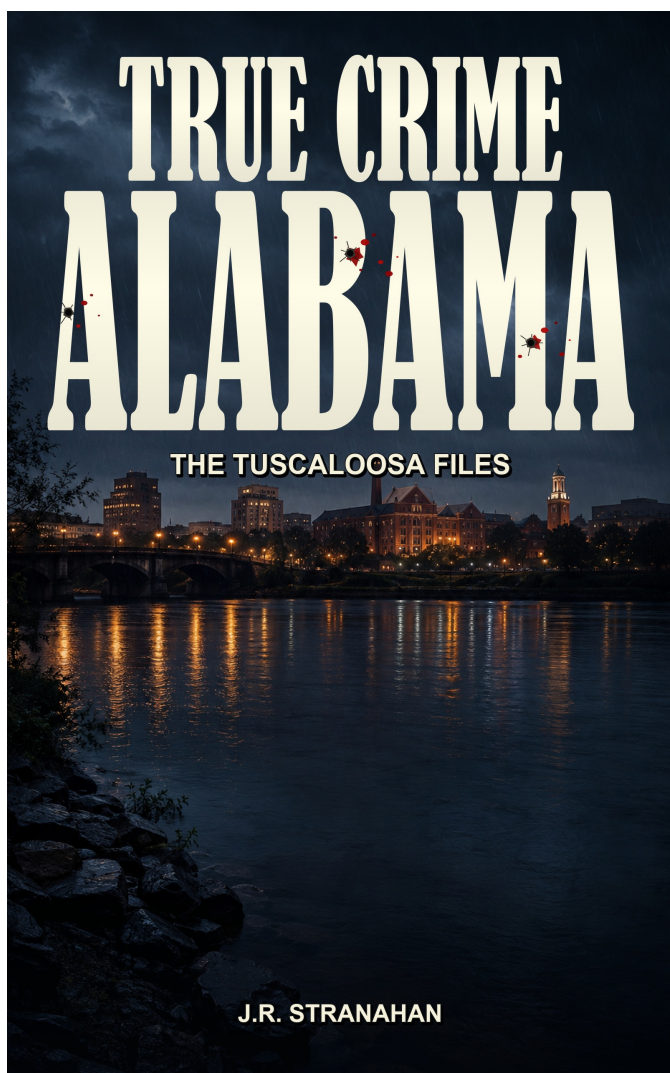


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J.R. Stranahan

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Chapter One: Taken from the Old Jail

The old Tuscaloosa County jail represented a promise that was simple to state and difficult to enforce.

Once the government placed a person behind its walls, that person was in public custody. A locked door prevented escape, but it also stood between the prisoner and anyone who wanted punishment without trial.

In July 1884, the door did not protect Andy Burke.

Some historical and local sources identify him as Henry Burke. The University of Alabama's Alabama Memory Project uses Andy Burke in its principal record and gives his age as twenty-two. The two names appear to describe the same killing. The uncertainty is part of the archive rather than a reason to choose whichever version sounds more familiar.

Burke was a Black man accused of assaulting a white woman. A hostile period newspaper reported a confession and described the accusation as established fact. No court tested that account. The mob ensured that none would.

On July 18, white men seized Burke from the city jail. Contemporary reporting placed the killing near a Presbyterian church. The mob hanged him and fired into his body. Historical records also describe mutilation.

No one was brought to justice.

The killing was public enough to be reported beyond Alabama, yet the surviving coverage did not preserve Burke as a full person. It preserved the allegation, the spectacle, and the restoration of order after the mob finished.

That structure was common in lynching reports. A newspaper began with an alleged crime, shifted quickly to collective anger, described the

seizure as inevitable, and ended when the crowd dispersed. The victim's death appeared as a consequence of the accusation rather than a separate criminal act.

Changing the sentence order changes the moral record.

Burke was accused. He was jailed. A mob took him. The mob killed him before trial.

Each statement can be documented without pretending to know whether the underlying allegation was true. The denied trial is not an inconvenience in the history. It is the central fact.

