The Darien “Insurrection” of 1899: Black Protest During the Nadir of Race Relations

BY W. FITZHUGH BRUNDAGE

When the murderer comes, he shall no longer strike us in the back. When the armed Lynchers gather, we too must gather armed. When the mob moves, we must propose to meet it with bricks and clubs and guns. . . .

—W.E.B. DuBois, 1919

EMBITTERED and sapped of patience by the murderous violence of whites against blacks during the summer of 1919, W.E.B. DuBois called for African-Americans to take up “the terrible weapon of Self-Defense.”1 What DuBois implored with characteristic passion was not new; for decades prominent black leaders had beseeched blacks to answer white violence blow for blow.2 Because the toll of mob executions was so great in the South, and blacks were so vulnerable to lynch mobs, it is tempting to assume that the notion of black self-defense against mobs only circulated among militant blacks secure in the relative safety of the North while southern blacks responded to lynchings with apathy and resignation.

In 1899, in an event that became known as the “Darien Insurrection,” blacks in McIntosh County, Georgia, dramatically demonstrated that they would boldly challenge whites and protect a fellow black from any lynch mob. That this defiant stand by blacks has attracted no recent scholarly interest may be explained by the tendency of historians to focus either on case studies of individual lynchings or on the history of national

1W.E.B. DuBois, “Opinion,” Crisis 18 (September 1919): 231. The author would like to thank William F. Holmes, George A. Rawlyk, and Mart Stewart for their comments and suggestions on this article.

2Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ideas and proposals by black leaders for responses to white violence are discussed in Herbert Shapiro, White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery (Amherst, Mass., 1988), 30-119.

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antilynching organizations. Very little is currently known about the actual response of southern black communities to threatened or accomplished lynchings. And until more is known, our understanding of the gruesome practice of lynching in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century South will remain incomplete.

Prevented lynchings no less than accomplished lynchings may be powerful lenses through which the origins and unfolding of mob violence become intelligible and vivid. What southern blacks did when confronted by whites intent on mob violence is not easy to ascertain. Much can only be inferred from vague episodes. Most of what is known must come from the records and newspapers of whites, all of which were suffused with the slogans and images of white racism. But unlike many instances of threatened or actual mob violence in which the images of African-Americans are distorted or incomplete, the events in McIntosh County in 1899 reveal a portrait of a black community that rose up against rather than submit to the threat of white violence.

A careful examination of lynching in the South uncovers black responses to lynchings that were both complex and diverse, ranging from sullen resentment to vigorous, even violent opposition, as occurred in McIntosh County. Certain patterns of black response are discernable; the greater the degree of black economic autonomy and political mobilization, the greater the likelihood of forthright black protest against white violence. A failure to recognize the complexity and diversity of black responses to threatened or actual aggression not only leads to an incomplete understanding of lynching, but also ignores the creativity of southern blacks in the face of white violence.

The atmosphere of race relations in Georgia during 1899 can hardly be described as auspicious for any gesture of defiance by blacks. Georgia, a state already shamed by a record of 138 lynchings between 1880 and 1898, was convulsed by racial violence during the spring and summer of 1899. The frenzied two-week long search for Sam Holt, a black man who allegedly had committed rape and murder, set the tone for the rest of the year. Newspapers carried daily accounts of the
search, of alleged sightings of the fugitive, and of numerous shocking crimes supposedly committed by Holt in all corners of the state. When a huge mob tortured, mutilated, and burned Holt to death in Coweta County, banner headlines and gruesome illustrations blazoned the news throughout the state.\(^3\)

Between May and November, mobs in Georgia executed nineteen blacks, frequently with blood-curdling savagery. On at least ten other occasions mobs attempted to lynch blacks but were prevented by either the interference of state militia or the successful removal of the alleged criminal to a secure jail. Also terrorist groups of whites, known as whitecappers, and other whites intent on punishing a variety of alleged minor offenses whipped blacks throughout the state. For many whites, the bloodshed confirmed their fears that a steady deterioration in the state’s race relations had reached a crisis, and most believed that black behavior lay at the heart of the crisis. For blacks, the butchery provoked understandable fear, frustration and outrage. In light of the pervasive violence against blacks and the unusual level of suspicion and fear present on both sides of the caste line, the events that took place in McIntosh County in August 1899 take on added significance.\(^4\)

