

The Proximity of Moral Ire: The 1919 Double Lynching of George Bolden

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At 2:30 Tuesday afternoon, 30 April 1919, George Bolden lay on a cot in a baggage car of the Vicksburg, Shreveport, and Pacific Railroad on his way to Shreveport, Louisiana. The wounds that had taken his right leg were new, as were the memories of three attempts on his life in less than forty hours. His wife attended him among the "Negro baggage" as both hoped the slow train would help them escape to Shreveport faster, faster, faster. But at 2:34, only eight miles outside of Monroe, Louisiana, near the small community of Cheniere, someone pulled the bell cord for an immediate stop. A group of white men boarded the car, threw Bolden to the ground outside and riddled him with bullets. The train began moving again almost immediately, and Bolden's wife, prevented by the mob from disembarking, continued a lonely journey west. Her mind was probably racing with memories of the previous night, when a mob had entered the Negro ward of the St. Francis Sanitarium, Monroe's only hospital, and tried to forcibly remove her husband. And how the nurses and nuns of the hospital bore the mob back.¹

1919 seemed to be a banner year in the fight against lynching. Editorials throughout Louisiana and the South decried the practice, accompanying broader calls for cessation in the national media. The NAACP held a widely publicized national conference on lynching, the hallmark of the organization's decades-long crusade against white Southern "justice." The United States total of eighty-three lynchings in

¹ *Monroe News-Star*, 30 April 1919, 1; 8 May 1919, 4; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 12 May 1919, 5.

1919 was never matched in subsequent years. But through these seeming successes, no federal lynch law appeared, a significant drop in yearly lynching totals did not happen until 1922, and Red Summer—a series of riots and racial violence in the North and South in 1919—did not end until October. Lynchings continued, as did the crusade against them.

An examination of the reaction to the Bolden attack can clarify the seeming contradiction in the 1919 vocabulary of lynching. The white population of Louisiana argued vigorously against the murder, but the arguments took two distinct tacks. The most common published opinion was indignation at the violation of the sanctity of the hospital and the mob's confrontation with the nurses. The other major concern was the damaged reputation of Monroe and Louisiana as lynching centers. The collective revulsion that seemingly sprung up throughout the state was not revulsion at the lynching itself, but at its antecedents. Though commentators, editors, and letter-writers fired from the moral high ground, seemingly creating a groundswell against lynching, their target was never the act itself. The murder near Cheniere was always ancillary to a story that culminated at St. Francis.²

That story began on 11 March 1918 with the shooting of Charles L. Thomas, a white railroad agent for a Missouri Pacific station just south of Monroe. Clyde Williams, an African American, was indicted for the crime by the Ouachita Parish Grand Jury, but sheriff's deputies kept the accused in neighboring Caldwell Parish, fearing mob reprisals. On 22 April 1918, their fear was realized. A mob dragged Williams from a train bound for Monroe and killed him. The wounds to Thomas had left him blind, and only the charitable donations of his friends and family built a new cottage for he and his wife on Lee Avenue.³ Just over a year after the lynching of Thomas's attacker, on Saturday, 27 April

² No politician in state government recorded an official comment on the lynching. William Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 98.

³ The Grand Jury investigated the Williams murder, but returned no indictments. The focus of the investigation was on a rumor that at the time of the lynching, Williams pointed at one of the white members of the mob and said, "You know that you are as guilty as I am. You know that you paid me 500 dollars for shooting Mr. Thomas." While in the Caldwell Parish jail, Williams even requested a white committee interview him so he could explain his actions. The theory that an enemy of Thomas hired the would-be assassin was popular but never proved. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 12 May 1919, 5; *Monroe News-Star*, 12 March 1918, 1; 23 April 1918, 1.