Five years later, another crowd took another young Black man in Tuscaloosa County.

Bud Wilson was about twenty-two. University researchers have recovered more of his family background than period crime reporting preserved. He was a son and brother, connected to people who survived him and carried his absence.

On December 27, 1889, officers had Wilson in custody near New Lexington. He had been accused of assaulting a white girl. Once again, the accusation reached the public through newspapers that treated the claim as certainty.

A white mob intercepted the officers.

The men took Wilson, shot him, and hanged him. No known member of the mob was prosecuted.

The two killings differed in location and mechanics. Burke was taken from the city jail. Wilson was taken from officers moving through the county. The institutional failure was the same. Public custody became a delivery system for private execution.

The word "private" can mislead. These were not hidden acts carried out by one unknown killer. Mobs depend on participation. People gather, carry weapons, block officers, obtain rope, select a location, and decide

that no authority will stop them. Others watch. Still others know names afterward and remain silent.

A mob can diffuse responsibility without eliminating it.

Each participant does only part. One person spreads the accusation. Another identifies the route. Another brings a gun. Another ties a knot. An officer decides resistance is impossible. A prosecutor later decides proof is insufficient. A grand jury, if one is called, declines to act. The result becomes a killing for which an entire crowd is responsible and no individual is punished.

The absence of prosecution taught its own lesson.

White residents saw that seizing a Black prisoner could end without legal consequence. Black residents saw that arrest did not guarantee survival long enough to reach court. A jail could become dangerous not only because the state had confined someone, but because confinement told a crowd exactly where to find him.

The accusations against Burke and Wilson involved the racial and sexual fears that repeatedly fueled lynching in the South after Reconstruction. Allegations that a Black man had attacked a white woman could move from rumor to death before investigators assembled a reliable case.

The historical record requires a careful balance.

A refusal to adopt an untried accusation does not declare that no woman was harmed. It says that the mob had no authority to decide what happened, and that its violence destroyed the process capable of hearing witnesses, examining physical evidence, testing identification, and allowing a defense.

The accused does not need to be proved innocent before lynching can be condemned.

That point matters because some retellings still make innocence the price of sympathy. They imply that mob murder becomes fully tragic only

when later evidence establishes that the victim could not have committed the alleged crime.

Due process is not limited to easy defendants.

If the right to trial applies only when an accusation is mild or the accused is popular, it is not a right. It matters most when public anger is strongest and officials feel the greatest pressure to surrender responsibility.

Burke's seizure from the jail exposes that responsibility directly. The state had physical control. The keys, walls, guards, and records were public instruments. The mob's entry demonstrated either that officials could not protect him or that they would not do what protection required.

The surviving sources do not permit a confident reconstruction of every official decision. It would be easy to invent a dramatic confrontation at the door, a terrified jailer, or a whispered surrender. Those details do not belong without evidence.

What remains is the outcome. A prisoner left state custody in the hands of a crowd.

Wilson's seizure from officers makes the same point on the road. Custody travels with the person. An officer escorting a prisoner does not stop carrying public duty because the jail is miles away.

Resistance may have been dangerous. A few officers facing armed men could have been killed without saving the prisoner. Historical judgment should recognize that danger without treating surrender as neutral. The mob created the threat, then used it to make official failure appear unavoidable.

Afterward, newspapers made the violence seem spontaneous.

The word "mob" itself can obscure preparation. It describes a group without naming its members. It allows each person to disappear into the collective. Period reports often focused on the crowd's emotional state, as if anger were weather that descended on the county.

Anger did not carry Burke from the jail. People did.

Anger did not intercept Wilson. People chose the road, confronted officers, and used weapons.

Names survived unevenly. Burke became Andy in one record and Henry in another. Wilson's family required later researchers to reconstruct. The alleged crimes were recorded more readily than the men's work, relationships, character, or plans.

That imbalance reflects who controlled the archive.