Located on the Georgia coast roughly midway between Savannah and Brunswick, bordered to the south by the torpid Altamaha River, and pierced by countless tidal estuaries and salt marshes, McIntosh County bore the marks of over two centuries of white and black settlement. Before the Civil War white planters, with armies of black slaves, had carved out vast, lucrative rice and cotton plantations in the county. After the war the combined effects of the abolition of slavery and stiff economic competition from other regions in the South drove many of the county’s plantations into decline. Increasingly, the

\(^3\)The Holt lynching can be traced in the *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13-26, 1899; *Atlanta Journal*, April 13-25, 1899; *Macon Telegraph*, April 13-26, 1899; *New York Age*, June 22, 1899; *Richmond Planet*, October 14, 1899; and Mary Church Terrell, "Lynching From A Negro's Point of View," *North American Review* 178 (June 1904): 859-60. For a brief secondary account of the lynching see Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York, 1984), 205-206.

\(^4\)The agitated state of race relations during 1899 is vividly conveyed in newspaper editorials. For examples, see *Columbus Enquirer-Sun*, April 25, 1899; *Valdosta Times*, April 29, 1899; *Atlanta Constitution*, June 8, 1899; *Blakely Early County News*, July 27, 1899; *Bainbridge Democrat*, August 3, 1899.
The lumber industry played a significant role in the economics of McIntosh County and allowed blacks a greater degree of economic autonomy than was true elsewhere. Photograph courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

lumber and naval stores industries dominated the economy of the county in general, and of Darien, the county seat, in particular. However much the foundation of the economy may have changed, the complexion of the county’s population remained predominantly black; African-Americans comprised over 80 percent of the population.5

The origins of the troubles in McIntosh County in August 1899 are murky. In July, Matilda Ann Hope, a young white married woman who lived several miles north of Darien, gave birth to a black child. Soon thereafter, she made out an affidavit claiming that Henry Delegale, a black neighbor, had raped her sometime during the previous winter. When the black man learned of the charges, he promptly surrendered to the county

sheriff on Monday, August 21. Delegale's caution was well-advised given the usual response of whites to alleged assaults by blacks. Even so, the alleged rape victim was not a person of "the best character" and, if white newspapers are to be trusted, most whites thought the charges were trumped up solely to protect her reputation.  

The incarceration of Delegale attracted little attention until the following day, August 22, when the sheriff of McIntosh County, Thomas B. Blount, decided to move the black man to Savannah for safekeeping. The sheriff's motives are unclear: he may have believed that an attempt to lynch Delegale would occur and that Savannah offered a safe refuge for the black man, or he may have intended to use the pretext of transporting his prisoner to turn Delegale over to a waiting mob. Whatever the sheriff's intentions, blacks in Darien had little doubt about the probable consequences of his actions. "To the average negro of McIntosh County," the Savannah Morning News observed, "'safekeeping' meant death to the accused on a swinging limb somewhere between Darien and Savannah."  

A group of blacks in Darien quickly organized themselves and laid plans to protect Delegale. If the details of the organization of the blacks are lacking, evidence of its existence certainly is not. Because Delegale was a man of some prominence locally his sons were able to arouse the interest of large numbers of blacks. Black sentinels took up positions around the jail to ensure that neither the sheriff nor a mob could remove Delegale without opposition. When an emergency arose, these sentries were to alert the black community by ringing the bell of a nearby black Baptist church. That the defense of Henry Delegale would assume the proportions of a collective protest is indicative of both the rich heritage of community bonds and the degree of economic independence attained by many blacks.

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"Savannah Press, August 24, 1899; Darien Gazette, August 26, 1899. News accounts fail to clarify if Delegale was the father or simply a convenient scapegoat for some other black man.

