

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT RESEARCH PROJECT

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10-19-1992.

Prof. Stewart Tolnay,  
Dept. of Sociology,  
Social Sciences 340,  
SUNY, Albany,  
Albany, NY 12222.

Dear Professor Tolnay:

Thank you very much for the reprint of the latest article by you, Jim Massey & Prof. Beck which is a valuable addition to my archives. When I first learned of this article from Rick Halperin at SMU, I thought that your name rang a bell with me but it was only when I received the article itself that I recalled that were an associate of Jim Massey. I did not know where he was but I now see that he is at Northern Illinois University. He had told me that he would be leaving Georgia but I did not know where he went.

There are some more of your writings listed as references that I would like to have reprints or copies of if you have them:

- 1) "The Gallows, the Mob & the Vote: Lethal Sanctioning of Blacks in North Carolina & Georgia, 1882 to 1930 (1989).
- 2) "The Killing Fields of the South: The Market for Cotton & the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930" (1990)
- 3) "Racial Violence of Black Migration in the American South, 1910 to 1930" (1992)
- 4) "Black Lynchings: The Power Threat Hypothesis Revisited" (1989).

I notice also that you and Professor Beck are publishing a book The Festival of Violence. Please let me know when it is out as I would be interested in a copy. If the publishers will provide me with a complimentary one, I will carry a listing in my inventory (now updated a couple of times a week) for a year. As it goes out all over the country, it would be a good promotion.

Thanking you, once again, and with best wishes, I am,

Sincerely yours,

*Handwritten signature*

*A copy of it would be a great help to explain how it comes*





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CENTER FOR SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

October 13, 1992

Watt Espy  
Capital Punishment Research Project  
Box 277  
Headland, Alabama 36345

Dear Mr. Espy:

I am enclosing a copy of, "Black Competition and White Vengeance: Legal Execution of Blacks as Social Control in the Cotton South, 1890 to 1929."

You may recall that you worked with Jim Massey about five years ago to provide us with the execution data used in this paper. As you will notice, we have acknowledged your assistance in this paper, and are still grateful for your cooperation.

I hope your work on documenting all executions is progressing well. Thank you for your interest in our research.

Cordially,

Stewart Tolnay  
Associate Professor





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November 5, 1992

Watt Espy  
Capital Punishment Research Project  
Box 277  
Headland, Alabama 36345

Dear Mr. Espy:

Thank you for your letter of October 19th, and the copy of your updated inventory and bibliography. I am enclosing copies of the papers that you requested. I hope you find them of some interest.

Yes, Woody Beck and I have been working on the book, *Festival of Violence*. We were pleased to learn recently that our manuscript has been awarded the Social Science History Association 1992 President's Book Award. We will be publishing the book with the University of Illinois Press. I will let you know when it is available, but it probably won't be for several months.

Best of luck with your continuing work on the execution inventory.

Cordially,

Stewart Tolnay  
Associate Professor





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January 21, 1993

Watt Espy  
Capital Punishment Research Project  
Box 277  
Headland, Alabama 36345

Dear Mr. Espy:

I'm sorry that it has taken me so long to send you the enclosed pages that were missing from our article, "Killing Fields of the Deep South...". I misplaced your last letter and couldn't remember which article or pages you needed. Fortunately, it turned up again.

Cordially,

Stewart Tolnay  
Associate Professor



in order to live and support their wives and children.

Violence was used by marginal whites to force black tenant farmers off desirable land (Williamson 1984), or to drive away successful black businessmen or landowners (e.g., White 1969, pp. 11-2).

Worsening economic conditions for poor rural whites also emphasized the relatively small difference between their level of financial well-being and that of nearby blacks. This made more salient the superior social status that even desperately poor whites took for granted as members of the dominant southern caste. As White (1969, pp. 11-2) observed, "It is not difficult to imagine the inner thoughts of the poor white as he sees members of a race he has been taught by tradition, and by practically every force of public opinion with which he comes into contact, to believe inferior making greater progress than his own." Thus, violence in response to economic distress sometimes took on an "expressive" nature as well. In some cases, poor whites reacted out of frustration to the contradiction between their objective economic status and the expected benefits of white supremacy. In other cases, lynchings were intended as a message to the black community — reminding them of their inferior position in white society.