Sheriffs, courts, and white newspapers generated documents because they possessed official power and printing presses. Black families preserved memory through channels formal institutions collected less consistently. Census schedules, church records, family papers, and oral histories can recover some of what crime reports omitted, but not everything.

Archival silence should never be confused with an empty life.

In 2017, the Equal Justice Initiative and local partners dedicated a marker at the old jail. It named eight Black people then commemorated as victims of racial-terror lynching in Tuscaloosa County between 1884 and 1933. Later EJI county data listed ten victims, reflecting a wider or updated research set.

The numbers do not have to compete.

The marker commemorated eight. Later research identified a broader county total. Historical datasets change when scholars find another newspaper, death certificate, family record, or location correction. Revision is evidence that memory work remains active.

Public commemoration does something a case file cannot.

A file organizes accusation, evidence, and procedure. A marker organizes place. It tells a person standing near the old jail that the building was not simply an artifact of county government. It was the last

place where Andy Burke remained alive in public custody.

The marker also resists the way cities renovate themselves out of uncomfortable memory. Jails move. Churches change names or buildings. Roads widen. Trees disappear. New construction can make the location of racial terror look ordinary.

Ordinary ground is often the point.

Lynching did not require a remote landscape. It could occur near a jail, church, road, or courthouse because public terror worked through visibility. The community was meant to know that the mob had acted and that law would not punish it.

The lack of accountability became part of the spectacle.

No prosecution means more than an empty docket. It affects every later case. Officials who know that a crowd escaped consequence once may expect the same result again. Residents asked to testify know what happened to prior witnesses or how little their testimony changed. Future mobs understand the precedent.

Burke's death in 1884 preceded Wilson's by five years. The first failure did not produce protection strong enough to prevent the second.

The repeat reveals institutional memory in reverse. Instead of studying failure and changing procedure, the county allowed failure to become permission.

Modern Tuscaloosa is not the county of 1884. The population, government, legal system, and public culture have changed. Recognizing that change does not require pretending the violence belongs to another place.

The city promotes history because history gives identity. The old capital, the university, river commerce, architecture, and football tradition all become parts of a civic story. Racial terror belongs in the same landscape, not as an accusation against every modern resident, but as a fact about institutions residents inherited.

Memory is not collective guilt.

It is collective accuracy.

The marker does not recreate Burke's trial or Wilson's. It cannot determine facts the mobs prevented courts from testing. Its claim is narrower and stronger: these men were killed without due process, and no one was held legally accountable.

That truth does not depend on resolving the allegations.

The old jail's promise was custody.

For Andy Burke, the promise ended when the mob took him through the door. For Bud Wilson, it ended when armed men took control from officers on the road. Both died before a jury could hear the state's case. Both entered the historical record through accusations that received more space than their lives.

The first task of this book is to reverse that order.

The men come first. The accusation remains an accusation. The mob's crime receives its proper name.

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The city and university sources control modern civic, geographic, and enrollment context. Census data controls the July 2025 population estimate.

Chapter One: Andy Burke and Bud Wilson

- University of Alabama Alabama Memory Project, “Andy Burke”: https://adhc.lib.ua.edu/Alabama_Memory/s/alabamamemoryproject/item/22 - University of Alabama Alabama Memory Project, Andy Burke event record: https://adhc.lib.ua.edu/Alabama_Memory/s/alabamamemoryproject/item/4105 - University of Alabama Alabama Memory Project, “Bud Wilson”:
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Chapter Two: Bloody Tuesday

- John M. Giggie, "Tuscaloosa Campaign and Bloody Tuesday," Encyclopedia of Alabama: <https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/tuscaloosa-campaign-and-bloody-tuesday/> - John M. Giggie, *Bloody Tuesday*, Oxford University Press: <https://academic.oup.com/book/56443> - Tuscaloosa Civil Rights History and Reconciliation Foundation, trail introduction: <https://civilrightstuscaloosa.org/trail/introduction/> - Tuscaloosa Civil Rights History and Reconciliation Foundation, First African Baptist Church: <https://civilrightstuscaloosa.org/trail/stop-16/> - National Park Service, First African Baptist Church: <https://home.nps.gov/places/alabama-the-first-baptist-church-tuscaloosa.htm> - City of Tuscaloosa, sixtieth-anniversary commemoration: <https://www.tuscaloosa.com/posts/2024/06/06/60th-anniversary-of-bloody-tuesday>

Giggie's scholarship controls the reconstructed scale and chronology. The local foundation controls the survivor-centered record and its statement concerning the absence of a formal apology. The National Park Service controls the June 26 courthouse order.

