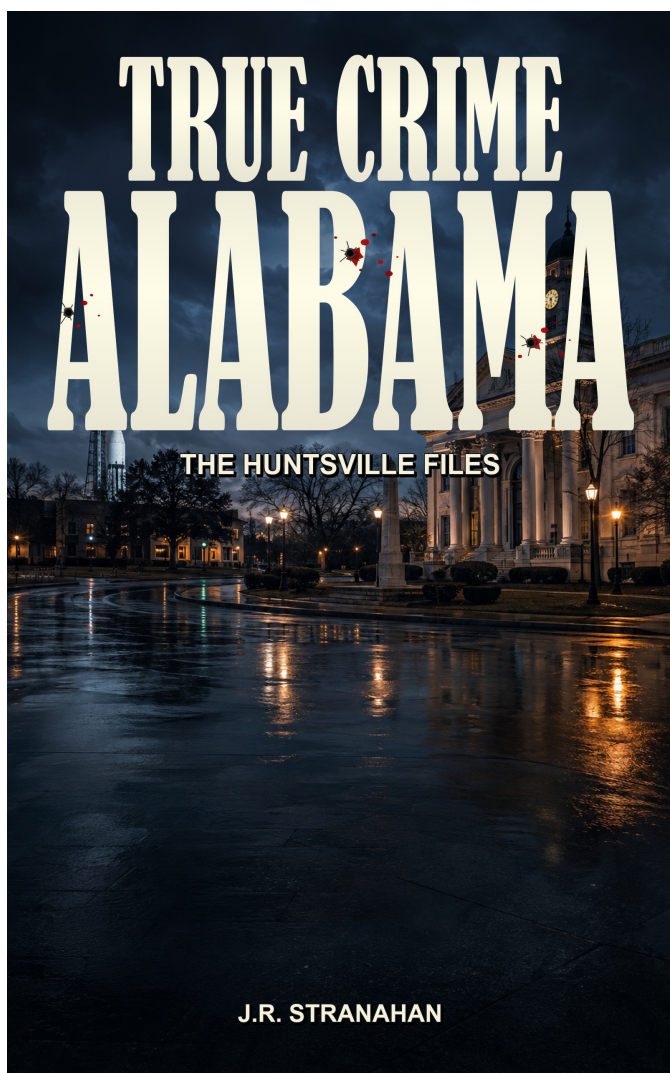


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J.R. Stranahan

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Chapter One: Taken from the Jail

The jail keys were supposed to mean custody.

They meant that the law had taken responsibility for a living person. A locked cell prevented escape, but it also placed a barrier between a prisoner and anyone who wanted punishment before trial. In Huntsville, that barrier failed Wesley Brown in 1883 and Horace Maples in 1904.

Both men were Black. Both had been accused of serious crimes. Both were taken from the Madison County jail by white mobs and hanged near the courthouse. No jury determined whether either accusation was true. No one was held accountable for either lynching.

The courthouse square sat at the center of civic life. Stores, offices, lawyers, officials, and residents moved around it during the day. A courthouse presented the community's claim that public disputes would be handled through evidence and rules. That made the square an especially powerful location for racial terror. A mob that killed there did not operate in a hidden clearing. It took possession of the city's legal center.

On October 9, 1883, at least fifty masked white men came for Wesley Brown.

The public record preserved by the Madison County Remembrance Project states that the group scaled the jail fence and forced its way into the building. One jailer remained between Brown and the mob. Rather than resist, he surrendered the keys, reportedly to prevent further damage to the jail.

The explanation reveals the order of value. The building could be protected by sacrificing the prisoner. Brown's legal right to live until trial was treated as less important than doors, locks, and walls.

The mob opened the cell and led Brown to a tree on the courthouse lawn. There, within sight of the institution that should have tried the accusation, the men hanged him. His body remained in public view. Hundreds of spectators reportedly saw it.

The display was part of the violence. Lynching did not end when the victim stopped breathing. A body left hanging told Black residents that the mob could enter a jail, take a prisoner, kill beside the courthouse, and expect no meaningful consequence.

Brown had been accused of assaulting a white woman. That is the safe limit of the surviving claim. Accused does not mean guilty. The mob destroyed the process that could have examined witnesses, tested identification, challenged inconsistencies, and required the state to prove its case.

Later retellings sometimes move directly from allegation to hanging, as if the accusation explained the act. It does not. The more serious the charge, the more important the denied trial becomes. Due process is not reserved for sympathetic accusations. It matters when fear and anger are strongest.

The masked men did not leave a verdict. They left Brown dead and made reliable historical judgment more difficult. Their violence deprived Brown of a defense, denied the accuser a lawful hearing, and prevented the public from learning what tested evidence might have established.

Huntsville continued to grow. The square returned to business. Twenty-one years passed.

On September 7, 1904, the mob was larger, louder, and prepared to burn the jail.

