



## Diabolical Murders: The Lynching of Thomas Hunter Cumberland Gap, Tennessee 1891 Teacher's Guide

**Summary:** In late March of 1891, an argument at Cumberland Gap saloon led to the fatal shooting of John Burkes and the extra judicial murder of Thomas Hunter.

**Teacher's Note:** This film portrays a painful story in Appalachian history. It offers teachers a unique opportunity to bring a local and regional example of life in post-Reconstruction South and a discussion about the importance of due process to their students. Through discussion of Hunter's story, students can draw connection to the larger themes of race relations and racial injustice during this period.

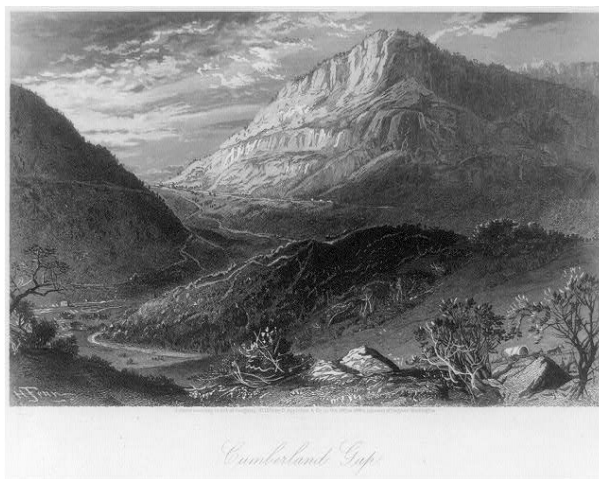
This film contains images of lynchings. Teachers are strongly encouraged to preview the film and related materials before using them in the classroom.

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### Discussion Questions

Use the questions below to lead a class discussion after viewing the film.

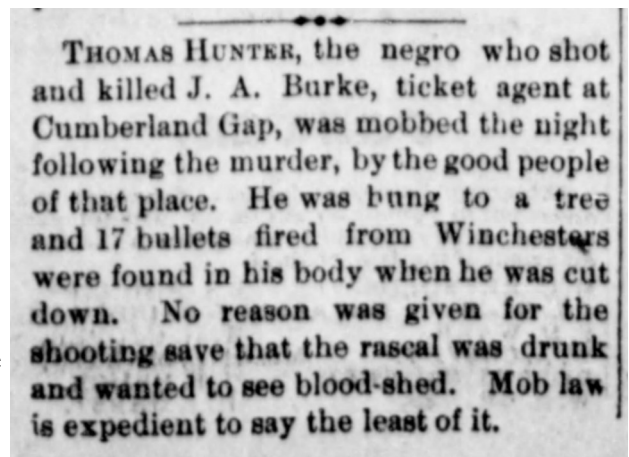
1. How do African Americans factor into the larger story of migration through the Cumberland Gap? How does the Gap's importance as a passage through the mountains cause this area to differ from other more remote areas of Appalachia?
2. For the African Americans who settled in and around the Cumberland Gap, what industries were they employed in? How does this compare with industries often discussed for African Americans workers in your textbooks?
3. How did industrialists like Frank Watts impact the development of Cumberland Gap and the surrounding communities? How would development shape the numbers and type of people coming into the area?
4. Who was Thomas Hunter? Who was John Burks? Why were each of them in Cumberland Gap?
5. How can we make sense of what happened in the confrontation between these two men given that the accounts from the time period vary?
6. How did law enforcement try to avoid the lynch mob? What can we deduce about tension in the area in the aftermath of Burks' murder given the efforts of law enforcement to circumvent the mob? Why do you think law enforcement was ultimately unsuccessful and turned over Hunter to the lynch mob?
7. How is the lynching of Thomas Hunter an example of the failure of due process? Why is due process such an important right for us as citizens and as a means to create a fair justice system?



[Cumberland Gap](#) [c1872] From the Library of Congress

## Classroom Extensions

- Explore how the Cumberland Gap differed from other areas of Appalachia. You may have students review the article [“Cultural and Ethnic Diversity on the Western Frontier Cumberland Gap Tennessee, 1750-1915”](#) by Rebecca Vial. How does this describe the development of African American communities in and around the Cumberland Gap? How does it describe life for those living in those communities? How does the depiction of life for African Americans in this article compare with what we learned in the film? Ask students how the economic development of the region in the late 1800s and early 1900s might have impacted race relations. Explain that with the ending of slavery after the Civil War that black and white workers would now be in economic competition with each other. How might that economic tension add to overall racial tension?
- As discussed in question 5, the accounts of exactly what happened in the confrontation between Thomas Hunter and John Burks differs from account to account. This makes it extremely difficult for those at the time and for us today to truly know what happened on that fateful night. Newspaper accounts of events like this were often the way that individuals learned about what happened and formed their opinions. Newspapers in some cases could be used to create more hysteria and racial tension in a community that could lead to a lynching. Have your students compare three press clippings of the events surround the lynching of Thomas Hunter (see page 3). Ask your students to use this [Venn diagram](#) to determine how the accounts differ and where they agree. Note that both papers included in this exercise were white papers.
- To lynch someone was to deny them due process as guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. As citizens, the Fifth Amendment guarantee us the right to due process via the federal government and the Fourteenth Amendment reiterates state governments must also guarantee citizens due process. Ask your students to research both of these amendments and write a brief reflection on how the lynching of Thomas Hunter is an example of him being denied his right of due process.