Chapter Three: Paula Ellis

- Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office, Cold Cases: <https://www.tcsol.org/solve-crime/cold-cases> - University of Alabama Libraries, *The Crimson White*, April 23, 1973: <http://purl.lib.ua.edu/38405> - Office of Justice Programs, Tuscaloosa County Homicide Unit fact sheet: <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/tuscaloosa-county-al-homicide-unit-police-services-study-fact-sheet> - Ryan Phillips, "How an Unsolved Murder Led to the Creation of the Tuscaloosa Violent Crimes Unit," Patch: <https://patch.com/alabama/tuscaloosa/how-unsolved-murder-spawned-tuscaloosa-metro-homicide-unit> - *The Crimson White*, "Not a Day for a Murder": <https://thecrimsonwhite.com/15926/news/not-a-day-for-a-murder/>

The sheriff controls current open status. Sources conflict on the precise last-seen time, so the manuscript preserves the broader overnight concert period. The causal link to the later homicide unit is attributed to modern local officials rather than presented as the unit's sole documented cause.

Chapter Four: Lillian Montgomery and J.B. Hubbard

- *Hubbard v. State*, Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, 1986: <https://law.justia.com/cases/alabama/court-of-appeals-criminal/1986/500-so-2d-1204-0.html> - *Hubbard v. Haley*, United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, 2003: <https://media.ca11.uscourts.gov/opinions/pub/files/19986292.opn.pdf> - *Hubbard v. Campbell*, United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, 2004: <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F3/379/1245/532565/> - Alabama Department of Corrections, Executions: <https://www.doc.alabama.gov/executions.aspx>

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Chapter Five: Robinson Bend Unidentified Woman

- Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office, Cold Cases:

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<https://www.namus.gov/UnidentifiedPersons/Case#/61157> - NamUs public record for UP61157: <https://www.namus.gov/api/CaseSets/NamUs/UnidentifiedPersons/Cases/61157> - WBRC, 2013 exhumation report: <https://www.wbrc.com/story/24036804/tuscaloosa-authorities-exhume-body-in-hopes-of-solving-1982-murder/> - Ryan Phillips, 2023 facial-image release: <https://patch.com/alabama/tuscaloosa/investigators-still-working-identify-victim-1982-cold-case>

The sheriff and NamUs control current status and physical description. Location labels vary among Romulus, Fosters, Robinson Bend, and Slaughter Creek. Public sources confirm exhumation for DNA testing but disclose no result and do not establish that investigative genetic genealogy has begun.

Chapter Six: Ronda Morrison and Walter McMillian

- *McMillian v. State*, Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, 1993:

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<https://media.ca11.uscourts.gov/opinions/pub/files/19956123.OP.pdf> - *McMillian v. Monroe County*, United States Supreme Court, 1997: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/520/781/> - Equal Justice Initiative, Walter McMillian: <https://ejj.org/cases/walter-mcmillian/>

The 1993 opinion controls the suppression finding and reversal. The federal opinion controls the nearly six-year death-row chronology, including more than a year before trial. The Supreme Court opinion controls the county-policy holding. Broader misconduct claims are attributed rather than converted into universal judicial findings.

