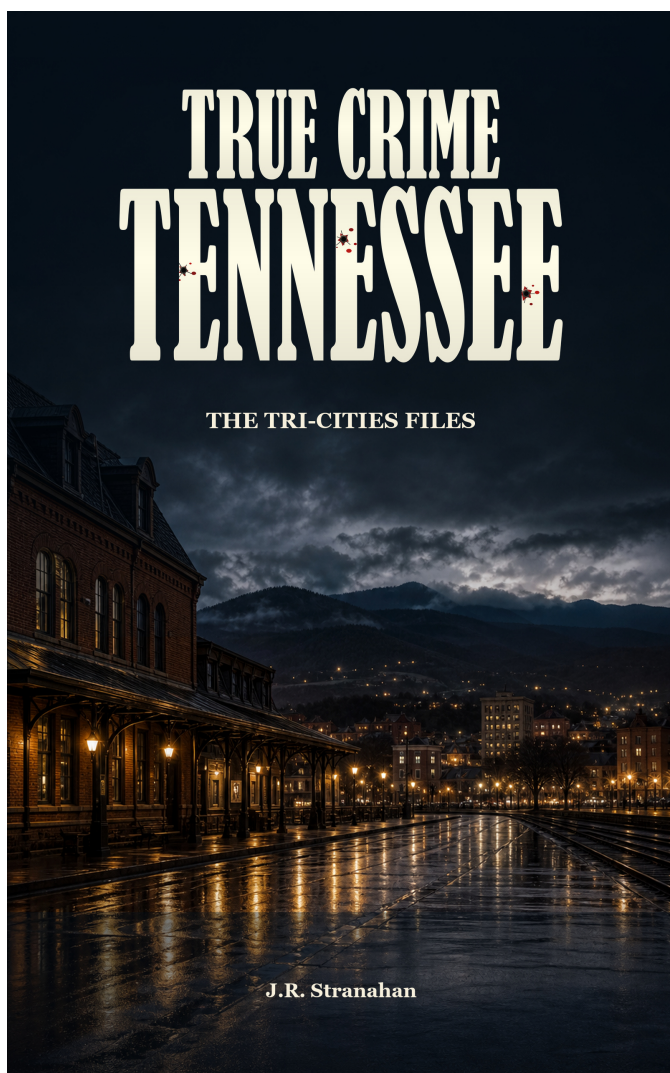




True Crime Tennessee: The Tri-Cities Files

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Georgia Lee Collins, Thomas DeVert, and the Erwin Expulsion

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Chapter 1: Georgia Lee Collins, Thomas DeVert, and the Erwin Expulsion

On Sunday, May 19, 1918, fifteen-year-old Georgia Lee Collins died near the river at Erwin. Thomas DeVert, a Black resident of the town, was accused of abducting or attacking her. Before any court could receive evidence, unidentified white men shot him. A mob then brought his body into town, burned it in public, compelled Black residents to witness the violence, and forced the Black community out of Erwin.

Those facts are terrible enough. The difficulty begins when the surviving record is asked to explain exactly what happened before the killings.

Contemporary newspaper accounts did not proceed with the restraint of a hearing. They treated an accusation as an established description of DeVert and used the racial language of their period to place him outside the protection of law. Later oral accounts offered another sequence, including a claim that DeVert had been gambling with white men and took Georgia while trying to escape. The versions do not become stronger simply because they are vivid. No trial tested them. No surviving judicial finding resolved how Georgia entered the water, what DeVert did, or whether the men who pursued him encountered him alive at every point described by the press.

Georgia's death cannot be treated as a preface to a lynching story. She was a child. Surviving accounts identify her as Georgia Collins, and later research supplies the fuller name Georgia Lee Collins. One report says that her seven-year-old brother was with her near the river. Beyond such facts, the public record reviewed for this chapter offers little that safely restores her daily life. It would be easy to fill that absence with a scene about an ordinary Sunday or with imagined details about the siblings walking together. It would also be false. Georgia deserves something

more difficult than invention. She deserves an account that acknowledges both her death and the limits imposed by the archive.