"Savannah Morning News, August 24, 1899. The suspicions of blacks in McIntosh County are supported by the statistics of lynching in Georgia between 1880 and 1930; 118 of the 453 lynching victims during this period were lynched while in transit to jail. See William Fitzhugh Brundage, "Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1988), 123-36.

*For a sensational description of Henry Delegale's "hold" on his black neighbors, see the Atlanta Constitution, September 2, 1899.
in McIntosh County. The sheriff’s attempt to move Delegale galvanized blacks throughout the county. Among the blacks who gathered to protect the jail were rural farmers from nearby Sapelo Island, day laborers, sawmill workers, and domestic servants. Quite literally, the crowd appears to have included black men and women from throughout the county.9

The participation of rural blacks in the protest, to a considerable extent, was the legacy of the peculiar form of slavery that flourished along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. The vast slave forces that tended the immense rice and sea island cotton plantations of the region had known a more stable family life, a more intense social and cultural solidarity, and a greater degree of independence than typical of most slaves.10 With the demise of large-scale plantation agriculture following the Civil War, many blacks acquired small holdings of land and became self-sufficient farmers, raising small crops of foodstuffs while supplementing their diet by hunting and fishing.11

9The backgrounds of members of the crowd are very difficult to determine with any certainty. Tax records for the years prior to 1899 are not extant, but the 1900 Census Manuscripts, 1896-1897 Superior Court Voters List, and McIntosh County Deeds, available at the Georgia Department of Archives & History, provide information on twelve of the alleged rioters.


11A very cogent description of the value that blacks placed upon self-sufficiency can be found in W.E.B. DuBois, The Negro Landholder of Georgia, U. S. Department of Labor, Bulletin No. 35 (Washington, 1901), 739-40. The extent of black landholding is effectively demonstrated by the Federal Census of 1900:

Black Farm Landownership in Coastal Georgia 1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Number Of Black Farm Owners</th>
<th>Total Number Black Farmers</th>
<th>Percent of Total Black Farmers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>70.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatham</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glynn</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>793</td>
<td>1138</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>2834</td>
<td>65.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Federal Census, Agriculture, 1900: 68-71.)
Negroes there," a Georgia planter observed, "will not work for wages, as they can live without work on fish, crawfish and oysters; a little patch of cotton furnishing them the means for tobacco and clothing." Consequently, as one white newspaper noted (with some exaggeration), coastal blacks had become "perfectly independent of the white man." 

Just as the comparative economic independence of rural blacks provided a foundation for collective protest, so too did the economic standing of black residents of Darien. The town, with its black population of roughly 1,000 out of a total population of 1,700, sustained many black merchants and craftsmen. Large numbers of blacks also found employment in the town's flourishing lumber and turpentine industries. Notably, black property holding, both of homes and stores, was extensive and commonplace in Darien.

In addition to the measure of economic autonomy that coastal blacks attained following the Civil War, political activism bolstered the cohesion of the black community. With the revolution in the status of blacks brought about by Reconstruction, shrewd and able black leaders mobilized local blacks. Tunis Campbell, a black carpetbagger and former abolitionist, created a political machine in McIntosh County that controlled local politics for years. Black politicians relied on the large black majorities in the regions to retain office until the early twentieth century, well after their counterparts elsewhere in the South had been driven from office.

12 Savannah Morning News, August 27, 1899.
13 Savannah Morning News, August 27, 1899. Some of the best farms are owned by the negroes themselves. It is known among the negroes that should a prolonged difficulty with the whites occur, the black men would have sufficient food to sustain them supplied from the farms either by [black] owners or tenants . . . ," ibid.
14 W.E.B. DuBois provides data on the extent of town property holding by blacks in 1899 in The Negro Landholder of Georgia, 678-79, 680, 739-40. For a contemporary newspaper portrait of one prosperous black family, the Henry Todd family of Darien, see Atlanta Journal, May 15, 1890.
15 The political history of postbellum coastal Georgia is traced in Russell Duncan, Freedom's Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen (Athens, Ga., 1987). Duncan's treatment counters the stridently hostile portrait by E. Merton Coulter, Negro Legislators in Georgia During the Reconstruction Period (Athens, 1968). For another account, see Albert E. Smith, "Down Freedom's Road: The Contours of Race, Class, and Property Crime in Black-Belt Georgia, 1866-1910" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1982), 117-64.
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The combination of McIntosh County's large black population, much of which enjoyed considerable economic independence, articulate leadership, and deeply rooted community ties created an atmosphere conducive to a collective challenge to mob violence. The crowd of blacks that quickly gathered to protect Henry Delegale after the ringing of the Baptist church bell in Darien on August 22 was the predictable and understandable expression of the heritage and attitudes of blacks in McIntosh County.