Horace Maples had been accused of killing a white man. Officials placed him in the Madison County jail as rumors and anger spread. A white crowd gathered outside. Estimates preserved in remembrance records place its size above two thousand.

Numbers in historical accounts require caution, especially when newspapers described crowds. Whether the precise count was fifteen hundred, two thousand, or more, the gathering was not a small band acting without witnesses. It was a public force large enough to overwhelm any ordinary jail defense.

The crowd set fire to the building and demanded Maples.

People other than Maples were inside. Prisoners faced smoke and flames while the mob used the fire as leverage. Huntsville police, sheriff's personnel, and members of the Alabama National Guard were present. Their presence did not save him.

The failure was not simply that the mob contained more bodies than the officers. Public authority had warnings, weapons, personnel, and a duty. The question is what officials were prepared to do with them. A guard force that appears but will not stop a lynching can become part of the performance, giving the scene the shape of order while violence proceeds.

Maples was taken from the jail and dragged toward the courthouse. The crowd hanged him from a tree and fired repeatedly into his body.

Again, the killing occurred where law was supposed to be visible. Again, the body became a message.

The accusations against Maples grew from the killing of John Waldrop. Contemporary accounts quickly described Maples as the killer and added claims of sexual assault involving Waldrop's wife. Those reports circulated in an era when an allegation that a Black man had attacked a white woman could mobilize lethal violence before evidence was tested.

The historical record supports saying that Maples was accused. It does not support adopting the mob's certainty. He never received the trial that would have permitted a defense.

The fire and the size of the crowd made the 1904 attack difficult to dismiss as the work of unknown night riders. Some participants could be

identified. A grand jury investigated. Charges followed against several men.

That response was unusual enough to be noted in later histories. It was also ineffective. No one was ultimately held responsible for Maples's death.

The gap between investigation and accountability deserves attention. A legal system can perform concern after public violence without imposing consequence. Officials can convene a grand jury, hear names, and create papers that later demonstrate action. If cases collapse and no punishment follows, the public lesson remains close to the mob's original one.

People who joined the crowd could see that identification did not necessarily produce conviction. Officials could reassure themselves that procedure had been attempted. Black residents had to live with the result.

The lynchings also complicate the way Huntsville's downtown is remembered. The courthouse square has changed across generations. Buildings were replaced. Streets carried new traffic. A Confederate monument occupied prominent ground before being moved in 2020. Restaurants, offices, and public events drew people who might not know that two men had been killed nearby by crowds.

Place can hide history without erasing it.

A tree does not need to survive for the ground to matter. The precise branches used in 1883 and 1904 are not necessary to understand why the courthouse location was chosen. The mob wanted legal authority to witness its replacement. Killing at the square announced that white collective violence could decide whose rights the county would honor.

The Madison County Remembrance Project returned Brown and Maples to public language as people, not just entries in a list of lynchings. The project is part of a broader movement associated with the Equal Justice Initiative to document racial terror, collect soil, install markers, and

create local conversations about victims whose names were omitted or distorted.

Remembrance work does not recreate a trial. It cannot answer every disputed factual question surrounding the original accusations. Its task is different. Brown and Maples were entitled to legal protection regardless of guilt or innocence. A mob killed them while they were in public custody. That fact does not depend on resolving the allegations against them.

The distinction protects more than historical accuracy. It prevents modern readers from accepting the structure that made lynching possible. If Brown or Maples must first be proved innocent before the killing can be condemned, the mob still controls the terms. The right not to be seized and hanged without trial belongs to the accused as accused.

The same principle exposes the jailer's choice in 1883. Later readers may sympathize with one person facing fifty armed men. Resistance could have cost the jailer his life and might not have saved Brown. Yet surrendering the keys was not a neutral event. It transferred a prisoner from state custody into a killing crowd.

Institutional responsibility is often distributed that way. One official yields because resistance seems futile. Another waits for clearer orders. A military unit arrives but does not fire. A sheriff points to the crowd's size. Each decision can be explained in isolation. Together, they leave a man hanging outside the courthouse.

In 1904, the fire intensified every hesitation. Defending the jail risked more deaths. The mob created that danger, then benefited from it. Arson forced officials to choose under pressure and made surrender appear like rescue for everyone except the person the crowd intended to kill.

That tactic also endangered other prisoners, whose names rarely enter accounts of the lynching. They were not the mob's target, but smoke did not distinguish among cells. Racial terror could treat their lives as

bargaining pieces in a demand for Maples.

Newspapers helped define the public meaning. Some described the violence with disapproval while repeating the underlying accusations as fact. Others emphasized order returning after the body was removed. Coverage could make the mob sound spontaneous, an eruption of feeling that no one organized and no official could reasonably stop.

Mobs are made of decisions. People hear a rumor and travel to the square. Someone brings fuel. Someone covers a face. Someone forces a door. Someone ties a rope. Someone fires a weapon into a body. Others watch. Still others decide not to use public power.

Calling the result an outbreak can conceal that sequence.

