assault secret for a week, during which time she freely communicated with Needleman.¹⁰⁵ More astonishingly, Griffin married Furnie W. Sparrow, Jr., several hours after canceling her testimony at Needleman's arraignment.¹⁰⁶ For most whites such behavior

was unacceptable. This undoubtedly led the prosecutor to drop efforts to prosecute Needleman.

County Prosecutor Dornell Gilliam (left) and Judge N. A. Sinclair, outside the Martin County Courthouse, c. 1925. (Courtesy of the Raleigh News & Observer.)

The next morning Judge Sinclair sentenced Dennis Griffin to thirty years in the state penitentiary. Then he sentenced Furnie Sparrow, Sr., Furnie Sparrow, Jr., and Julian Bullock to prison terms ranging from six to ten years.¹⁰⁷ Coconspirators Claro Heath, Edward Stone, Johnny Gurkin, Alfred Griffin, Albert Gurkin, and Ray Gray received prison terms ranging from one to three years.¹⁰⁸ Sinclair fined the other mob members five hundred dollars each. Then as a warning to other would-be mob participants the judge declared:

I think this trial is a demonstration of the fact that the people of North Carolina can trust the courts. I have been surprised to read in the public press and to hear intelligent men say, that the

courts are not functioning, an implied justification of the people taking the law into their own hands. It is a lie and a slander upon the government of the state, and I hope that the press of North Carolina will stop that carping spirit of criticism which, to a great extent has created a feeling that the courts cannot be trusted. You can trust the courts. They never fail. Men have no excuse, no justification for taking the law into their own hands. The old sentiment that because some woman has been wronged you must revert to barbarism and become savages, taking the law into your own hands and redressing such wrongs is a reflection upon civilization. Men who ought to know better, from time to time attempt to justify and excuse such conduct is absolute poison running through the State and the men who express such sentiments are bad citizens and a positive menace to the government of the State. That spirit must be stamped out in North Carolina.¹⁰⁹

Nonetheless, the case refused to go away. In July 1927, Needleman filed a one hundred thousand dollar lawsuit for damages against Sheriff Thad Roberson, Effie Griffin, and the men charged in the assault.¹¹⁰ At first, few of the defendants appeared to worry about the suit. Most realized that the suit was more than a year after the crime. North Carolina law required persons seeking compensatory damages to file suit within one year from the date of the crime. In addition, during the trial, Needleman signed an agreement in which he consented not to bring a civil suit if the men agreed to plead guilty as accessories.¹¹¹ Needleman, however, overcame these obstacles by filing his suit in federal court. Federal law superseded state law. Consequently, in June 1928, the defendants concluded an out-of-court settlement with Needleman.¹¹²

What were the motivations of the attack? In his study, *Lynching in The New South*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage maintains that acts of lynching and mob violence often had a "twofold nature: not only were they intended to enforce social conformity . . . but they also served as a means of racial repression."¹¹³ It is plausible such motivations were factors in the decision to attack Needleman. For example in the 1920s, when a wave of nativist sentiment spread across the country, many white Protestant Americans

regarded "hyphenated Americans" with great suspicion and as members of alien races. At the same time, groups like the Ku Klux Klan heightened tension by forging white Protestant fears over immigration, sexual promiscuity, miscegenation, and alcohol into a potent political force with common targets: immigrants, African Americans, Catholics, and Jews.¹¹⁴ In such an environment the very thought that a Jew would sexually assault a white woman represented a serious transgression that demanded a response. Perhaps the most dramatic punishment would have been castration, which "symbolically exorcised the threat of interracial mingling," thus disempowering the Jew.¹¹⁵

At the center of such beliefs lay two vastly different stereotypes of Jewish men then present in American culture. On one hand, these images portrayed Jewish men as physically weak, bookish, and asexual. On the other hand, these beliefs held that Jewish men harbored an insatiable sexual appetite for white Christian women. Taken together both stereotypes represented a threat to white Protestant masculinity. For one, the prowess and prominence of Jewish athletes and blue-collar workers easily discredited characteristics traditionally assigned to Jewish males. Hence, instead of competing with weak, sickly rivals, white Protestant men contended with strong physical specimens. Furthermore, as criminologist Barbara Perry maintains, the thought that Jewish men might engage in what were then defined as interracial relationships represented an even more insidious threat since this would have deprived white heterosexual Christian men of their rights to white women and weakened the white race by introducing inferior bloodlines.¹¹⁶ Such views were analogous to black rapist theories in which white men feared and resented black men for their alleged large sexual organs and their supposed lust for white women. Castration and subsequently lynching were symbolic and very real attempts to destroy this imaginary threat to white masculinity. Moreover, like the black rapists theory, white Protestant males possibly felt that the only way to maintain their masculinity was through the emasculation of the Jewish threat.