1919, a lewd note appeared on the door of the Lee Avenue cottage. With her husband incapacitated, Thomas's wife gave the note to some devoted family friends. Each saw that the note was signed "George Bolden."⁴

George Bolden worked as a paperhanger, painter, and carpenter. He endorsed his paychecks for those jobs with an X. He could not, like more than a quarter of Monroe's black population, read or write.⁵ Nevertheless, Thomas family friends arrived at Bolden's house en masse around eleven p.m. Sunday night. They fired five shots at Bolden, and though four missed their mark, one bullet shattered his right shin. After the crowd dispersed, Bolden's wife managed to get her husband to the sanitarium, where doctors amputated his leg.⁶

The St. Francis Sanitarium and Training School for Nurses began in 1913 as the pet project of Father Ludovic Enaut, a Franciscan priest. Nuns from France and Ireland ran the institution and lived on the grounds, which featured an X-ray department, surgical suites, and a wing for black patients. Mother de Bethany Crowley administered both the hospital and the on-site nursing school, which graduated its first class in 1916. Homes for nurses accompanied the convent also on hospital grounds.⁷

Bolden recuperated in the "colored ward" through the following Monday, until a group of white men came calling for him around nine o'clock p.m. The two nurses on duty told the men that Bolden was gone, but the mob attacked a man they assumed to be Bolden, driving

⁴ *Monroe News Star*, 29 April 1919, 1; 30 April 1919, 1.

⁵ Monroe had 12,675 residents, 5,540 of them African American. 26.9% of the black population was illiterate. The whole of Ouachita Parish had 30,319 residents, with 13,897 African Americans. 32.7% of the parish black population was illiterate. *Monroe News Star*, 29 April 1919, 1; *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, vol. 3, *Population, 1920: Composition and Characteristics of the Population by States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1922), 396, 399.

⁶ One version of the shooting asserted that the mob was there to take Bolden to the police, but that Bolden was waiting for them with a gun. Another rumor claimed that Bolden wrote three notes to Mrs. Thomas and went to the Thomas home to inquire why she had not answered him. *Monroe News Star*, 29 April 1919, 1; 8 May 1919, 4; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 12 May 1919, 5.

⁷ *Medical Center News*, 90th Anniversary Edition (Summer 2003): 1-4, 8; *Insurance Map of Monroe and West Monroe, Louisiana, 1932* (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1920), 16; *Monroe, Louisiana City Directory, 1913-1914* (Asheville, N.C.: Piedmont Directory Co., 1913) 209, 225; and *Monroe, La. City Directory, 1921* (Monroe, La.: H.H. Boyd Co., Inc., 1925), 255, 220, 227.

him into a state of shock that persisted until his death the following morning. The group dispersed after the police arrived. To ensure the safety of the nurses, a local officer gave them a pistol. When the mob returned in an hour with reinforcements, the nurses and nuns held them off, one wielding the gun and daring the group to enter the ward. She fired a warning shot into the air, dispersing the crowd. The nurses even caught one of the throng, held him, and turned him over to the police upon their arrival. The police, however, waited half an hour before responding to the nurses' call, and allowed the prisoner to escape after removing him from the sanitarium.⁸

Immediately following the incident, Mayor H.D. Apgar ordered the sheriff's office to take charge of Bolden, and at two o'clock early Tuesday morning, sheriffs took him to the city jail for the rest of the night. When day broke, Bolden's wife took custody of him. Fearing reprisals from yet another mob, the two boarded the 2:10 train to Shreveport, but never made it past Cheniere.⁹

Bolden's lynching was one of eighty-three in 1919 and part of a broader "Red Summer" of racial violence. Americans were just settling into their mistrust and vilification of Soviet Russia, but Red Summer was named for the blood it produced.¹⁰ While the majority of American eyes were focused firmly on Paris and the peace conference that ended the Great War, violence at home kept them glancing back to their own domestic trouble. A series of twenty-six race riots from May to October shook the optimism brought by peace, beginning in Charleston, South Carolina. Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Omaha, and Chicago, among others, all experienced racial violence.¹¹

Closer to Monroe, incidents in Texas and Arkansas loomed large. In Longview, Texas, whites attempted to lynch black schoolteacher Samuel L. Jones, who found refuge in the home of C.P. Davis, founder

⁸ *Monroe News Star*, 30 April 1919, 1; 1 May 1919, 1; 8 May 1919, 4.