DeVert deserves the same factual discipline. He was about thirty-five, according to the period reporting reconstructed by historian Carrie Russell. He and his wife, Sallie, had purchased a lot on Toney Street in January 1918 for ninety dollars. The deed gives the couple a place in the civic life that the mob tried to deny. They were property owners. They had made an investment in the town. Their presence was not an abstraction created by the violence.

By 1910, census records counted fifty seven Black residents in Erwin and 131 in Unicoi County. Those figures describe a small community, not an invisible one. Black residents worked in and around a railroad town whose economic life depended on skill and mobility. A newspaper editorial after the expulsion claimed that nearly one hundred skilled Black laborers had left, including machinists. That estimate does not sit neatly beside the earlier census and should not be converted into a precise count. It does show that at least some white observers understood the expulsion not only as racial terror but also as the removal of workers whose labor mattered.

The first reports of the event moved quickly from Georgia's death to a hunt for DeVert. White men pursued him. The surviving accounts place gunfire outside the procedures of arrest and trial. DeVert was shot by men who were not acting through a verdict. Whether he was dead before his body reached the center of town is one of several points on which the Johnson City and Bristol accounts diverge.

The distinction matters, but it cannot change the legal core. If DeVert had already died, the mob burned a body and used it to terrorize a community. If he remained alive, the burning was also part of the killing. Neither account describes due process. Neither supplies a lawful judgment on the accusation involving Georgia.

The mob's actions widened the circle of harm. Black residents were made to witness what had been done to DeVert. Threats communicated

that the violence would not end with one man. Families left. By Monday night, newspapers were reporting that no Black residents remained in town.

Forced departure is sometimes described in passive language. A community disappeared. A population declined. Residents moved away. Those phrases conceal agency. The Black population did not collectively decide that the town no longer suited it. People were shown what could happen to them and were ordered, directly or through unmistakable threat, to leave.

Russell's research follows that coercion into the property record. Sallie DeVert sold the Toney Street lot soon after her husband's killing. The price was forty dollars, less than half of the ninety dollars the couple had paid months earlier. The surviving deed cannot record what she said during the transaction or measure the pressure she experienced. Its timing and price do establish a material consequence. Racial terror transferred more than fear. It disrupted ownership and stripped value from a Black widow's property.

The 1920 census placed Sallie in Johnson City. She was listed as widowed and boarding there. The census entry is spare. It cannot say what she carried from Erwin, whom she trusted, or whether she expected to return. It can show that she survived beyond the night when the mob tried to decide where Black people were permitted to live.

Other expelled residents are harder to trace. Some may have gone to Johnson City, where Black civic life included churches, businesses, schools, and later the community centered around Langston High School. Others may have joined relatives or sought railroad work elsewhere. Without a reliable individual trail, a collective account must not assign destinations. The honest statement is that the expulsion scattered households and made their paths harder to recover.

The newspapers also conflict over the conduct of local officials. One Johnson City account credited a person identified as Phettaplace with preventing homes from being burned. A Bristol account described a

group allegedly led by Sheriff George Buckner as burning houses and killing another man. These cannot be blended into one smooth narrative. They make materially different claims about property destruction, a possible additional death, and official involvement.

The conflict leaves several responsible options. The book can report what each paper said. It can identify the later scholar who compared them. It can say that the available sources do not settle whether houses were burned or another person was killed. It cannot choose the more dramatic account merely because it creates a stronger scene. It also cannot choose the less dramatic account because it makes the institutional history easier to accept.

Local silence compounds the uncertainty. Russell found no comparable account in the Erwin newspaper she examined. She also reviewed Unicoi County criminal court microfilm for the relevant period in late May 1918 and found no mention of Collins or DeVert. That absence does not prove that no clerk ever created another document. It does support a narrower and important conclusion. The reviewed criminal court record contains no prosecution that supplied a lawful examination of Georgia's death, DeVert's accusation, or the mob violence.

DeVert's death certificate carried its own stark summary. The responsible person was recorded as unknown, and the disposition referred to his body being burned by a mob. Russell reports that a grand jury found no one responsible. The certificate placed official language around public violence without identifying a defendant.

More than a century later, the Equal Justice Initiative's county supplement lists one documented racial terror lynching in Unicoi County. That classification places the killing within a national pattern in which accusations against Black people, especially accusations involving white women, became instruments for violence outside the law. The classification does not answer every factual question about the river. It identifies the public killing and racial terror for what they were.

