

ROSEWOOD, FLORIDA: THE DESTRUCTION OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

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A violent racial disturbance took place in Rosewood, Florida during the first week of January 1923 that destroyed the community. Two white men and several blacks were killed and there was extensive property damage. This episode created headline stories in Florida papers and the national—especially black—press. Yet interest declined, and soon the incident faded into obscurity, disappearing even as a footnote. Interest was renewed in 1982 as the result of the work of Gary Moore, an investigative reporter with the *St. Petersburg Times*, and a decision by the descendants and surviving residents of Rosewood to publicly tell their story. The Florida legislature took up the Rosewood incident in 1994 and passed a bill to compensate the Rosewood victims for loss of property as a result of the state's failure to prosecute the parties responsible. The Rosewood bill was the nation's first compensation bill for African Americans who had suffered from past racial injustices. The act was based, in part, on the results of a study by a team of historians commissioned by the Florida House to provide an objective account of the incident. The author of this article was one of the participating historians.¹

In examining racial violence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars have attributed such incidents to a variety of factors, including political instability, sexual fear, religious fundamentalism, class conflict, economic competition, and hot weather. Such a multitude of explanations and theories makes it difficult to assign a primary reason to specific instances of racial violence. In most cases local events, concerns, and conditions determined the course of such events. The

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¹Gary Moore, "The Rosewood Massacre," *St. Petersburg Times*, 27 July 1982; R. Thomas Dye et al., *A Documented History of the Incident Which Occurred at Rosewood, Florida in 1923: A Report Submitted to the Florida Board of Regents* (Tallahassee, December 1993).

Rosewood incident provides an example of a fully functional and economically viable black community that was destroyed as a result of white anger.²

During the World War I era and immediately after, racial tensions and violence increased significantly as black Americans challenged the segregation customs of southern society and many others moved north to escape the racial oppression of the region. Wartime industrial development encouraged blacks to move north, but as black migration increased, so too did northern white fears, resistance, and discrimination. No longer confined to the region south of the Mason Dixon line, racial violence became a national epidemic. Thirty-nine blacks and nine whites lost their lives in the East Saint Louis Riot of 1917. African Americans who had served in the armed forces during World War I expected to be welcomed home and granted full-fledged citizenship, but they were soon disillusioned by rampant local violence and the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915. By 1924, the KKK claimed over 4.5 million members throughout the nation. Racial violence continued to spread throughout the country. In 1919, 15 whites and 23 blacks died in a Chicago riot, and in September of that year, 700 federal troops were called upon to quell rioting in Omaha. In the South, lynchings became so frequent that they no longer constituted front-page news.³

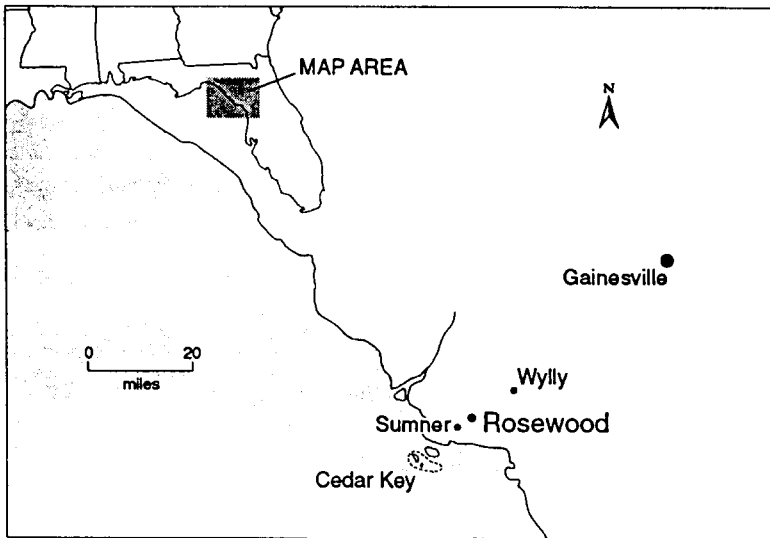
Florida followed the national trend. On 5 October 1920, four blacks were taken from a jail in McClenny and lynched. In November 1920, the black community in Ocoee was burned out. At least six blacks were killed and the community virtually destroyed in a dispute over black voting rights in local elections. In February 1921, a black man in Wauchula was accused of rape, taken from the city jail, and hanged from a telephone pole. A few weeks before the events in Rosewood, a black man was burned alive at the stake in Perry, two others murdered, and a local black church, school, and meeting hall burned following the murder of a white schoolteacher. As

²A. Cash Koeniger, "Climate and Southern Distinctiveness," *Journal of Southern History* 54 (February 1988): 21-24; Sheldon Hackney, "Southern Violence," *American Historical Review* 74 (February 1969): 906-25; John Shelton Redd, "To Live and Die in Dixie: A Contribution to the Study of Southern Violence," *Political Science Quarterly* 86 (September 1971): 429-43; Earl Louis Brown, *Why Race Riots?: Lessons from Detroit* (New York, 1977); Paul Finkelman, ed., *Lynching, Racial Violence, and Law* (New York, 1992).