Aftermath

The results of the mutilation trial were far-reaching since the trial marked the first time in North Carolina's history and one of the few instances in American history that a southern state successfully prosecuted and sent key members of a mob to prison. More importantly, the state's success in prosecuting members of the mob allowed officials and sympathetic journalists to cast North Carolina as a symbol of the New South in which lynching and mob violence were passé and unacceptable. After the conviction, R. L. Gray wrote in the journal *World's Work*, "it should not be possible to have hereafter in North Carolina a lynching." Samuel S. McClure, the editor of *McClure's Magazine*, stated, "The results of the trial discouraged lynching in North Carolina." The most vocal acclaim came from William H. Richardson, the former private secretary of North Carolina Governor Cameron Morrison. "The mob is dead! Long live the law! Well might be the slogan of North Carolina for that state has ended the reign of the mobmen."¹¹⁷

Despite the headline, the trial did not end mob violence nor did it herald the start of a new era in North Carolina law enforcement. In fact, from June 1925 to December 1935 North Carolina experienced nine lynchings and five serious acts of mob violence. In only one of these cases, the 1925 mob attack on the Asheville jail, the state prosecuted those responsible. Not until 1937, when North Carolina created a Department of Justice and formed the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation, would the state bring to an end the reign of Judge Lynch and vigilante law.¹¹⁸

The question remains what happened to Joseph Needleman and the key players in his castration. Evidence obtained from the 1930 census revealed that after his mutilation trial Needleman returned to Philadelphia. One year later he married and became a salesman for a cleaning plant. Needleman died in 1986.¹¹⁹ Effie Griffin and Furnie Sparrow, Jr., separated in 1942 and divorced one year later. In 1942, Griffin joined the Women's Army Corp. She died in 1984 at the age of seventy-eight.¹²⁰

*Portrait of WAC Effie Griffin Sparrow, c. 1944,
from the Effie Sparrow Papers (WV0179).
(Courtesy, Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project,
Martha Hodges Special Collection, and University Archives,
University Libraries, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.)*

Furnie Sparrow, Jr., served three years in prison for the attack on Needleman. After his divorce from Effie Griffin, he remarried and returned to Martin County. He died in 1976 at the age of seventy-one. Tommy Lilley, another key player in the case, never recovered from his self-inflicted gunshot and died less than a year after the famous trial. Julian Bullock escaped from the Caledonia State Prison on January 2, 1927, and disappeared. As for Dennis Griffin, he reported to prison in 1925. However, existing records do not reveal what happened to him after 1930.¹²¹ As for black and Jewish reactions to the crime, the surviving evidence presents only cursory information about how Jews, only ten years after the lynching of Leo Frank, reacted to the attack. However, for local African Americans reaction to the attack was likely one of forced indifference. Martin County had a long history of repression against blacks. In the period from 1883 to 1925, Martin County mobs lynched three African Americans. Dozens of other blacks suffered beatings or economic reprisals at the hands of whites. As a result, most African Americans expressed little desire to become involved in a case especially because it lacked any black participants.

The assault on Joseph Needleman was the last documented act of mob violence carried out on a white man in North Carolina. As such, the tragedy helps us understand a complex and crucial moment in history when North Carolina, like much of the South, was mired in efforts to end lynching and mob violence. The case also helps us to understand the tenuous place Jews occupied in southern society during the 1920s. For example, Furnie Sparrow, Jr., and several other members of the mob had been friends with Needleman. Sparrow's decision to seek revenge over Needleman's relationship with Effie Griffin and the subsequent participation of Klansmen and others who harbored strong anti-Jewish biases in the tragedy also reveals that during the 1920s, in much of the South, prejudice towards Jews continued to stir just below the surface, ready in moments of crisis to break loose. More significantly, it illustrates just how blurred the line was between revenge and antisemitism. Yet, the case did not herald an upsurge in antisemitism. On the contrary, after the initial excitement, Jews

living in North Carolina resumed their daily lives with little fanfare. As for the Ku Klux Klan, less than two years after the Needleman case, a split in the organization's leadership led to a rapid decline in membership. By 1935, only remnants of the Invisible Empire remained in North Carolina.