⁹ *Monroe News Star*, 30 April 1919, 1; 1 May 1919, 1.

¹⁰ Seventy-six of the eighty-three lynching victims in 1919 were African American. Seven of the total occurred in Louisiana. The previous year, nine of sixty-two total lynchings occurred in Louisiana. *Lynchings by States and Race, 1882-1959* (Tuskegee, Ala.: Department of Records and Research, Tuskegee Institute, 1959), 2; "Lynchings in 1919," *Literary Digest* 64 (17 January 1920), 20; Robert R. Moton, "The Lynching Record for 1918," *Outlook*, 22 January 1919, 159. Communist vilification, though not the focus of "Red Summer" was evident in the portrayal of Bolshevism in the press. *New York Tribune*, 30 April 1919, 4; 1 May 1919, 6; and *Washington Post*, 1 May 1919, 2; 2 May 1919, 9.

of the Black Business League. Members of the League assembled at Davis's home, then fired on the white mob attempting to storm the house. Eleven white men were killed. In Phillips County, Arkansas, a white-black shootout erupted at a local African-American church where a meeting of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union was being held. The causes of the outbreak were (and are) disputed, but the consequences were clear—one dead sheriff's deputy and two days of continued racial violence. At least twenty-five black citizens lay dead by the end. Hundreds more were arrested, leading to sixty-seven prison terms, twelve death sentences, and a white population that trumpeted white frontier justice as the rule of law.¹²

Meanwhile, the NAACP continued its push for a federal anti-lynch law. Though the first two decades of the twentieth century saw sixteen such bills introduced in Congress, it was not until 1918 that one received a hearing, and not until 1922 that one received a floor vote. To highlight its 1919 push for legislation, the NAACP held a national conference on lynching at Carnegie Hall in New York. In conjunction with

¹¹ Margaret MacMillan, *Paris, 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2002), 296-305; Donald L. Grant, *The Anti-Lynching Movement: 1883-1932* (San Francisco: R and R Research Associates, 1975), 121-122; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 60; "Omaha," *Nation*, 11 October 1919, 491; "On the Firing-Line During the Chicago Race-Riots," *Literary Digest*, 23 August 1919, 44-46; Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., "Seeing Red": *Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 22-23; and Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 53-54.

¹² Both incidents occurred approximately 150 miles from Monroe. Unlike the Bolden lynching, both had economic roots. Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 60; Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 159-160; Jeannie M. Whyne, "Low Villains and Wickedness in High Places: Race and Class in the Elaine Riots," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Autumn 1999): 286-287, 293, 313; Richard A. Buckelew, "Racial Violence in Arkansas: Lynchings and Mob Rule, 1860-1930," (Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 1999), 122-126. For more on the incident in Texas, see Lawrence Michael Olsen, "Black Texans In the 'Red Summer' of 1919: The Longview Race Riot" (master's thesis, Southwest Texas State University, 1974); and Sarah Davis Elias, *Recalling Longview: An Account of the Longview, Texas Riot, July 11, 1919* (Baltimore: C.H. Fairfax Co., 2004). For more on the incident in Arkansas, see Richard C. Cortner, *A Mob Intent on Death: The NAACP and the Arkansas Riot Cases* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); and Grif Stockley, *Blood In Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001).