On several occasions on the day following the arrest of Delegale, the sheriff had made attempts to move the prisoner from the jail, but on each occasion the watchmen rang the bell and hastily gathered crowds of blacks refused to allow the transfer of the prisoner. On the second day of the stand-off, the sheriff made a final attempt to remove Delegale, but again he was discovered while in the act. In a short time perhaps as many as one hundred blacks, many armed, surrounded the jail. Although the assembled blacks explained that their sole intention was to protect Delegale, local authorities concluded that the situation had gotten out of hand and force might be necessary to restore order. Because the local militia company, the Darien

Tunis G. Campbell, a black carpetbagger, left a legacy of political activism and organization among blacks in McIntosh County which helped provide a foundation for protesting Henry Delegale's arrest and imprisonment. Portrait courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.
Dragons, was virtually defunct, the authorities wired Governor Allen D. Candler and urgently requested troops.16

Upon receiving the request for troops, Governor Candler promptly ordered two hundred men and six officers of the First Infantry Regiment of the state militia, comprised of several militia companies in Savannah, to report to the McIntosh County sheriff. Within two hours, two hundred militia troops from the Republican Blues, Irish Jasper Greens, German Volunteers, Oglethorpe Light Infantry, Georgia Hussars, and Savannah Cadets left Savannah on a special train provided by the Florida Central and Peninsula. Urged on by warnings of a "race war" in McIntosh, the train engineers drove the engine at a furious pace, exceeding a mile a minute for much of the trip, and delivered the troops to Darien shortly after dusk.17

With bayonets fixed and rifles loaded, the troops faced the large crowd of blacks that met the train. Although many blacks brandished shotguns and pistols, they made no effort to interfere with the troops. Even the blatantly sensational accounts in white newspapers admitted that "there was no appearance of riot or disorder."18 Judge Paul E. Seabrook, the Superior Court judge for the district that included McIntosh County, gave an impromptu speech to the crowd urging them to disperse and announced that the troops had come to transport Delegale to Savannah.19 His audience, now assured that Delegale would not be lynched while in transit to Savannah, erupted in applause and celebration.20

After marching the troops to the jail, the commanding militia officer reported to Sheriff Blount. Within minutes, Mayor Kenan, the sheriff, and several prominent whites led Delegale out of the jail and to the train. Once the prisoner and a small guard of militia were aboard the train, the militia com-

16The most detailed coverage of the early events in Darien is in Atlanta Constitution, August 24-27, 1899; Savannah Morning News, August 24-27, 1899; Savannah Press, August 24-27, 1899.
17Ibid.
19Seabrook, born in South Carolina of a distinguished family, had been appointed judge for the district that included Bryan, Effingham, Liberty, and McIntosh counties during the previous year. Darien Gazette, November 5, 1898.
20Savannah Press, August 24, 1899; Atlanta Constitution, August 24, 1899.
At the urging of the local sheriff, Governor Allen D. Candler sent units of the state militia to quell black unrest during the Darien "insurrection." Photograph courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

mander and most of the troops took up positions in the center of Darien. Sentries were posted throughout the town (and in the black Baptist church in particular), and the troops spent an eventless night marching the streets of the town.²¹

The crisis in Darien might well have ended without further turmoil had the local authorities refrained from rounding up the organizers of the black guard who had interfered with the sheriff. Unable to ignore such a blatant gesture of resolve by blacks or the possible consequences if the "rioters" went un-