NOTES

¹ Cindy Sier, "Long History and Strong Spirit of Jews in the Deep South." Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, 2006, http://www.msje.org/media/article_remote_communities.htm (accessed October 2009).

² Deborah R. Wiener, *Coalfield Jews: An Appalachian History* (Champaign, IL, 2006), 49; Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark Greenberg, eds., *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History* (Waltham, MA, 2006), 9.

³ Patrick Q. Mason, "Anti-Jewish Violence in the New South," *Southern Jewish History* 8 (2005): 77-78.

⁴ Steve Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (New York, 2003), 343-565; Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* (Athens, GA., 1999).

⁵ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York, 1995), 35.

⁶ "Doubt Girl's Tale Which Fired Mob," *New York World*, April 6, 1925; "Leader of Williamston Mob Is Given Sentence of Thirty Years in State Penitentiary," *Raleigh (NC) News & Observer*, May 14, 1925.

⁷ "Martin County's Sheriff and Court Clerk Totter on Thrones," *Raleigh (NC) Times*, May 9, 1925.

⁸ "Total Sentences 63 Years Imposed Five Mob Members," *Kingsport (TN) Times*, May 14, 1925; "State Must Avenge This Crime," *Washington (NC) Daily News*, April 1, 1925.

⁹ "Doubt Girl's Tale," *New York World*, April 6, 1925; Papers of the NAACP, Anti-Lynching Campaign 1916-1950, part 7, reel 15, Joyner Library, East Carolina University.

¹⁰ Lenwood Thomas, *Cry of Wounded Innocence* (New York, 1994); Lucia Peel Powe, *Roanoke Rock Muddle* (Raleigh, NC, 2002); Leonard Rogoff, *A History of Temple Emanu-El: An Extended Family, Weldon, North Carolina* (Durham, NC, 2007); Leonard Rogoff, *Homelands: Southern Jewish Identity in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2001); Leonard Rogoff, "Is the Jew White?: The Radical Place of The Southern Jew," *American Jewish History* 85 (1997): 195-230.

¹¹ "Williamston," *Williamston (NC) Enterprise*, September 23, 1914.

¹² Shelby Jean Hughes, *Martin County Heritage* (Williamston, NC, 1980), 71.

¹³ Fred W. Harrison, *Martin County: Images of America* (Charleston, SC, 1999), 1-2.

¹⁴ During the 1918 influenza outbreak Rutenburg sold his interest in the store to Dennis Taylor and left town. The next year Adler and Taylor sold their interest in the store to Max

Margolis. Margolis then sold the store to his brothers Frank and Irvin who operated the enterprise until 1972.

¹⁵ Williamston was also home to several Arab-owned businesses. Like the Jews, most initially entered the country as traveling salesmen. One of the most notable of this group was Farris Nassef, a man prominent in this story as Needleman's employer and a witness to certain events.

¹⁶ Hughes, *Martin County Heritage*, 403-404.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Organizations: View from the Ten-Yard Line," *Time*, February 8, 1968.

¹⁹ Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 79-80.

²⁰ Sidney M. Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance: Voices of Jewish Identity* (Detroit, 1991), 81-82.

²¹ Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 81-82.

²² The *Dearborn* (MI) *Independent* also sought to create an American Dreyfus case. In October 1918, after a shooting accident left an army officer dead, the paper tried to pin the incident on a Jewish captain named Robert Rosenbluth. Although a military court ruled the death was accidental, the *Independent* went through a great deal of trouble to create the impression that the only reason such a verdict had been rendered was due to Jewish financiers working behind the scenes. Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York, 2003), 45-46.

²³ Edward Halperin, "The Jewish Problem in U.S. Medical Education, 1920-1955," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 56 (April 2001): 140-167.