Chapter Seven: Brenda Kay Green

- Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office, Missing Persons:

<https://www.tcsol.org/solve-crime/missing-persons> - Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office, Cold Cases:

<https://www.tcsol.org/solve-crime/cold-cases> - National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Brenda Kay Green poster:

<https://www.missingkids.org/poster/NCMC/768065/1> - WVTM 13, July 2026 renewed appeal: <https://www.wvtm13.com/article/tuscaloosa-county-sheriffs-office-seeks-publics-help-in-1988-missing-person-case/71844134>

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Chapter Eight: Worthy and McRae Murders

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The sheriff controls the official link and current Alabama status. The specific ballistic detail is attributed to retired Sheriff Frank McKeithen

through Associated Press reporting. Unproved conspiracy and contract-killing theories are omitted.

Chapter Nine: Copper Top

- Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000 to 2015 Active Shooter Incidents: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/office-of-partner-engagement/active-shooter-incidents/2000-2015-active-shooter-incidents> - Associated Press and CBS News, surrender report: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tuscaloosa-shooting-suspect-nathan-van-wilkins-turns-self-in/> - WBRC, plea and sentence: <https://www.wbrc.com/story/27559053/copper-top-shooting-suspect-pleads-guilty/> - Associated Press and WCBI, sentence report: <https://www.wcbi.com/man-gets-30-years-for-tuscaloosa-bar-shooting/>

The FBI count of eighteen includes the earlier Northport victim. Seventeen people were wounded at Copper Top. Investigative theories about retaliation, medication, or personal stress are not presented as adjudicated motive.

Chapter Ten: Megan Rondini

- *Rondini v. Bunn*, federal district-court order, January 8, 2018: <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/alabama/alndce/7%3A2017cv01114/163093/60/> - *Rondini v. Bunn*, Alabama Supreme Court, May 7, 2021: <https://law.justia.com/cases/alabama/supreme-court/2021/1190439.html> - Federal summary-judgment order, January 13, 2020: <https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/tort.pdf> - WVTM 13, university resolution: <https://www.wvtm13.com/article/university-of-alabama-settles-lawsuit-with-parents-of-megan-rondini-admits-no-wrongdoing/18861278> - Alabama Public Radio, final civil settlement: <https://www.apr.org/news/2021-09-28/settlement-reached-in-suit-over-alabama-students-suicide>

Every assault claim remains attributed to Rondini or the complaint. Bunn's denial, the grand jury's no-indictment result, the dismissal of law-enforcement claims, the university's no-admission resolution, the limited Alabama Supreme Court holding, and the undisclosed final settlement are stated separately.

Chapter Eleven: Samantha Payne and Michael David Belcher

- *Belcher v. State*, Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, substituted opinion, June 26, 2026: <https://law.justia.com/cases/alabama/court-of-appeals-criminal/2026/cr-2025-0085.html> - *Belcher v. State*, direct-appeal appendix: https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/21/21-6065/196708/20211018153007552_Belcher%20USSC%20cert%20petition%20appendices.pdf - *Belcher v. Alabama*, United States Supreme Court docket material: <https://www.leagle.com/decision/insco20220110d77>

The 2026 substituted opinion controls current post-conviction status, offense chronology, codefendant pleas, conviction, and death sentence. The exact medical cause of Payne's death was undetermined. Contested details remain attributed to testimony and prosecution evidence.

Chapter Twelve: Willoe Watkins

- WBRC, 2019 charging chronology: <https://www.wbtv.com/2019/07/29/arrested-after-missing-womans-body-found-bottom-tuscaloosa-co-well/> - *Tuscaloosa News*, Tyler Battles sentencing report: <https://www.yahoo.com/news/mccalla-man-faces-life-sentence-005947776.html> - Tuscaloosa Thread, Tyler Battles verdict: <https://tuscaloosathread.com/tyler-battles-guilty-murder/> - Tuscaloosa Thread, Tyler Battles sentence: <https://tuscaloosathread.com/tyler-battles-sentenced-to-life-for-willoe-watkins-murder/> - Associated Press, Monic Battles dismissal and codefendant outcomes: <https://apnews.com/article/crime-alabama-d5d3f4d407eef2a467e24855cfc26b9f>

Charging-stage claims about motive and individual acts remain attributed. The dismissal against Monic Battles is not described as a conviction, complicity finding, or affirmative declaration of innocence.

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