²¹The details of the militia's duty in Darien is recorded in the Adjutant General's Report, Georgia Senate Journal, 1899, 112-25.
punished, local authorities "determined that those who led the mob . . . shall feel the weight of the strong arm they have defied, and that punishment shall be meted out to them." On August 24, the day following the removal of Delegale, the sheriff arrested thirty-five alleged "rioters." While these arrests seem to have prompted few disturbances, the actions of a quasi-official posse of whites had the opposite effect.22

Around three o'clock on the morning of August 25, two temporarily appointed deputies, Robert Townsend and O. Hopkins, traveled to the Delegale homestead several miles from Darien. Once at the house, they demanded that the Delegale sons surrender to them on charges of having incited the unrest in Darien. Initially the black men agreed, but when Hopkins flourished his gun, someone in the house opened fire with a shotgun on the two white men. The blast hit both men, killing Townsend and severely wounding Hopkins.23 Under any circumstances in the South, the shooting of whites by blacks would excite local whites; McIntosh County whites had the additional incentive to demonstrate unequivocally to blacks that their defiance would not be tolerated. But no lynchings or further bloodshed followed. Instead, a biracial effort by locally prominent blacks and militia officers worked to ease the clearly volatile situation.

Colonel Alexander R. Lawton, the ranking commander of the militia, took the first step in restoring order. To prevent the sheriff's posse from degenerating into a lynch mob, he convinced the sheriff to enlist the aid of the militia in capturing the Delegales. Both the posse and the militia raced to capture the black family, but before the posse reached the Delegale homestead, the matriarch of the family met the advancing militia and pleaded for the troops to protect her family from the posse. The militia officers persuaded the sheriff's posse, which included the brothers of the two men who had been shot, to surrender their arms and to promise to refrain from violence against the family. The Delegales then surrendered and were

22McIntosh County Superior Court Jail Record, 1886-1927, 33-36. Microfilm Reel 34, Drawer 64, Georgia Department of Archives & History, Atlanta, Georgia. See also Savannah Morning News, August 25, 1899.

23Savannah Press, August 25, 1899; Atlanta Constitution, August 26, 1899; Savannah Morning News, August 26, 1899.
moved without incident to the jail in Darien. Almost certainly, had the militia not been present the posse would have carried out its avowed intention to avenge the shooting of Townsend and Hopkins by executing the entire black family.\footnote{Savannah Press, August 26-27, 1899; Savannah Morning News, August 26-27, 1899.}

Col. Lawton met with ten of the county’s most prominent blacks and asked them to use their influence to calm the black community. The group, consisting of the Revs. E. M. Brawley, Paul R. Mifflin, J. P. Davis, all ministers in local Baptist churches, the Rev. J. D. Taylor of the Presbyterian church, the Rev. G. W. Butler of the African Methodist Episcopal church, the Rev. F. M. Mann of the St. Cyprian P. Episcopal Church, Charles R. Jackson, postmaster of Darien, John C. Lawton, federal collector of customs for Darien, S. W. McIver, chairman of the local Republican party, and James L. Grant, editor of the Darien Spectator, enjoyed excellent reputations in the white community.\footnote{The local white newspaper, for example, noted that Rev. Mifflin “is thought a heap of by the white people of Darien,” Darien Gazette, April 29, 1899.} These black leaders, who had been conspicuously silent during the previous week, collaborated on a circular that was posted throughout the county and widely published. They insisted that blacks refrain from any acts that might incite white violence and that they recognize that the troops were not present solely to protect “white interests.” The circular admonished women to “abstain from all words that may incite rashness or may be abusive. And by all means let every man see to it that no colored woman shall show her face at the courthouse or on the streets thereto. . . .” In conclusion, the circular urged all local residents to uphold the law and “to bring back to our city and county that peace and harmony between the races with which in the past we have been so signally blessed.”\footnote{Atlanta Constitution, August 28, 1899; Georgia Senate Journal, 1899, 112-25, includes the militia commander’s account as well as the proclamation issued by the committee of local blacks.}
The Darien incident provoked alarmist headlines throughout the state such as these from the Savannah Press on August 26, 1899.

circular, a special term of the Superior Court convened in Darien and took up the cases of the various participants in the “insurrection.” Judge Seabrook, intent on emptying the jail of the rioters, scheduled the trials of the rioters first, before turning to the closely watched cases of Henry Delegale, whose alleged rape had sparked the turmoil, and of his family, who was
charged with murdering Robert Townsend and wounding O. Hopkins.