the event, John R. Schillady, the Association's national secretary, sent a telegram to Louisiana Governor Ruffin G. Pleasant, urging him to "demand legal authorities proceed energetically to apprehend lynchers and bring them to trial." Among the proceedings was the signing of a petition calling for federal legislation. Signatories included Charles Evans Hughes, former Secretary of State Elihu Root, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, and former Alabama Governor Emmett O'Neal. Governor O'Neal's speech to the conference served as one of the event's highlights. He called lynching "a relic of savagery and barbarism unworthy of a self-governing people." Following the conference, the NAACP distributed "An Address to the Nation on Lynching," stressing the need for a congressional investigation of the practice.¹³

The conference raised ten thousand dollars, ten percent of which was donated by a wealthy black farmer in Arkansas. From 1918 to 1919, the organization grew from eighty to 229 branches, almost half of which were in the South. But the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign and the broader national movement against the practice offered messages fundamentally different from Louisiana pundits in the wake of the Bolden lynching.¹⁴

¹³ Interestingly, the "Address" did not specifically demand a federal anti-lynch law, but the Association's national conference, held the following month, proclaimed that its goal was "To Make America Safe for Americans." "Organizing 100,000 for Negro Rights, 'To Make America Safe for Americans': National Conference in Cleveland, June 21 to 29," *Papers of the NAACP*, part 1, reel 8, *Annual Conference Proceedings, 1910-1950* (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1982); *New Orleans Item*, 6 May 1919, 4, 14; Grant, *Anti-Lynching Movement*, 67; Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade Against Lynching*, 46-50; "For Release, Monday, May 5," *Papers of the NAACP*, part 7: The Anti-Lynching Campaign, 1912-1955, Series A, reel 12, (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1982), 359-360 [hereinafter cited as *Papers of the NAACP*, part 7, series A, reel 12]; and "Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors, March 10, 1919," *Papers of the NAACP*, part 1, reel 1, *Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Directors, 1909-1950* (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1982).

¹⁴ The NAACP's first Louisiana branch was in Shreveport in 1914. New Orleans, Alexandria, and Baton Rouge established branches by the end of the decade, with Monroe finally participating in 1925. None, however, wielded any real power. Dr. Claude Hudson, Shreveport branch president, wrote in 1923, "The NAACP is thoroughly hated in this section." *New Orleans Item*, 8 May 1919, 4; Greta de Jong, *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 67; and Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 20.

Robert Russa Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor at the Tuskegee Institute and a leading anti-lynching advocate, viewed lynching as a distinctly Southern problem. Lynchings, he argued, disaffected black workers, causing mass migrations from the South and thinning the labor pool of the region. Moton described lynching as "evil," as did the national publications *Review of Reviews*, *New Republic*, and *World's Work*. *Current Opinion* called lynching a "national disgrace." These publications, like the speakers at the national conference on lynching, opposed the practice on moral grounds. They generally assumed their readers' opposition.¹⁵

Many Southern calls against lynching were also surprisingly resolute, spurred by a dramatic increase in lynchings from 1917 to 1918. The total dead numbered thirty-eight in 1917, compared to sixty-four the following year. While the editors of *The Outlook* praised the *Montgomery Journal* for arguing that lynching "does us incalculable harm on the economic side," it worried that two Southern newspapers in 1919 reported that a mob murder was "expected." The *New York Times* praised the *Houston Post* for a similar stand, and Robert Russa Moton lauded a variety of major metropolitan Southern newspapers for condemning the practice.¹⁶

Herbert J. Seligmann avoided opinion pages, choosing to concentrate on Southern news coverage of lynchings. He described the Bolden lynching, among others, as a symptom of a perverted desire to protect Southern womanhood. "For the benefit of those unfamiliar with the increasingly popular sport of 'protecting Southern womanhood' it should be noted that the objects of this sport are usually United States citizens of dark skin—Negroes." From Bolden's phantom signature on his note to Mrs. Thomas to his murder outside of Cheniere, Seligmann portrayed the entire debacle as a misapplication of Southern notions of chivalry.¹⁷

¹⁵ Robert R. Moton, "The South and the Lynching Evil," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 18 (July 1919): 191-193; "The Lynching Evil from a Southern Standpoint," *Review of Reviews* 60 (November 1919): 531-532; Zagando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching*, 48; "The Lynching Evil," *New Republic*, 3 May 1919, 7; "The Fight in Texas Against Lynching," *World's Work* 37 (April 1919): 616; and "New Phases of the Fight Against Lynching," *Current Opinion* 67 (July 1919): 45.

