

Our Little known History



"You've Raped Our Women"

When Dylann Roof shot and killed nine innocent, unarmed Black people in a Charleston church, he first told one of them why: "You've raped our women...you have to go." This was 2015. The historic and unrelenting propaganda of the Black man as sexual predator and white woman as helpless innocent that must be protected had poisoned this young white man's mind. He's one in a long line.

We recently watched *Marshall*, starring the electrifying Chadwick Boseman. This biopic focuses on the true story of a 1941 Thurgood Marshall case as a young NAACP lawyer: he defends a Black man falsely accused of rape by a white woman. Spoiler alert: Marshall gets him off. But the film also reveals the terror and destruction brought on by such accusations. Besides the deadly threat to the accused man, for example, many Black women doing domestic work in the community were fired by their white employers who feared the maids' husbands were rapists, too. It's a powerful courtroom drama that reminds us how ingenuous and persistent any lawyer defending a Black man had to be. The film ends with Marshall receiving a call just after he triumphantly leaves the court. He's urgently needed on another case.

Sadly, he didn't always win. He was not able to save the "Groveland Four," four young Black men accused of raping a white woman in Groveland, Florida in 1949. Just after the accusation was announced, one of the four, Ernest Thomas, fled in terror. A white sheriff's posse of 1000+ men later found him sleeping under a tree and shot him 400 times as he lay there. The other 3 were arrested, and 2 were shot while in the custody of the local sheriff who claimed they were trying to escape. Marshall defended one of the Four, but an all-white jury convicted him. 70 years later, just this past November, the four were exonerated, all charges (false accusations) were dismissed by a Florida judge.

There have been many others. The Scottsboro Boys, nine young Black teenagers, aged 12-19, were accused of rape by two white women in 1931. The boys were jailed in Scottsboro, Alabama, swiftly convicted by an all-white jury, and all but the youngest sentenced to death. Though one of the women recanted the story and there was no medical evidence that a rape had taken place, all but two served prison time. It wasn't until November 21, 2013, that Alabama's parole board voted to grant posthumous pardons to the three Scottsboro Boys who had not been pardoned or had their convictions overturned.^[5]

Harper Lee, herself from Alabama, closely followed the trials of the Scottsboro Boys and was greatly influenced by them as she wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the novel, an innocent Black man, Tom Robinson, is ultimately shot to death for his kind act of moving furniture for white Mayella Ewell, who falsely claimed he raped her.

William Faulkner, Bard of the south, tells a similar tale in his story, "Dry September." A rumor is spreading through the town of Jefferson, Mississippi: "Something about Miss Minnie (a white woman) and a Negro." The white men in the town seize on it and swiftly incite each other to violence. And although, "...The men assembled in the barbershop are unsure about her claim: 'Attacked, insulted, frightened: none of them knew exactly what had happened, or whether anything had happened at all,' and although Miss Minnie has reported imaginary stories before, the men weapon up and go capture Will Mayes on his night shift at the ice house. The hand-cuffed, terror-struck Mayes repeatedly pleads with them from the back seat to tell him his crime and to ask anybody about his reputation, but they silently face ahead as their car hurtles into the dark night. *The full story can be read at the link below.

But that was then, right? The bad old days. We've gotten better, right?

Last month's headlines say no. *The New York Times* best-selling author, Alice Sebold, a white woman, wrote in her memoir, *Lucky*, that she was raped by a Black man while she was a freshman at Syracuse University in the 1980's. Five months after the attack, she spotted a man on the street whom she believed had raped her. She called the police and had him arrested. The man was 20-year old Anthony Broadwater, who Sebold failed to identify in a line-up and who passed two polygraph exams. Still he was tried and convicted. He was imprisoned for 16 years. When he came up for parole, he was released as a sex offender, making him ineligible for many jobs. Years later, in a fascinating turn of events, Sebold's #1 best-selling memoir was being adapted into a film. One of the producers had been a lawyer. As he read about the case, he was struck by the lack of evidence and the court's rush to sentencing. He hired a private detective and a team of lawyers to revisit the case. They were all shocked at how obvious the case for exoneration was. A judge agreed and on November 22, 2021 (2 months ago!), Mr. Broadwater was completely exonerated. He is joyful for his full freedom and that his innocence has been acknowledged; but those lost years and that trauma can't be undone.

These few stories only scratch the surface. Black mens' perceived sexual advances toward white women was a common rationale for lynching. The NAACP asserts that "Charges of rape were routinely fabricated. These allegations were used to enforce segregation and advance stereotypes of Black men as violent, hypersexual aggressors." Our justice system and our society owes so much to the wrongly accused and to those who've been held in terror by the mere possibility they might be. And to their families and loved ones. And yet, it continues.

According to a March 2017 report by the National Registry of Exonerations titled "Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States," a Black person incarcerated for sexual assault is three-and-a-half times more likely to be innocent than a White person convicted of sexual assault.

"Dry September" short story by William Faulkner

<https://southinblackandwhite.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/william-faulkner-dry-september.pdf>

Documentary on The Groveland Four <https://www.pbs.org/show/groveland-four/>