When the trial began, twenty-three of the alleged rioters were convicted while the charges against the remaining forty were dropped. The rioters received stiff fines ranging from two hundred and fifty to one thousand dollars and prison terms of twelve months' hard labor. Then Judge Seabrook took up the cases of Henry Delegale and his two sons, ruling in favor of their motion for a change of venue and thereby ensuring a fairer trial than would have been possible in McIntosh County. At the close of the trials in nearby Effingham County, John and Edward Delegale, charged with the murder of Robert Townsend, received life sentences, but their brother and sister, who also had been charged with the murder, were acquitted. The jury also concluded that Henry Delegale was innocent of the rape charge that had precipitated the turmoil of the past month.

The convicted Delegales and the rioters certainly suffered for their actions. The Delegales endured harsh treatment while serving their sentences in the Brooks County convict camp in south Georgia. The convicted rioters, including two women, Louisa Underwood and Maria Curry, were hired out to the James sawmill at Adrian, Georgia. Although a revision of the convict lease law had prohibited the leasing of women prisoners, the two women, in apparent violation of the new law, served out their terms at the sawmill.

The conclusion of the Darien "insurrection" left little doubt that whites could suppress organized black protest. While white lynchers before and after the incident acted with little fear of prosecution, the stiff penalties meted out to the "rioters" in McIntosh County were cruel reminders of the transparent racial bias of Georgia's courts. And the presence of state militia to restore order underscored the overpowering arsenal that whites had at their disposal to shore up their domination. Yet,

27McIntosh County Superior Court Minutes, Book E, 1896-1905, 174-97; Savannah Press, September 1, 1899.
28McIntosh County Superior Court Minutes, Book E, 1896-1905, 227-28.
29Darien Gazette, February 24, 1900; Third Annual Report of the Prison Commission of Georgia, 1899-1900 (Atlanta, 1900), 42; Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, 1897 (Atlanta, 1898), 71-76.
the “insurrection” also exposed several distinctive characteristics of race relations in the region. Both the restrained response of the local whites and the Savannah militia commander to the black protesters and their willingness to work with local black leaders to quell tensions typified the meticulously maintained tone and conventions of race relations in the region. In addition, the organization and militancy of coastal blacks also served as a warning to whites that blacks would not let mob violence pass without protest.30

The events in McIntosh County cast light on the comparative infrequency of lynchings in coastal Georgia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a state where blacks were commonplace victims of the noose and torch, only thirteen lynchings occurred in the six coastal counties between 1880 and 1930. No region in the state had fewer lynchings, whether measured in absolute terms or in proportion to the total black population (see Tables 1 and 2 and map, p. 251).

How then can the infrequency of mob violence in the coastal region be explained? Whites along the Georgia coast may in part have refrained from violent attacks against blacks because of lingering paternalism, but also because they could not count upon a passive black response. Whites lacked many of the traditional means to intimidate blacks; blacks still retained modest political rights, a modicum of economic independence, and durable community bonds, and therefore were less vulnerable to many non-violent forms of coercion. But whites could not lightly turn to violence because they recognized they were not dealing with a cowed and impotent black population.

When whites in McIntosh County concluded that black behavior had exceeded appropriate boundaries, they had to rely upon the outside aid of the state to restore order and caste boundaries. That whites in McIntosh County felt compelled to take such steps is indicative not of their strength, but rather of their comparative weakness and the strength of the black community. Moreover, the reliance on state intervention by coastal

30For an account of the Darien “Insurrection” that reaches very different conclusions, see Arthur Raper, The Tragedy of Lynching (Chapel Hill, 1933), 232. Raper’s brief account is marred by numerous errors and shows little understanding of the tradition of race relations in coastal Georgia.
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Table 1: Lynching of Blacks by Region and Decade, Georgia, 1881-1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mountain</th>
<th>Piedmont</th>
<th>Black Belt</th>
<th>Southern</th>
<th>Coastal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881-1890</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1900</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-1910</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-1920</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-1930</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
<td><strong>195</strong></td>
<td><strong>166</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
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(Source: Brundage, "Lynching in the New South," 22-75.)