¹⁶ *Lynchings by States and Race*, 2; "Southern Protests Against Lynching," *Outlook*, 30 July 1919, 493; *New York Times*, 9 March 1919, III, 1; and Moton, "The South and the Lynching Evil," 193.

The lynching debate in Louisiana, and Monroe in particular, seemed to validate Seligmann's argument. The *News Star*, Monroe's only newspaper in 1919, took a defensive stance from the outset, titling its coverage of the first attack on Bolden, "Insulting Note Cos's Negro a Leg." The following day, coverage of the St. Francis attack and the Cheniere train murder was straightforward, without praise for the nurses and nuns or condemnation of the mob. Along with the New Orleans press, newspapers in Little Rock and Memphis ran similar associated press wire stories. The failed attempt on Bolden's life at the hospital was secondary to coverage of the murder the following afternoon.¹⁸

The reporting, however, seemed inadequate to the nurses of St. Francis, and the following day, an unknown number of them wrote a letter that was published on the front page of the *News Star*. "It was with great surprise and indignation that we read the account given in yesterday's *News Star*," the letter began. It recounted the capture of a member of the mob and the fear and apprehension the events of the evening created among the nurses. "It certainly seems strange," the letter chastised, "that the man who was caught could be held by ladies, but made his escape from the officers." They concluded indignantly, "we think it a disgrace to Monroe for a mob to come to the sanitarium to carry out their vengeance, and to scare the nurses and patients, when they easily could have waited until the patient was carried home." The letter was signed, "The Nurses."¹⁹

The following two days, letters to the editor appeared in the *News Star* denouncing the violence at the hospital. "The whole thing savours of what we considered was peculiar to our Teuton foes," said the first. The letters only mentioned "this mob action of last Monday night"—

¹⁷ Though African-American newspapers such as the *New York Age* and *New Orleans Vindicator* echoed Seligmann, they remained hopeful that justice would be served. Herbert J. Seligmann, "Protecting Southern Womanhood," *Nation*, 14 June 1919, 938-939; "How Shall the Black Man's Burden Be Lifted?" *Current Opinion* 67 (August 1919): 111-112; "New York Age—May 24, 1919," *Papers of the NAACP*, part 7, series A, reel 12, 403-404; and "New Orleans Vindicator—May 17, 1919," *Papers of the NAACP*, part 7, series A, reel 12, 401.

¹⁸ *Monroe News Star*, 29 April 1919, 1; 30 April 1919, 1; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 30 April 1919, 12; *New Orleans Item*, 30 April 1919, 5; *Arkansas Gazette*, 30 April 1919, 16; *Arkansas Democrat*, 30 April 1919, 9; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 30 April 1919, 3.

¹⁹ *Monroe News Star*, 1 May 1919, 1.

the mob's entry of the sanitarium. "Even the 'Unspeakable Turk' spares from attack the hospitals of his enemy," noted the second letter. Though it closed with the slogan, "Mob violence must cease," neither it nor its counterpart ever mentioned Bolden, Thomas, or the Cheniere train murder. The pastor and congregation of Monroe's First Baptist Church also registered their indignation with a formal resolution passed at a Victory Liberty Loan rally on Sunday, 4 May. Again the situation of the nurses was the principal focus of ire, as the congregation, "emphatically register our protest and disapproval of the unwarranted and cowardly actions of the mob which unlawfully entered our good sanitarium recently and tried to intimidate its nurses into submitting to their unlawful purposes. This and subsequent actions of the mob stand as a blot on the fair name of our city." Bolden's murder was never mentioned.²⁰