The killings occurred during the long national era of racial terror following Reconstruction. White political power was reinforced through law and through violence outside formal law. Disfranchisement, segregation, labor control, and public killing worked in the same environment. Lynching warned that a Black person's access to court depended on white willingness to permit it.

Huntsville was not exceptional in committing this violence. It was not excused by the fact that other counties did the same. Madison County remembrance researchers have documented ten victims of racial-terror lynching in the county. Brown and Maples stand together because their deaths made the courthouse square the scene twice.

The repeat matters.

After Brown's death, officials knew what a mob could do to the jail. The city had twenty-one years to strengthen custody, develop a response, and establish that another seizure would meet resistance. When the crowd came for Maples, the lesson from 1883 had not become protection. It had become precedent.

The later investigation after Maples suggests that some officials understood the damage. Public killing challenged state authority as well

as the victim's rights. Yet a government concerned mainly with recovering its dignity may stop once the spectacle fades. Accountability requires following the case through names, charges, testimony, and consequence.

That did not happen.

Brown and Maples therefore remain connected by more than place. The state took custody and failed to keep it. The mob imposed death. The community watched. The legal aftermath produced no punishment for the killers.

Today, Huntsville's public image is built around people who solve difficult problems. Engineers test systems because failure must be studied rather than hidden. A launch accident produces investigations, changed procedures, and new safeguards. The same civic seriousness belongs to historical failure.

Remembering Brown and Maples is not an argument that a modern city is identical to the one that killed them. It is an argument that reinvention should include the truth about what required changing.

The jail keys meant custody.

In 1883, they were handed to a mob. In 1904, fire and numbers overcame the people assigned to protect another prisoner. Both men crossed the short distance from a cell to the courthouse square. Neither reached a courtroom.

The first file ends where the legal process should have begun.

The Record the Mob Prevented

Historical crime writing usually depends on a completed file. An indictment narrows the accusation. Witness testimony can be compared. A verdict establishes what one jury accepted. An appeal preserves disputes in writing.

Brown and Maples have none of that structure because the mobs intervened before it could develop.

The missing trial should not be confused with missing history. Newspapers, jail accounts, local records, and later remembrance work document the public violence. What remains unavailable is a fair evidentiary hearing on the accusations that placed each man in custody.

That gap affects every sentence a modern writer chooses. Saying a man was arrested for a killing describes state action. Saying he killed describes factual guilt. The first may be documented even when the second cannot be responsibly established.

Lynching accounts regularly blur the two because contemporary white newspapers used accusation as narrative explanation. The alleged crime appeared first, followed by the crowd, seizure, and death. Readers were led to interpret the killing as excessive punishment rather than the destruction of legal process.

Changing the grammar changes the history. Brown was accused, jailed, seized, and lynched. Maples was accused, jailed, seized, and lynched. The mob did not prove what happened before the arrest. It guaranteed that proof would never be tested.

Modern remembrance also asks whose names are preserved. The alleged victims attached to the accusations deserve careful historical research. A refusal to repeat untested claims is not a refusal to recognize that another person may have suffered. It is a refusal to let mob action decide the facts.

The courthouse location offers a public route for that discussion. A marker can name Brown and Maples, describe the jail seizures, and explain that no one was held accountable. It can also invite archival work into officials, witnesses, and other people affected by the original alleged crimes.

Commemoration becomes strongest when it does not require a simplified past.

The two lynchings reveal several layers of responsibility: individuals who planned and carried out the killings; spectators who made public terror possible; officials who surrendered or failed to protect; prosecutors and jurors who later failed to punish; newspapers that normalized accusation as guilt; and generations that allowed the names to recede.

Responsibility does not mean every person in Huntsville approved. Historical communities contain resistance, fear, silence, and disagreement. Some residents condemned mob action. The question is whether opposition became effective protection.

For Brown and Maples, it did not.

The modern city cannot change that result. It can decide whether the courthouse square tells only a story of civic authority or also remembers the nights when authority collapsed.

The question reaches beyond a marker. Schools decide whether local history includes racial terror. Courts decide whether ceremonial accounts acknowledge people denied their process. Archives decide which brittle newspapers and jail records receive preservation resources.

Every choice affects what the next researcher can know.

Brown's and Maples's names survived, but many details of their lives did not. That imbalance reflects who produced records in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. White officials wrote charges. White newspapers described crowds. The Black community carried memories that formal archives collected less consistently.

A modern account should not mistake archival silence for an empty life. The absence says more about record-making power than about the person who died.

Genealogy, church records, census schedules, tax lists, and family collections may yet recover more. Remembrance is not finished when a public ceremony ends. It can become an invitation to research that

returns work, kinship, neighborhood, and personality to people first preserved only as victims.

The mob made Brown and Maples visible through death. Historical work can make them visible as men whose right to a future was taken.

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Chapter Ten: The Smallwood Family

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Chapter Twelve: Cynthia Lynn Davis

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