Table 2: Lynchings per 100,000 Blacks by Region and Decade, Georgia, 1881-1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mountain</th>
<th>Piedmont</th>
<th>Black Belt</th>
<th>Southern</th>
<th>Coastal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coastal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1881-1890</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1900</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-1910</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-1920</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-1930</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>23.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Federal Census, 1880-1950; *ibid.*)

*Note: The total for the decade 1921-1930 in coastal Georgia is distorted by a lynching of two black men taken from the sheriff of Ware County while in transit by a small mob from south Georgia. Although the lynching occurred in Liberty County in the coastal region, no local residents participated in or witnessed the murder. See L. E. Williams to John E. Nail, July 21, 1922, NAACP Papers, Box C-355, Library of Congress; Savannah Morning News, July 2, 4, 1922.

whites contrasts sharply with the haste with which whites elsewhere in Georgia punished infractions with extralegal violence. Had blacks in the "Wire Grass" region of southern Georgia, for example, ever staged an "insurrection" a wholesale pogrom against blacks would have erupted.31

31For example, in Brooks County in December 1894, whites launched a campaign of terrorism against the black population after some blacks armed to protect themselves against a marauding mob of white lynchers. Militia failed to prevent the murder of five blacks and the beating of countless others. See Atlanta Constitution, December 22-27, 1894; Macon Telegraph, December 24, 25, 1894; Valdosta Daily Times, December 22, 29, 1894; January 5, 1895.
Whites in coastal Georgia were no less vigorous supporters of white supremacy than were whites elsewhere—in fact, they were often more so—but they recognized that violence against blacks could have unintended and, more important, troublesome consequences. The combination of effective black leadership that strove to prevent racial conflict and the threat of black protest in the event of white violence convinced many local white leaders that racial violence posed an unwelcome threat to social tranquility. Furthermore, white leaders gained legitimacy by stifling lynchings. They could allude to the alternatives to their benign rule by drawing comparisons with the brittle race relations elsewhere in the South in order to win the allegiance, if only grudging allegiance, of black leaders.

Coastal whites struggled to explain the events at Darien, but the straitjacket of white racism imposed rigid constraints on their understanding of the “insurrection.” In a climate of heightened racial tensions, whites were unable and unwilling to admit that the stand by blacks represented anything but lawlessness. White newspapers in Savannah attempted to string together anecdotal accounts of black misdeeds in recent years to portray the blacks of McIntosh as dangerous and reckless. “We have often praised them as law-abiding and good citizens,” the Darien Gazette complained, “and it is now with a feeling of sorrow that we are compelled to publish their outrageous proceedings. . . .”32 Whites repeated incantations of white supremacy, but with the veiled recognition that there were limits to their power. In a slogan that succinctly captured the sentiments of most whites in the coastal region, the Darien Gazette explained that “the whites are going to rule and rule justly.”33

The editorial columns of the white papers, in apparent contradiction to the sensational and overdrawn accounts of blacks in McIntosh County, stressed the importance of interracial cooperation in ending the disturbance without greater bloodshed.34 As one Savannah newspaper noted, the efforts of

32Darien Gazette, August 26, September 2, 1899.
33Ibid., September 2, 1899 (italics added).
34For strident editorials, see Savannah Morning News, August 27, 1899; Savannah Press, August 28, 1899. Contrast with Savannah Morning News, August 29, 1899; Savannah Press, August 29, 1899.
prominent blacks in Darien helped "to cement the peace and harmony which in the past has so signally blessed the relationship between the races in McIntosh County."\(^{35}\) The lesson that the Savannah Morning News drew from the episode was that the two races had to work together to ensure that "misapprehen-
sions" of either race did not produce similar outbursts in the future.36