²⁴ Ham was best known as the preacher who converted Billy Graham. Abernethy was a well-known writer who later became pastor of Asheville's First Christian Church and Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. Haywood was a member of the North Carolina legislature as well as a minister. James Baker, "The Battle for Elizabeth City: Christ and Antichrist in North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 54 (October 1977): 397.

²⁵ Rogoff, *Homelands*. 7; Isaiah Janowsky, *The Jew: A Composite History* (Freeport, NY, 1942), 12.

²⁶ "\$143,111 for Jewish Relief," (Lumberton, NC) *Robesonian*, March 13, 1922.

²⁷ Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 100.

²⁸ Ida Libert Uchill, *Pioneers, Peddlers & Tsadikin: The History of Jews in Colorado* (Boulder, CO, 1951), 159.

²⁹ Ralph D. Mecklenburger, "Comfort and Discomfort: Being Jewish in Fort Worth," in *Lone Stars of David: The Jews of Texas*, ed. Hollace Ava Weiner and Kenneth Roseman (Waltham, MA, 2007), 271.

³⁰ "Says Ku Klux Klan Sends Letter of Threat," *Robesonian*, November 10, 1921.

³¹ "Young Jew Beaten By Masked Men," *Robesonian*, January 30, 1922.

³² Several days after the beating a court convicted the manager for attacking Murnick. Rogoff, *Homelands*, 131.

³³ Needleman was employed as a traveling cigarette salesman for the Lorillard Tobacco Company. Two years earlier Needleman, fresh out of high school, moved to Kinston, North Carolina, to work in a store his brother operated. He met Furnie Sparrow Jr. and Effie Griffin through this relationship. When business declined he took a job with Lorillard.

³⁴ "Miss Effie Griffin Gives Her Version of Alleged Assault," *Tarboro (NC) Daily Southerner*, April 6, 1925.

³⁵ "Philadelphia Traveling Salesman Arrested in Edenton on Charge of Criminal Assault on Local Girl," *Williamston Enterprise*, November 27, 1925.

³⁶ "Needleman Still in Serious Condition at Washington is Friendly to Williamston," *Williamston Enterprise*, April 3, 1925.

³⁷ "Judge Sinclair Expected to Join Gilliam Investigation," *Raleigh News & Observer*, April 3, 1925.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Peele was Effie Griffin's cousin. *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ "Needleman Gives Pathetic Account," *Raleigh News & Observer*, May 8, 1925.

⁴¹ "Needleman Still in Serious Condition," *Williamston Enterprise*, April 3, 1925.

⁴² "Needleman Tells His Story on Stand," *Washington Daily News*, May 7, 1925.

⁴³ Ironically, Walker's boss Dr. Tayloe later served as one of Needleman's physicians. Vann Newkirk, *Lynching in North Carolina* (Jefferson, NC, 2008), 10-14.

⁴⁴ In addition to the attacks on the jail, in 1919 a mob lynched Dan Williams, an elderly black man. "Grand Jury Indicts Three Young White Men for Murder," *Williamston Enterprise*, March 23, 1923; "Feeling Against Sheriff Grows," *Tarboro Weekly Southerner*, April 2, 1925.

⁴⁵ The assault on the jail occurred on the night of March 29, 1925. "Needleman Accuses D. Griffin Dramatic Scene When Victim Says That's The Man," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 7, 1925.

⁴⁶ "Gurkin Tells His Side of the Crime: Puts Entire Responsibility for Crime on Dennis Griffin," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 10, 1925.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ "Doubt Girl's Tale," *New York World*, April 6, 1925.

⁴⁹ "Needleman Tells His Story on Stand," *Washington Daily News*, May 7, 1925.

⁵⁰ "Gurkin Tells his Side of the Crime," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 10, 1925.

⁵¹ Eric L. Goldstein, "'Now Is the Time to Show Your True Colors': Southern Jews, Whiteness, and the Rise of Jim Crow," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil*, ed. Ferris and Greenburg, 135; Cheryl Lynn Greenburg, *Troubling Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, 2006); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2008); Rogoff, "Is the Jew White?"