The *New Orleans Item* chided Monroe as the "lynch law center of Louisiana" and told of its "several lynchings" in recent months. Northeast Louisiana seemed to fit the description. On 15 March 1918, a mob hanged George McNeal, a black man accused of attacking a white woman, Mrs. H.M. Strozier, from a tree on Monroe's courthouse square. McNeal and John Richards entered the house, where Strozier and her three children lay sleeping. Though other robberies were reported that night, the mob interpreted McNeal's as an attack because Strozier's husband was away. The following day, Richards met the same fate. Then there was the April 1918 lynching of Clyde Williams, reported in newspapers throughout the country. In January 1919, a Rayville mob lynched John Clayton. Later that month, Sampson Smith was lynched near Columbia in Caldwell Parish. Three months later, a mob entered the St. Francis Sanitarium.²¹

The *Item* reminded its readers that hospitals are "filled with sick people, people recovering from operations; not negroes alone, but white people of high standing." It wondered "what Monroe will do now. Will it stand for the forcible invasion of a hospital full of sick white people, conducted by white nurses, by a masked mob bent upon murder?" The indignation now focused on both the sanitarium break-in and the reputation of Monroe, and the *News Star* was quick to fire

²⁰ Monroe's Victory Loan campaign was also a success. The city surpassed its quota and won a captured German cannon for its effort. *Monroe News Star*, 2 May 1919, 5; 3 May 1919, 1, 2; 5 May 1919, 1; 10 May 1919, 10.

back. It correctly described its role as news hub for a large rural area in northeast Louisiana and southeast Arkansas, explaining that lynching news from within that broad swath carried Monroe datelines. It also correctly explained that the colored ward of St. Francis was a separate building that held no white patients.²²

The *News Star's* defense of Monroe then drifted further from anger at the mob murder. "Whenever a negro violates the sanctity of the home of any white man, or insults any white woman, he may as well send a hurry call for the undertaker," it explained. "The great majority of the people abhor and detest the resort to mob law, but they recognize the fact that it is infinitely preferable to deal quickly and summarily with the negro who steps over the forbidden bounds." The editorial argued that the mob should not have entered the sanitarium looking for a man whose guilt was far from certain. The *News Star* blamed law enforcement. If officials had enforced the laws and swiftly meted out justice, then the white populace would never been put in such an unfortunate position. And did not law enforcement officials lose the nurses' prisoner? "So, after all, the officials, from the highest to the lowest, are in a large measure, directly responsible for the contempt in which many people hold the courts and the officials."²³

The sentiment against the Monroe lynching saga was certainly muddled. Both Arthur Price, rector of Monroe's Episcopal Church,

²¹ Also in 1918, Jim Lewis, Jim Jones, and Will Powell died in Rayville for the crime of stealing hogs. After Bolden's murder, mobs in northeast Louisiana took the lives of George Clayton and Bubber Hall. From the turn of the century to the close of 1918, the region found thirty of its black citizens lynched. The *Item* wasn't the only newspaper to notice. The *Times-Picayune* carried similar commentary, as did the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*. *New Orleans Item*, 6 May 1919; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 12 May 1919, 8; "The Monroe Lynching," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, 12 June 1919, 1-2; NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 71-73, 104-105; and *Papers of the NAACP*, part 7, series A, reel 12, 348-352, 354, 356, 373-380, 383, 393.

²² The McNeal, Clayton, and Smith lynchings all carried Monroe datelines, but the last lynching specifically related to Monroe before the Bolden lynching was the lynching of Clyde Williams. Monroe's image took a similar hit on 6 September 1919 when a Mer Rouge mob of forty men shot a black man for allegedly attacking the wife of a white farmer. Papers throughout the nation carried a Monroe byline. *Papers of the NAACP*, part 7, series A, reel 12, 410-413; *New Orleans Item*, 6 May 1919, 8; *Monroe News Star*, 8 May 1919, 4; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 12 May 1919, 8; "1940s Front," archival photograph, St. Francis Medical Center Department of Public Relations; *Insurance Map of Monroe and West Monroe, Louisiana, 1932*, 16.