Georgia and DeVert are sometimes forced into a false competition for sympathy. Recognizing the injustice done to DeVert does not minimize Georgia's death. Recognizing Georgia as a child whose death demanded investigation does not validate an untried accusation. A functioning legal system should have protected both truths. It should have investigated Georgia's death with care. It should have taken DeVert into lawful custody if probable cause existed, protected him from a mob, tested evidence, and allowed a court to decide guilt. It should have protected Black residents who had nothing to do with the accusation. It did none of those things.

The absence of a trial also shaped memory. Without sworn testimony and tested evidence, later retellings could harden rumor into plot. Each version could begin where its teller wanted the moral balance to fall. One could make DeVert guilty in the first sentence and treat everything afterward as retaliation. Another could make every detail of the accusation a deliberate fabrication without evidence sufficient to prove that conclusion. Both approaches offer certainty that the record does not.

What the record does establish is the sequence of public power. An accusation circulated. Armed white men acted. A mob made the result visible. Threats expanded punishment from one accused man to an entire racial community. Property changed hands under the shadow of expulsion. The official process did not identify and punish those responsible.

Erwin's later description as a sundown town belongs to the history of exclusion, but even that phrase needs care. It is an analytical category used by later researchers. No reviewed source documents a particular sign or ordinance, and none is assumed here. The documented expulsion is enough to show that Black residents were made unsafe and unwelcome through force.

The event also resists confinement to one date. May 19, 1918, marks the deaths. The next day and the days that followed mark departure,

sale, relocation, and silence. For Sallie DeVert, the event entered a deed and a census. For Georgia's family, it became a loss around which public accounts constructed an accusation. For expelled families, it altered the map of where they could work, own property, worship, and raise children.

A town can preserve violence in what it builds, what it names, and what it omits. Erwin's railroad history remained visible. The Black community driven away became harder to see. Modern archival projects have begun reconstructing names, deeds, census entries, and family connections. That work does not reverse the expulsion. It prevents the mob from having the final word about who belonged in the record.

The most accurate legal status is therefore deliberately plain. Georgia Lee Collins's death was never adjudicated in a prosecution found in the reviewed record. Thomas DeVert was accused but never tried. His killing and the public treatment of his body were extrajudicial acts. The forced expulsion punished people who were not accused of any crime. No public record reviewed for this book identifies a person convicted for the mob violence.

Unresolved does not mean unknowable in every respect. It means the unanswered questions must remain separate from the facts that can be proved. Georgia died. DeVert was denied trial and killed. Sallie lost her husband and sold their property at a sharp loss. A Black community was terrorized out of Erwin. The legal system did not produce justice for any of them.

The word community can hide individual losses unless it is unpacked. Expulsion meant that people had to find transportation, shelter, employment, and some measure of safety under urgent conditions. A worker could lose access to a job as surely as a property owner could lose land. A child could lose classmates and familiar adults. A congregation could lose members. The record reviewed here does not allow those effects to be assigned to named people one by one, but the nature of forced removal makes clear that departure was not a single act

completed when a train left town.

Economic consequences extended beyond the sale recorded by Sallie DeVert's deed. Property usually carries value through continued possession, improvement, inheritance, or a sale made under ordinary choice. A threat can interrupt every one of those possibilities. The forty dollar transaction does not reveal a private negotiation, yet its proximity to the killing and expulsion makes it relevant evidence. The safest conclusion is not that a particular buyer committed a crime. It is that racial terror transformed the conditions under which a widow disposed of property.

The newspaper estimate about displaced skilled workers also shows how white institutions framed the aftermath. Their concern could shift toward labor supply even while Black residents were leaving because their lives were unsafe. That perspective is worth identifying without adopting its count. People were not valuable because a railroad needed machinists. Their labor nevertheless demonstrates that they were embedded in Erwin's economy before later memory treated the town's whiteness as natural.

Census figures expose a further complication. The 1910 count predates the violence by eight years. Population could have changed through births, deaths, arrivals, and departures. The editorial estimate followed the expulsion but may have been rhetorical. Placing the numbers beside each other is useful precisely because they do not align. A responsible historian does not average them into a new number. The mismatch becomes evidence about the limits and purposes of each source.