⁵² On the day after the assault a throng of curious townsmen rushed to the site of the attack. Arriving first, the local undertaker collected Needleman's testicles. In a type of morbid exhibitionism he placed the testicles in a jar of embalming fluid. Over the next few

days, he did a brisk business displaying the remains for curious townspeople. "Needleman Accuses D. Griffin," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 7, 1925.

⁵³ "Martin County's Sheriff and Court Clerk Totter on Thrones," *Raleigh Times*, May 9, 1925; "Doubt Girl's Tale," *New York World*, April 6, 1925; "Sheriff and His Deputies Seize A Still Thursday," *Williamston Enterprise*, September 21, 1923.

⁵⁴ "Needleman Accuses D. Griffin," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 7, 1925.

⁵⁵ Jerome Skolnick and James J. Fyfe, *Above the Law: Police and the Excessive Use of Force* (New York, 1994), 24.

⁵⁶ "Needleman Accuses D. Griffin," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 7, 1925.

⁵⁷ "Lynching Party From Plymouth Fumbled the Job," *Williamston Enterprise*, June 19, 1923.

⁵⁸ "Needleman Taken From Jail," *Williamston Enterprise*, March 31, 1925.

⁵⁹ "Jury Chosen For Needleman Case," *Washington Daily News*, April 16, 1925.

⁶⁰ "Doubt Girl's Tale," *New York World*, April 6, 1925.

⁶¹ Four hundred dollars was the maximum reward allowed by North Carolina law. "Governor Ignores Martin Sheriff in Offering Reward," *Raleigh News & Observer*, April 4, 1925.

⁶² Mary Underwood, "Angus Wilton McLean Governor of North Carolina," (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1962), 198; Brent Glass, *The Textile Industry in North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC, 1992), 61-63; Bernard Cone, *Some Present day Problems of the Textile Industry* (Charlotte, 1930); *A Century of Excellence: The History of Cone Mills, 1891 to 1991* (Greensboro, NC, 1991); Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stump: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008), 9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ D. L. Corbitt, ed., *Public Papers and Letters of Cameron Morrison* (Raleigh, 1927), xxxiv.

⁶⁵ Banks in the syndicate included First National Bank of New York, B. J. Van Ingen & Company, Kissel, Kinnicutt & Company, Hornblower & Weeks, Eldredge & Company, Redmond & Company, and Stacy & Braun. Cecil Kenneth Brown, *The State Highway System of North Carolina: Its Evolution and Status* (Chapel Hill, 1931), 125.

⁶⁶ Brown, *The State Highway System of North Carolina*, 125; "New Bond Offerings of the Week," *New York Times*, July 1, 1922.

⁶⁷ Underwood, "Angus Wilton McLean Governor of North Carolina," 68, 187, 198; William Richardson, "North Carolina Crushes Mob Rule," *Dearborn Independent* (April 1926), 7, 23-24.

⁶⁸ "Sees No Hope for Bullock If Sent Back," *Toronto Globe*, January 20, 1922.

⁶⁹ Newkirk, *Lynching in North Carolina*, 56-74.

⁷⁰ Goldstein, "'Now Is the Time to Show Your True Colors,'" Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*; Rogoff, "Is the Jew White?"

⁷¹ Newkirk, *Lynching in North Carolina*, 167-170.

⁷² "The Coroner's Inquest," *Asheville (NC) Citizen*, September 26, 1891.

⁷³ "Asheville Lynchers Go Free," *Statesville (NC) Landmark*, November 5, 1891.

⁷⁴ "White Man Is Lynched," *Charlotte (NC) Observer*, May 29, 1906.

⁷⁵ Investigations of Lynchings, etc., Public Law 461, North Carolina General Statutes, 1893; Walter Lockhart, "Lynching in North Carolina" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1972), 84.

⁷⁶ Lockhart, "Lynching in North Carolina," 84.

⁷⁷ "Needleman Mutilated by Mob," *Williamston Enterprise*, March 31, 1925.

⁷⁸ "Three Men Charged With Parts in Joe Needleman Case Silent; Many Talk," *Kinston (NC) Daily Free Press*, April 14, 1925; "Needleman Accuses D. Griffin," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 7, 1925.