²³ *Monroe News Star*, 8 May 1919, 4; 9 May 1919, 4; 10 May 1919, 4.

and David Fichman, rabbi of the Jewish Synagogue, denounced the mob action at St. Francis and lauded the nurses for their courage. Neither mentioned the Bolden murder. While a writer in the *New Orleans Item*, responding to news of a Mississippi lynching, declared himself "disgusted with the South," an editorial in the *Baton Rouge State Times Advocate* argued that while lynching was problematic, it was not unique to the South. *Item* and *News Star* editorials echoed the sentiment of the capital city paper. "This is a country of law, and all loyal citizens should uphold the law," the *Times-Picayune* editorialized. "The assault on the sanitarium at Monroe must not go unpunished. Mob rule in Louisiana must end now." The Cheniere train murder remained conspicuously absent.²⁴

On 13 May, new governors took an oath of office at Monroe's city hall. A board of commissioners replaced the former aldermanic administrative system, and there were high hopes for new mayor Arnold Bernstein and his fellow commissioners. "These men," reported the *News Star*, "will lessen and somewhat relieve the City of Monroe of the odium and unenviable notoriety which has come upon it." While the new government took office, the Southern Sociological Congress met in Knoxville, Tennessee and condemned lynching. "The time has come," proclaimed Jack C. Wilson, executive secretary of the Mississippi Welfare League, "when civilization and common decency demand that lynching must cease." A variety of distinguished Southern academics echoed Wilson, but the Congress's strident call for federal and state legislation went unreported in Monroe, which remained focused on its new government. "There is much to be done," reported the *News Star*, "before Monroe will take her proper place in the procession of progressive municipalities." Both were statements of anti-mob rhetoric, but the *News Star* and the Southern Sociological Congress presented wholly different messages.²⁵

Two days after the commission government took office, Judge Fred Odom called a special session of the Ouachita Parish Grand Jury, to meet on 19 May. He did not specifically mention the Bolden lynch-

²⁴ A similar plea came from Bishop Wilbur P. Thirkield of the New Orleans Methodist Episcopal Church [*New Orleans Item*, 10 May 1919, 4]; *New Orleans Item*, 12 May 1932, 8; *Baton Rouge State Times Advocate*, 13 May 1919, 4; *Monroe News Star*, 8 May 1919, 4; *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 12 May 1919, 5, 8; 18 May 1919, B4.

²⁵ *Monroe News Star*, 10, May 1919, 4; 13 May 1919, 1, 3, 4; *New Orleans Item*, 13 May 1919, 2; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 11 May 1919, B14.

ing or the sanitarium invasion. He did not need to. The grand jury summoned three St. Francis nurses, two African American patients, and the crew of the Vicksburg, Shreveport, and Pacific Railroad on duty at the time of Bolden's murder. They made their official report to Odom the following afternoon, indicting no one for the crime. The grand jury only indicted one man, R.R. McCord, for carrying a concealed weapon and for trespassing on sanitarium grounds. He paid a one hundred dollar bond the same afternoon. The grand jury demurred in its official report, "notwithstanding its firm conviction by testimony before it that George Bolden committed a bold and repulsive act, which it is alleged was an incentive for the taking of his life, it has exerted every effort and made use of all available agencies to ascertain the identity of the parties responsible for his death."²⁶