Georgia's younger brother illustrates another form of archival silence. His reported presence places a child near the event, but the available record does not support a reconstruction of what he saw or later said. Imagining his memory would turn trauma into a device. The chapter identifies his presence only because it is part of the historical account and because it reminds readers that Georgia belonged to a family whose loss extended beyond the public accusation.

The handling of DeVert's body made the violence communicative. The crowd did not conceal the result. It displayed it, brought Black residents into proximity, and coupled the spectacle with threats. The purpose evident in those acts was broader than killing one person. The mob demonstrated what it could do without immediate legal restraint.

That public quality explains the term racial terror more completely than a bare label can. Terror operates through witnesses and anticipation. It tells people that the harm already inflicted may be repeated. When the threatened population leaves, the absence can later be misread as preference or demographic accident. The documented threats provide the missing cause.

Questions about official participation are therefore significant even when unresolved. If an officer led part of the mob, public authority directly joined the violence. If an official instead prevented the burning of homes, that intervention may have limited one form of destruction while failing to protect residents from expulsion. The conflicting accounts prevent a final choice. Neither version describes an effective official defense of DeVert's right to trial or the Black community's right to remain.

A grand jury finding that identified no responsible person should also be read within its institutional setting. A grand jury depends on evidence brought before it, witness cooperation, and the willingness of local officials to pursue those involved. Public violence can be widely witnessed and still produce no named defendant when social power discourages testimony or treats the act as legitimate. The absence of an indictment does not transform the perpetrators into an unknowable force of nature. It records a failure to hold individuals accountable.

Modern remembrance changes what can be publicly discussed, but it cannot supply missing trial findings. Archival projects can recover deeds, census pages, certificates, and newspaper conflicts. Community conversations can restore the expulsion to local history. Neither should be asked to decide the untried allegation against DeVert. Their most important contribution is to identify the violence and the people whom

older narratives pushed aside.

This distinction also protects Georgia. If the mob's account is treated as the only possible explanation for her death, her name becomes justification for crimes against others. If her death is ignored because the accusation was untested, she disappears in another direction. An ethical account refuses both uses. Georgia was owed a careful investigation. DeVert was owed the presumption of innocence and physical protection. Erwin's Black residents were owed safety and equal citizenship.

The legal system could have pursued those duties at the same time. It could have preserved the river area, gathered witness accounts, examined physical evidence available in 1918, protected the accused, and investigated the men who shot him. After the mob assembled, it could have identified organizers and protected threatened homes. The failure was not that officials had to choose one victim. It was that the rule of law yielded to a racial hierarchy that presented collective punishment as community action.

Later readers may never learn the exact sequence at the river. They can still understand how quickly an accusation became permission, how a public killing became expulsion, and how expulsion became silence. That is not a complete resolution. It is a reliable account of the violence the record can prove.

The physical record helps explain how the terror reached beyond the river. DeVert and Collins died near a transportation landscape that connected water, rail work, and the town. Accounts then place DeVert's body at railroad facilities where a crowd could assemble and Black workers could be summoned or compelled to watch. Toney Street places Thomas and Sallie DeVert in another part of that same civic map as residents with property. These locations should not be dressed with invented weather, sound, or movement. Their documented relationship is enough. Violence that began near the river was carried into a workplace environment and then into the housing market through expulsion and a distressed sale.

The name record also requires a small but meaningful explanation. Period material often uses Tom DeVert, while the chapter uses Thomas when referring to him as a person and Tom when identifying the form found in a particular source. Capitalization and spacing of the surname can vary in searchable archives. That variation affects discovery. A search for only one spelling can falsely suggest that no other record exists. It does not justify treating every similar name as the same man. The deed, census, death record, place, age, and family connection must do that work together.

This source chain has different strengths at different points. Newspapers provide sequence and public language. A deed establishes a transaction. A census locates a household on a particular enumeration date. A death certificate records an official account supplied through an informant and registrar. A later archival study compares those records and exposes contradictions. None is a complete substitute for the others. Reading them together creates a stronger account without turning their disagreements into certainty.

Sources

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