⁷⁹ Both F. W. Sparrow, Sr., and F. W. Sparrow, Jr., were rumored to be members of the Ku Klux Klan. In addition several of the members of the mob claimed that they had come to Skewarkee Church, the site of Needleman's castration, to attend a Klan rally. "Arguments in Martin County Cases Resume Today," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 11, 1925.

⁸⁰ "Three Men Charged With Parts," *Kinston Daily Free Press*, April 14, 1925; "Doubt Girl's Tale," *New York World*, April 6, 1925.

⁸¹ "Three Men Charged With Parts," *Kinston Daily Free Press*, April 14, 1925.

⁸² "Where the Ku Klux Klan Falls Down," *Williamston Enterprise*, April 10, 1925.

⁸³ "Three Men Arrested Suspected of being Members of Mob," *Tarboro Southerner*, March 31, 1925; Furnie Sparrow & Effie Griffin marriage license, March 26, 1925, Martin County Licenses 1921-1927, v. 7, Microfilm, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

⁸⁴ The indictments, however, did not remove the original charges that Needleman faced. On the same day the mob members were arraigned, the state found enough probable cause to charge Needleman with rape. *North Carolina v. Joe Needleman*, Grand Jury Minutes, May 4, 1924, Martin County Minute Docket, v. 10, 1924-1930, Microfilm IXV, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

⁸⁵ "Tommy Lilley Shoots Self With Small Caliber Rifle; Not Expected to Recover," *Williamston Enterprise*, April 24, 1925.

⁸⁶ "Special Term of Trial of Joe Needleman and Mob Began Monday," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 5, 1925; "Gurkin Tells His Story;" "State Puts in Rebuttal Defense Testimony," *Washington Daily News*, May 9, 1925; "Court Idle While Six Deputies Summon Men For Jury Service," *Raleigh News & Observer*, May 6, 1925; "The Grand Jury Return 33 Bills In Record Time," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 7, 1925; "The Mutilation Joseph [sic] Needleman Told by John W. Gurkin," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 7, 1925; "Jury Try Men Charged With Attack Needleman be Drawn Tomorrow," *Greenville (NC) Daily Reflector*, May 5, 1925; Newkirk, *Lynching In North Carolina*; "First Night Session Mob Trial to Night," *Washington Daily News*, May 8, 1925; "Needleman Says Henry D. Griffin Leader of Mob," *Greenville Daily Reflector*, May 7, 1925; "Two Defendants Deny Any Part in Needleman Attack," *Greenville Daily Reflector*, May 8, 1925; "Needleman Points Out Griffin As The Man Who Mutilated," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 8, 1925; "Dennis Griffin Attempts Prove Alibi At Trial," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 9, 1925; "Arguments In Martin County Cases Resume Today," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 11, 1925; "Needleman and Sparrow Slated Next For

Trial," *Wilmington (NC) Morning Star*, May 12, 1925; "Needleman Gives Pathetic Account," *Raleigh News & Observer*, May 7, 1925."

⁸⁷ Newkirk, *Lynching In North Carolina*; Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore, 1988); George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940* (Baton Rouge, 1990); Laura Wexler, *Fire in a Canebrake* (New York, 2003); Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynching* (Baltimore, 1988); Walter Howard, *Lynchings and Extralegal Violence in Florida During the 1930s* (New York, 1995).

⁸⁸ "Gurkin Tells His Story"; "The Mutilation Joseph Told by John W. Gurkin," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 7, 1925; "Needleman Points Out Griffin As The Man Who Mutilated," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 8, 1925.

⁸⁹ "Three Men Charged With Parts," *Kinston Daily Free Press*, April 14, 1925."

⁹⁰ "Needleman Tells His Story on Stand," *Washington Daily News*, May 7, 1925; "Gurkin Tells His Story," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 7, 1925; "The Mutilation Joseph Told by John W. Gurkin," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 7, 1925; "Needleman Points Out Griffin As The Man Who Mutilated," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 8, 1925.

⁹¹ "Needleman Accuses Griffin," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 10, 1925.

⁹² "Eye Witness Describes Attack on Needleman," *Raleigh News & Observer*, May 7, 1925.

⁹³ "Needleman Gives Pathetic Account," *Raleigh News & Observer*, May 7, 1925."

