



A Gate City Villainy: The Lynching of Samuel Wood

Gate City, Virginia 1894

Teacher's Guide

Summary: In 1894 a group of prominent citizens of Scott County, Virginia organized themselves into a vigilante gang to rid the area of houses of ill repute. In their pursuit, these White Caps eventually arrived at the home of Samuel Woods where tragedy would occur.

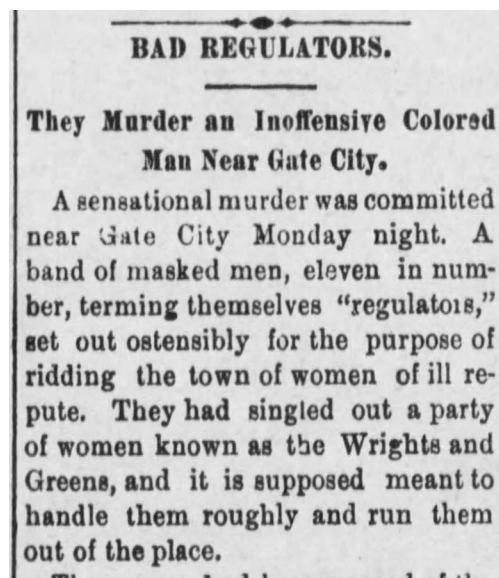
Teacher's Note: This film portrays a painful story in Appalachian history. It offers teachers a unique opportunity to bring a local and regional example of life in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South. Through discussion of racial violence of vigilante groups like the White Caps, students can reflect on how these events impacted our communities and nation.

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

Discussion Questions

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

1. What can we deduce about life in Scott County, Virginia in 1860 based on the Census data for the population of free Blacks and enslaved people? How does knowing the number of enslavers add to our understanding of the makeup of that community?
2. Why do you think most of the African American population lived in the same approximate area around the county seat in 1870?
3. Who was Samuel Woods?
4. Who were the White Caps? What other names did they go by?
5. Who did they target? Why do you think they targeted these different groups of individuals?
6. What happened in the confrontation between Samuel Woods and the White Caps? Why do you think he refused to allow them inside?
7. What is surprising about the response of local law enforcement and justice officials in the immediate aftermath of Woods' murder?
8. What was the defense of the men who were tried? Who did they blame?
9. What was the outcome of the trial?
10. Why do you think the *Richmond Planet* advocated for self defense in the wake of Woods' murder and the accused being found innocent?



The Comet May 17, 1894

Classroom Extensions

- The lynching of Samuel Woods has many similarities to the stories of other African Americans targeted by vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Ask your students to research the events surrounding the murder of Emmitt Till. How is that story similar to Woods? What is different? How did the justice system fail in holding those responsible accountable for their actions in both cases?
- Have your students read the article from the *Richmond Planet* featured in the video (see following page). Ask students to analyze the article using the [HAPPY analysis worksheet](#). After analyzing the article, allow your students to discuss their thoughts on the content of the piece. What do you they find surprising? How effective do you think self-defense might be in the Jim Crow South? Challenge your students to look for other examples where armed self defense was advocated by African Americans (for example: The Deacons for Defense or Black Panthers). How does including stories of African Americans who armed themselves to defend their homes, families, and their own lives from racial violence add to our understanding of the time?

Additional Educational Resources

- [“I Wanted the Whole World to See”: The Murder of Emmett Till](#) Curriculum Unit from Facing History
- [Lesson Plan: The Emmett Till Story](#) from Educating for American Democracy
- [The Deacons for Defense and Justice Research Guide](#) from National Archives
- [Backlash and the KKK](#) Lesson Plan from Facing History
- [Reconstruction and the Ku Klux Klan](#) Activity from DocsTeach

Prominent Citizens Implicated in a Murder.

BRISTOL, May 19 —Great excitement has prevailed at Gate City, Va., caused by the confession of Harvey Wallace, son of a physician of that place, implicating a number of leading citizens in the murder of Samuel Wood, an inoffensive colored man, Monday night. The party, calling themselves “regulators,” was in search of women of ill-repute, whom it was meant to tar and feather. The “regulators” murdered Wood for refusing to permit them to search his house. Among the best citizens now arrested and under guard are Dr. Samuel Patton, Clinton Davidson, John Fearson, George Carr, George Blair and Floyd Williams. The officers are in search of others.

Roanoke Daily Times May 20, 1894

A COWARDLY MURDER.

The following account will give an idea of the situation of affairs in the South.

BRISTOL, TENN., May 15.—(Special)—“At Gate City, Va., last night a band of eleven masked men, terming themselves “regulators,” started out ostensibly for the purpose of ridding the town of the inmates of a house of ill-repute. The women had been warned and were anticipating trouble. For this reason they were not in the house where the raiders expected to find them. They proceeded in search of the women, having entered two or three houses in the suburbs. Coming to the house of Samuel Wood, an inoffensive colored man, they were refused admittance. The leader ordered the band to fire on the house. The men were armed with Winchester rifles and revolvers, and about thirty shots were fired through the door of the cottage, killing Wood instantly. His wife and children remained in bed and escaped death. Three of the men are under arrest. They are Jack Downey, R. T. Potter and George Car. Downey and Potter have heretofore been regarded as peaceable citizens. The remainder of the band are hiding in the neighboring mountains.”

What think the white men of the country of this? What have colored men to say about it?

Think you that any one of that band of murderers will be punished? We shall see. The only fault with poor SAMUEL WOOD was that he was too peaceable. Alone with his family in his cabin during the silent hours of the night he hears a hammering upon the door reinforced by the sound of angry voices. A demand is made for him to throw wide the portals of his humble mansion, and permit rough, uncouth men to invade the sanctity of his bed chamber.

His wife with her little ones, horror-stricken, crouched in the bed while the husband and father maintained a watch at the entrance to his home.

Ah, that scene was one that should cause the veins of sympathy to be opened and invite tears to flow.

This man had done no wrong. His enemies announce that he was not only innocent of any wrong-doing, but was known as a peaceable man.

Today all that was mortal of him has been consigned to Mother Earth and his spirit has returned to God who gave it.

who gave it.

The cries of orphans, and the lamentations of the widow have stirred the neighborhood, and black and white persons are indignant over the outrage. But what of the murderers? What has the sheriff done? Is the commonwealth's attorney interesting himself in the matter?

This occurs at Gate City,—upon the soil of old Virginia. The outrage rivals any which mars the pages of Texas history. What will be done about it? Our position in these matters is perfectly plain. Colored men living in lonely communities should be as careful in purchasing Winchester rifles and revolvers as are prudent men in taking out insurance policies in large cities.

These weapons should be used for hunting game and the like during days of peace and upon cowardly, murderous marauders during nights of trouble. Oh, that Woods had been prepared! The lesson would have been healthy, as well as beneficial and other innocent colored men might have been saved a similar fate. It is well enough to say that he was a good man, peaceable and inoffensive. It would have been far better to say that he was a brave man and died in defense of his home.

We should have shot down those outlaws with as little compunction of conscience as we would a rabbit, and we believe that the liberal minded citizens regardless of color would have sustained us in it.

We know that the law justifies such action. We do not believe in retaliation but insist upon self-defense. When colored men do this, realizing that they can die but once, lynch-law will go and the lynchers with it.