The white elite also benefitted from a heightened sense of racial antagonism and the violence that accompanied it. Most important was their perennial fear of a coalition between black and white labor. Such a coalition was perhaps the greatest threat to the social, economic, and political hegemony enjoyed by the southern white elite. It was in the interest of the white elite, therefore, to perpetuate hostility between black and white laborers. Raper (1933, p. 47) noted this function of lynching when he wrote, "Lynchings tend to minimize social and class distinctions between white plantation owners and white tenants . . ." Shapiro (1988, p. 219) put it more directly, "When those committed to racial subordination saw the possibility of blacks and whites coming together for common purposes, their response most often was to reach for the gun and the rope." The threat of a coalition between black and white laborers likely increased when the poor of both races suffered from reduced cotton prices.

In sum, the economy of the Deep South was dependent upon the fortunes of the cotton crop. As "King Cotton" went, so went the region.

Declining prices had serious consequences for all groups involved in the production of cotton. Rural blacks were the most vulnerable in a society stratified by class and caste. There is reason to believe that racial hatred and the violence it spawned served the interests of poor whites and the white elite during periods of economic stress. Of course, the motives and objectives of the two classes were not necessarily the same. For poor whites, violence was a response to fear of black competition for economic and social position. For the white elite, violence prevented a coalition between black and white laborers. Thus, the relationship between swings in the cotton economy and black lynchings does not assume participation by a single class of southern whites. Nor does it assume a coordinated response by all whites.

#### KING COTTON AND MOB VIOLENCE: GENERAL PATTERNS

The broad historical sequence is uncontested: the peak of black lynchings in the early 1890s coincided with a softening demand for southern cotton, the rise of populism and agrarian protest, and the birth of radical racism (Gaither 1977; Hahn 1983; Shapiro 1988; White 1969; Williamson 1984; Wright 1986). The bloody 1890s were followed by several years of ballooning cotton prices and an apparent decline in violence against southern blacks. Following World War I, however, there was a significant reversal of this trend, when an alarming bottoming of the cotton market was accompanied by another wave of radical racism, signalled by the dramatic re-birth of the Ku Klux Klan and the popular acclaim lavished on D.W. Griffith's epic film, *Birth of A Nation*.

To examine this apparent relation, we employ newly available data on lynchings in the Deep South to trace trends in the annual number of black victims of lynch mobs and the price per pound of cotton during the years 1882 to 1930. The basic data are displayed in Figure 1.<sup>1</sup> Between the early 1890s and mid-1910s,

<sup>1</sup> Both time series have been twice-smoothed statistically using three-year moving averages in order to visually simplify the underlying trends. The Deep South is defined as the six states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. The cotton price data refer to December 1 average prices for years prior to 1909 and seasonal averages thereafter (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975, Series K 555). Texas was also a major producer of

