



An Intense Feeling: The Lynching of Robert Clark

Bristol, Virginia 1891

Teacher's Guide

Summary: In June 1891, Mrs. Elizabeth Warren was allegedly assaulted in her home. The ensuing investigation identified a Mr. Robert Clark. He was arrested and accused of the crime. Before the courts could run their course, residents of Bristol, Virginia and those from the surrounding area kidnapped Mr. Clark from his cell and proceeded to take the law into their own hands.

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 to their students. Through discussion of Clark'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.

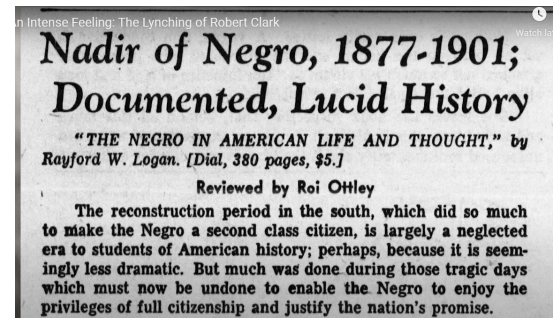
Discussion Questions

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

1. In the opening of the film, one of Clark's descendants talks about how she learned of his story from her older family members. Why do you think oral histories passed down through families and communities would be important to uncovering the stories of lynchings and racial violence in communities?
2. The historian Rayford Logan called this period the "nadir of American race relations." Why might he have classified this period as such? Ask your students to provide examples to contextualize the Reconstruction and Jim Crow period up to 1900. You may wish to list these in front of the class to provide historical context for the rest of the class discussion of the film.
3. How was Clark described in the press coverage of the crime leading up to the trial? How would this have shaped public opinion about the case against him? How do you think this might have contributed to a lynch mob forming?
4. How was the mob described? How did local leaders respond to the gathering mob? How did the intersection of race and class contribute to mob taking action?
5. Discuss Clark's last statements and requests to the lynch mob. How are his last statements and requests indicative of the overall state of race relations in the South at the time especially as related to the treatment of African American men accused of crimes?

Five well-known citizens of Bristol have been indicted for participation in the recent lynching of Robert Clark, colored, in that city.

[Image 2 of Staunton spectator \(Staunton, Va.\), June 24, 1891](#) From the Library of Congress



6. The leaders of the lynch mob were later indicted. One of them was arrested but bonded out by a group of prominent citizens. Ultimately, no one was held responsible for the murder of Clark. What conclusions might you draw about how the leaders of Bristol and the surrounding communities felt about the lynching based on this?

7. Ida B. Wells documented lynching across the South during this period. What did she argue was the real reason that lynchings were taking place during this period? How does her argument fit into the larger historical context of the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction period?
8. How does the story of Robert Clark illustrate how African Americans were denied their basic Constitutional rights? Have students cite examples of rights that Clark was denied.

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This idea of rape and even criminal behavior is not so much connected to lynching, but that lynching was a means to keep blacks [down]—who were very economically competitive at this point.”

Classroom Extensions

- Ask students to reflect on the list of events they came up during discussion of question two. Ask them to write a short reflection on how the lynching of Robert Clark fits into the broader context of life in the post-Reconstruction South in the 1890s leading up to the passage of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. How were the successes of the Reconstruction era (examples: 13th, 14th, 15th Amendment) being rolled back during the 1890s?
- Ida B. Wells is an important figure in the fight against lynching. A crucial part of her work as a journalist and an activist was to document the stories of lynchings across the South. She published her findings in a book in 1895 called the *Red Record*. Ask your students to research the life and work of Ida B. Wells. You may wish to use [this close reading exercise](#) exploring an excerpt from the *Red Record*. Ask students to draw connections between Wells’ findings and the story of Robert Clark.
- The epidemic of lynchings in the United States led groups like the NAACP to campaign for federal anti-lynching legislation. Have [students explore some of the strategies](#) used to pass such legislation.

Additional Educational Resources

- Lesson Plan: [Domestic Terror: Understanding Lynching During the Jim Crow Era](#) from PBS
- Curriculum Unit: [Teaching the Legacy of Lynching in the United States](#) from the Equal Justice Initiative
- Lesson Plan: [The Anti-lynching Activism of Ida B. Wells](#) from Facing History and Ourselves
- Lesson Plan: [Racial Violence in America: Lynchings, 1877 to 1920](#) from The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences History Teaching Institute
- Analyzing Documents: [Red Record of Lynching Map Analysis](#) from Docs Teach, National Archives



[Flag, announcing lynching, flown from the window of the NAACP headquarters on 69 Fifth Ave., New York City] [1936]
From the Library of Congress