From *Interior Journal*, Tuesday, March 31, 1891

## Additional Educational Resources

- Lesson: [Due Process of Law](#) from the Bill of Rights Institute
- Lesson: [Why Is Due Process So Important to American Justice?](#) From iCivics
- Lesson: [Due Process Ignored: Lynching and American Culture](#) from Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
- Primary Source Set: [The New South](#) from Teaching with Primary Sources-MTSU
- Newsletter: [The New South](#) from Teaching with Primary Sources-MTSU
- Blog: [Henry Grady's Vision of the New South](#) from Teaching American History
- Lesson: [After Reconstruction](#) from the Library of Congress

act.

The killing of Mr. J. A. Burke at Cumberland Gap, a short account of which appeared in the last issue, seems to have been without provocation. He was assassinated by Thos. Hunter, the colored valet of Mr. Frank Watts, a rich young Englishman who resides at Cumberland Gap. From Mr. R. J. Foster, agent for the K. C. G. & L. railroad at Cumberland Gap, in whose office the murdered man was employed, we learn the facts of the killing. Mr. Burke, with several friends, had been playing billiards and the negro being in the room and drinking took offense at a remark made that some one was drunk. Nothing was thought of the remark which resulted in the assassination a few minutes later as the parties were returning home. The assassin was not over ten feet from Burke when he fired a load of bird shot into his face, killing him instantly. Hunter fled, but was captured at Middlesborough the next morning. While the officers were taking the murderer to jail at Tazewell, Tenn., he was taken from them by a mob who hung him to a tree about 4 o'clock that (Thursday) afternoon and riddled his body with bullets. It is reported the whole community approved of the mob's work. The remains of Mr. Burke were interred in the Junction City cemetery Friday afternoon. Deceased leaves a wife and four children who were depend-

## EVENTS IN THE SOUTH

### Diabolical Murder Committed at Cumberland Gap.

### Indignant Citizens Promptly Swing Up the Assassin.

### A Freight Train Collides With a Chattanooga Street-Car.

### Hold Highwayman Operating in Memphis—Scramble for the New Circuit Judgeship in Alabama.

KNOXVILLE, March 26.—[Special.]—The little town of Cumberland Gap was in a fever of excitement to-day, caused by a brutal murder this morning. It was the killing of J. A. Burke, Southern Express Agent there, this morning about 12:30 by a negro named Tom Hurley. Burke, with several young friends, had been playing pool last night in Renfroe's pool-room. About 11:30 they started to their rooms, when they met the negro Hurley in the front room of Renfroe's building, which is used as a saloon and restaurant. Hurley, for some unknown cause, began to abuse Burke in most violent and insulting language, but parties interferred and prevented trouble. The negro left the house swearing vengeance upon Burke. In a few minutes Burke and his friends were on their way home. In passing a shanty used as a line-house they were fired upon and Burke fell dead.

Instantly there was great excitement. It was found that the negro Hurley was the assassin. Early this morning he was captured and placed in the city jail. Feeling ran high all day and increased as the diabolical deed was better known.

About 4:30 this afternoon the Sheriff took the prisoner and started to Tazewell for safe keeping. He had, however, proceeded but a little way when he was overtaken by a mob, the negro taken away from him and hanged to a convenient tree.

The negro is said to have killed two other men and was considered a most dangerous character.

The negroes are greatly excited tonight and declare that they will have revenge. No trouble is feared, as the police force has been increased.

The murdered man Burke was exceedingly popular. He was about 45 years old and leaves a wife and children. His remains were sent to his old home, Shelby City, Ky., for burial. He was a faithful employe of the Southern Express Company.

[BY ASSOCIATED PRESS.]

MIDDLESBOROUGH, KY., March 26.—Another terrible tragedy took place this morning at Cumberland Gap, Tenn., a few miles from here, in which J. A. Burke, the telegraph operator at that place, was shot and instantly killed by Tom Hurley, a negro. Reports are conflicting as to what caused Hurley to commit the deed, but from what can be learned from reliable sources it seems that Burke and Hurley fell out over some trifling matter in a saloon. The latter then left, procured a shotgun and laid in ambush for Burke. The latter was on his way home, when the negro discharged the contents of both barrels at him, tearing out his eyes and cheeks and killing him instantly.

The murderer fled, but was captured here this morning and taken back to the Gap by a circuitous route, to avoid meeting a mob which had gathered to lynch him. The excitement at the scene of the murder is intense, and unless the officers succeed in keeping Hurley in hiding until the people cool down the murderer's hours are numbered. It was one of the most cold-blooded and unprovoked murders that has ever disgraced this section. Burke was well-known and liked here. He formerly resided at Lucasville. Hurley hails from Columbia, Ky.

Later—Thomas Hurley, who shot Burke at Cumberland Gap last evening, was forcibly taken from the authorities this evening and was hanged to a tree. His body was then riddled with bullets. This is the first instance of lynch law in this section of the country.

Excerpts from *Kentucky Advocate*, Tuesday, March 31, 1891 and *The Tennessean*, Friday March 27, 1891 (left to right) Note: Excerpt in the middle and on the right are both from *The Tennessean*.