The editor of the *Item* remained suspicious. "This grand jury showed about as much energy in investigating this lynching as southern grand juries usually display in lynching cases." The paper noted that the body's brief report followed only one afternoon of nine interviews. It titled its story, "The Usual Result." The *Times-Picayune* accused the grand jury of indulging in suspicions, arguing that the investigation was "barren of results." It was "unsatisfactory and [does] not set that town and Louisiana right before the country." The paper charged the body with dereliction of duty, and concluded that, "the anarchy and outlawry of Russia, Germany and other countries of Europe warn us against tolerating such lawless ideas." The *News Star* responded by accusing the *Times-Picayune* of engaging in hearsay. It again condemned the invasion of the sanitarium as indefensible, but acknowledged the need for mob action in capital cases devoid of swift justice. It defended its "twelve men, good and true" who constituted the Grand Jury, and concluded,

²⁶ The Ouachita Parish District Attorney's office only keeps grand jury testimony for ten years before destroying it. Though testimony is unavailable, McCord is probably the member of the mob apprehended by the nurses. The Grand Jury's insistence that it did not have enough evidence to return bills against anyone, coupled with their interview of the nurses and the indictments' specific mention of St. Francis sanitarium, probably left the body with little choice but to charge him. *Monroe News Star*, 15 May 1919, 1; 19 May 1919, 1; 20 May 1919, 1; 21 May 1919, 1; *State of Louisiana v. R.R. McCord*, "Indictment for carrying a firearm on premises of a St. Francis Sanitarium," index no. 15248, 20 May 1919, Clerk of Court, Criminal Division, Ouachita Parish Courthouse; *State of Louisiana v. R.R. McCord*, "Indictment for trespass on property of sanitarium," index no. 15249, 20 May 1919, Clerk of Court, Criminal Division, Ouachita Parish Courthouse.

"The taking of human life is repulsive to every sane human being, we believe, and mighty few white men care to participate in a mob that kills a human being."²⁷

Again, Bolden's murder was never emphasized. "If Monroe sentiment condemns mob rule it has overlooked several very fine opportunities to prove it," opined the *Shreveport Journal*. The collective outrage at the actions of the Bolden mob centered not on the murder, but on the sanctity of the hospital and the virtue of the nurses, leaving contradictory messages about the legitimacy of vigilante justice. A letter published by the *News Star* on June 2 served as the paper's final word on the debacle, and a fitting culmination of the mob rule debate. "Do not understand me to advocate lynching," wrote W.W. Cook, "for I do not. I have never participated in a lynching and never expect to. At the same time, under certain circumstances, I cannot say just what I might do." He lauded the fairness of Monroe citizens and professed to "appreciate a law-abiding, obedient negro." There was obviously a simple way to remove the injustice from the Southern landscape: "First do something to stop the negro from committing crimes that justifies his neck being broke." Cook closed with a wish of success and prosperity for "honorable negroes."²⁸

In 1920, fifty-three Negroes proved dishonorable in the eyes of some white men. In 1921, the number was fifty-one; in 1922, fifty-nine. 1923's total of twenty-nine African-American lynchings represented a decline that would continue, aided by the work of the NAACP.²⁹ Though denunciations of mob murder were loud and frequent in 1919, regional opinion was more skewed. Monroe, Louisiana was angry that mob rule had brought infamy to its doorstep, but the focus of its ire never touched on black male murder. It focused on white female sanctity. Fittingly, Monroe's actual lynch mob also focused on white female sanctity. The press defended the nurses, the mob defended Mrs. Thomas, and the 1919 consensus against lynching never coalesced into a

²⁷ The *News Star's* defense of the Grand Jury obviously rings hollow as four of the nine interviewees—conductor A.J. Hood, engineer Frank Watts, flagman J.R. Pratt, and baggage man J.W. Patton, all of the VSP Railroad—were not privy to the actions at the sanitarium. *New Orleans Item*, 25 May 1919, 4; *Monroe News Star*, 19 May 1919, 1; 30 May 1919, 4; 31 May 1919, 4.

²⁸ *Shreveport Journal*, 16 May 1919, 6; *Monroe News Star*, 2 June 1919, 4.

²⁹ *Lynchings by States and Race*, 2.

force for change. With such a variety of approximate denunciations, there was never really a consensus.