Prominent blacks, like their white counterparts, shared a commitment to maintaining tranquil race relations. They only had to look elsewhere in the South to see how bad race relations could be; and while they argued that the status of blacks in the coastal region demanded improvement, they strove to prevent any further erosion of the position of blacks. When racial conflict erupted in Darien, they worked diligently to diffuse the tension. At times, as in the crisis at Darien in 1899, they had to mediate between whites and the black rank and file who bitterly resented abuse at the hands of whites.37

What, then, is the larger significance of the Darien "insurrection"? Rather than discount the events in 1899 as exceptional, they should be seen as examples of the diversity of race relations that existed even during the "highest stage" of white supremacy.38 When attempted lynchings receive careful scholarly scrutiny, it is likely that the portrait of southern blacks as sullen, powerless victims of mob violence will need serious revision. After most lynchings blacks well understood that vigorous protest would be suppressed brutally by whites. But prior to threatened lynchings aroused blacks were often inventive and vocal opponents of mob violence. These bold stands, like the Darien "insurrection," offer just one demonstration that white violence need not always produce pervasive fatalism or strict obedience among blacks, even during an era of ascendant white supremacy. The "insurrection" also suggests new approaches to the question of the seemingly baffling geographical distribution of lynchings in the South. In the search for explanations of the pattern of lynching, scholars have pointed to a wide variety of socioeconomic causes, ranging from the persistence

36Savannah Morning News, August 29, 1899.
37Two recent studies, which offer trenchant discussions of black leaders in Norfolk and Louisville, shed light on attitudes that were similar to those of black leaders in coastal Georgia. See Earl Lewis, "At Work and At Home: Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1910-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1984), 179-83; and George C. Wright, Life Behind the Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930 (Baton Rouge, 1985), esp. 156-75.
38Scholarly interest in the Darien "insurrection" and other examples of black protest in the South will begin to answer Howard Rabinowitz's recent call for more research on the "fluidity" of race relations during the period of segregation. See Howard Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis: Assessing The Strange Career of Jim Crow," Journal of American History 75 (December 1988), 848.
of frontier conditions to fluctuations in cotton prices. If blacks figure into the equation at all, it is usually by relating the geographical distribution of lynchings to the proportion of blacks in the population.\(^39\)

In addition to the traditional explanations of the patterns of lynching—poverty, weak rural governments, and economic conditions, for example—the protest of blacks in McIntosh County points to the likelihood that blacks themselves imposed limits on white violence. In other areas of the South where blacks enjoyed a range of economic possibilities, a degree of communal autonomy and articulate leadership, blacks were often outspoken in their opposition to lynching. In Tidewater Virginia, for example, a region that shared many traits with coastal Georgia, African-Americans on several occasions organized themselves into unofficial militia and protected alleged black criminals while they were in jail. And after several lynchings Tidewater blacks took to the streets to express their outrage.\(^40\) Even in Mississippi, where the obstacles to black self-defense were as great as anywhere in the South, some black communities violently resisted white vigilantism.\(^41\) Deeply resentful of each failure of local authorities to protect them from mob violence, some blacks turned to their own race for protection. Nowhere in the South did blacks have the effective means to suppress lynching, but they could, and as the Darien “insurrection” indicates did, play an important and complex role in restraining white violence.


\(^{40}\)Blacks organized guards to protect jails in Hampton, Virginia in January 1889 and Richmond in May 1901. Near Norfolk, in 1904, intimidated white authorities called in the state militia to restore order after the black population reacted with fury to the lynching of George Blount, a politician and outspoken opponent of white supremacy. In the aftermath of other lynchings, blacks organized campaigns to raise money for the victims’ families and to protest white lawlessness. See Robert F. Engs, Freedom’s First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890 (Philadelphia, 1979), 195; Richmond Dispatch, May 8, 1901; Richmond Planet, May 11, 1901; Portsmouth Star, October 23-30, 1904; Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, October 25-November 1, 1904; Richmond Times-Dispatch, October 25-29, 1904.