⁹⁴ "Needleman Points Out Griffin As The Man Who Mutilated," *Tarboro Daily Southerner*, May 8, 1925.

⁹⁵ "Needleman Gives Pathetic Account," *Raleigh News & Observer*, May 7, 1925.

⁹⁶ "Needleman Accuses Griffin," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 10, 1925.

⁹⁷ "Griffin Denies Everything. Claims He Was Not in Mob That Mutilated Needleman," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 8, 1925.

⁹⁸ "Griffin Attempts Prove Alibi at Trial," *Tarboro Daily Southern*, May 9, 1925.

⁹⁹ "Needleman Case Will be Ended Tomorrow Save for Trial Sparrow Junior," *Kinston Daily Free Press*, May 8, 1925.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ "Trial of Alleged Mob Members Nearing Its Close," *Greenville Daily Reflector*, May 11, 1925.

¹⁰² "Mob Leaders Guilty, Needleman to Go Free, Griffin and Bullock May Get Sentence of Sixty Years," *Wilmington Morning Star*, May 13, 1925.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ "Dennis Griffin Gets 30 Years," *Williamston Enterprise*, May 11, 1925.

¹⁰⁵ "Judge Sinclair Expected To Join Gilliam," *Raleigh News & Observer*, April 3, 1925.

¹⁰⁶ "Marriage Licenses Issued in March," *Williamston Enterprise*, April 3, 1925; Furnie Sparrow and Effie Griffin marriage license.

¹⁰⁷ "Leader of Williamston Mob is Given Sentence," *Raleigh News & Observer*, May 14, 1925.

¹⁰⁸ Two weeks after Sinclair closed the trial, Dennis Griffin's attorney filed an appeal and secured his release on the grounds that improper evidence was used in his conviction.

One month later the North Carolina Supreme Court upheld Griffin's conviction and sent him back to prison. *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ "Needleman Enters Suit for \$100,000 Against Mutilators," *Williamston Enterprise*, July 29, 1927.

¹¹¹ "Defendants in Needleman Suit File Their Answer in Washington Federal Court," *Williamston Enterprise*, August 26, 1927.

¹¹² "Needleman's Suit For \$100,000 Ended," *Statesville Landmark*, July 2, 1928; "Needleman \$100,000 Suit is Compromised," *Gastonia (NC) Daily Gazette*, June 28, 1928.

¹¹³ William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Champaign, IL, 1993), 18.

¹¹⁴ Glenn Feldman, *Politics and Religion in the White South* (Lexington, KY, 2005), 70-71.

¹¹⁵ Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archive: Gender, Race & Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, 1999), 14.

¹¹⁶ Barbara Perry, "White Genocide, White Supremacists and the Politics of Reproduction," in *Home Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, ed. Abby L. Ferber (Florence, KY, 2004), 91-93; Goldstein, "'Now Is the Time to Show Your True Colors,'" 135; Greenburg, *Troubling Waters*; Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*; Rogoff, "Is the Jew White?"

¹¹⁷ R. L. Gray "Winning the War of Lynching," *World's Work* (September 1925): 507-511; S. S. McClure, "The Cause and Cure of Excessive Crime in the United States," *McClure's Magazine*, November 1925, 9-30; "Mob Law Ended in State Says Writer in Henry Ford's Dearborn Independent," *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, March 25, 1926.

¹¹⁸ Newkirk, *Lynching In North Carolina*, 123-140.

¹¹⁹ Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Salem, New Jersey; Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; U.S. Social Security Administration Death Index, Pennsylvania, Issue Date: Before 1951, No. 183-09-2872.

¹²⁰ Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Griffins, Martin, North Carolina; Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Kinston Ward 5, Lenoir, North Carolina; Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Kinston, Lenoir, North Carolina; Florida Divorce Index, 1927-2001, Certificate No. 1436, Florida Department of Health, Jacksonville, Florida; U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946, Record Group 64, U.S. National Archives, College Park, MD; North Carolina Department of Health and Humans Services, North Carolina Death Records 1968-1996, North Carolina Vital Records, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*; "Defendants in Needleman Suit File Their Answer in Washington Federal Court"; "Resources of State in Lynching Probe," *Burlington Daily News*, August 21, 1930.