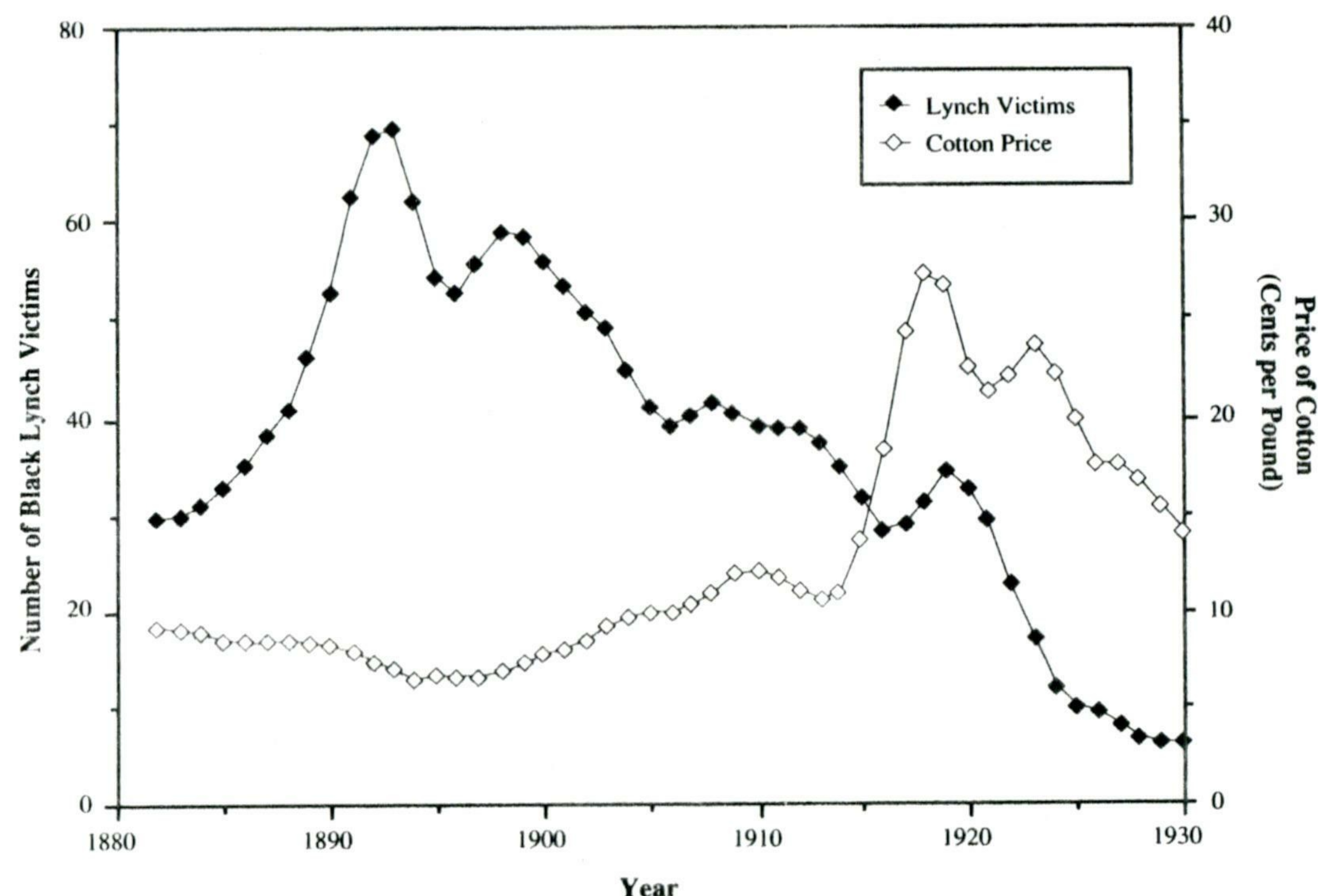


Figure 1. Number of Black Lynch Victims and the Price of Cotton in the Deep South, 1882-1930\*

\* Both trends twice-smoothed statistically using three-year moving averages. Cotton prices per pound are unadjusted for inflation.

there was a broad downward trend in the number of black lynch victims, concurrent with a general upward swing in the market price of cotton. These two smoothed trends are linearly correlated  $-.67$  over the entire 48-year period. Using the raw, unsmoothed series, the correlation is still a respectable  $-.52$ . Raper (1933) and Hovland and Sears (1940) based their conclusions on similar evidence.

It must be demonstrated, however, that this general historical correspondence between mob violence and the vagaries of the cotton market is something more than coincidence. Several problems must be considered before concluding that swings in the price of cotton actually drove corresponding swings in the level of mob violence against blacks. First, a correlation between any two time series is insufficient to establish a functional relationship. To reach conclusions about the covariation of two time trends, their dependence on time must be removed by "detrending" both time series.

Second, the overall negative correlation suggests that as prices rose, the likelihood of a black lynching diminished. But increasing cotton prices may reflect inflationary trends as well as changes in the constant dollar price of cotton. Would black lynchings decline if cotton prices increased solely as a result of inflation? Between 1917 and 1918, the average market price for cotton increased almost 1.8¢ per pound, but the deflated price actually fell close to 1.6¢ per pound. Thus an apparent increase in market price masked what was in reality a worsening condition for cotton producers and others whose livelihoods depended on a healthy King Cotton.

To the degree that advances in cotton prices were matched by inflation in the cost of staples, marginal whites experienced no net gain, and thus there would be no softening of racial antagonism. In fact, if inflation were sufficiently high, the plight of many agrarian whites would harden, and their tenuous position become even more precarious. Under these conditions, the frustration-aggression model predicts that increased hostility would be directed toward