³Elliot Rudwick, *Race Riot in East St. Louis, July 2, 1917* (Urbana, Ill., 1982); William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York, 1970); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 4th ed. (New York, 1974), 350; George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1910-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), 143-218; David Chambers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, 1987); U.S. House, *Special Committee Authorized by Congress to Investigate the East St. Louis Riots*, 65th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C., 1918); "700 Federal Troops Quiet Omaha," *New York Times*, 3 August 1919.

the nation experienced a resurgence of racial tensions, it was not unusual for a black man accused of improper behavior toward whites—especially white females—to become the victim of lynch mobs. Almost every Florida town, including the state capital, witnessed these atrocities. The Rosewood riot was not an anomaly, but rather an all too common expression of racism in the 1920s.⁴

The destruction of Rosewood has been described as a massacre, a race riot, and even a holocaust by some journalists. The entire black community was burned out



⁴"Lynch 4 Florida Negroes," *New York World*, 6 October 1920; *Papers of the NAACP*, part 7, "The Anti-lynching Campaign," 1912-55, Series A: Anti-Lynching Investigative Files, Reel 9, Group 1, microfilm (University Publications of America, Inc., 1987), hereafter referred to as *Papers of the NAACP*; "As Negro Houses Burned in Ocoee, Great Mass of Ammunition is Exploded," *Orlando Morning Sentinel*, 4 November 1920; "Eight Known to be Dead," *Orlando Evening Reporter-Star*, 3 November 1920; "Riddled with Bullets, Fate of Negro taken by Wauchula Mob," *Jacksonville Times-Union*, 12 February 1921; "Mob at Perry, Florida," *New York Evening Post*, 9 December 1922; Mrs. H. V. Baskins, interview by author, tape recording, Perry, Fl., 19 October 1993; Walter T. Howard, "Vigilante Justice: Extra-Legal Executions in Florida, 1930-1940" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1987).

and never rebuilt. At least eight people were killed, perhaps more, and an undetermined number were injured. Today, the psychological scars associated with Rosewood are still carried by a handful of survivors and their descendants who have recently come forward, after years of silence, to tell their story.

Located nine miles east of Cedar Key in western Levy County, Rosewood dated from 1847, and by 1855, seven homesteads had been established along a dirt trail leading to the Cedar Keys. In 1857, the Levy County Commission ordered a road to be constructed from the county seat in Levyville to the Cedar Keys via Rosewood, and 1861 county records refer to a request to establish a school at a site named "Roseville." David Levy Yulee's Florida Railroad officially opened in 1861, and a line ran from Fernandina on Florida's Atlantic coast to the Cedar Keys on the Gulf coast that later became part of Florida's Seaboard Airline Railway. Cedar and citrus shipments led to the establishment of a railroad depot at Rosewood, and Station Number 11 was built on a parcel of high land that would come to define the center of the community. By 1870, a voting precinct was established as "Outside Cedar Key," prompted by population growth in a small community referred to as the "Rosewood Settlement."⁵

Rosewood was never incorporated under Florida law and remained little more than a village or hamlet. Its most significant growth came in the 1870s when Rosewood's expansion was linked to the prosperity of Cedar Key, which for a brief time reigned as Florida's largest Gulf-coast port. The large cedar trees found in the vicinity of Rosewood were ideal for manufacturing lead pencils. During the 1870s, trees were cut in the Rosewood area for shipment by rail to two large, international pencil companies—the Faber and Eagle mills in Cedar Key. The name Rosewood came from the pale rose hew of freshly cut cedar.⁶

Railroad business directories indicate that in 1886 the principal shipments were red cedar and citrus. There was no telegraph office at Rosewood, but the town received mail service daily, and visitors could book a room at Ford's Hotel. A post

⁵State of Florida, Plat of Land District East, Township 14 S., Range 14 E., Tallahassee, Florida State Archives, 1850; *Minutes of the Board of Levy County Commissioners*, Bronson, FL., Book A, November 1850 and Book A, September 1861; Dudley Sady Johnson, "The Railroads of Florida 1865-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1971), 30-49; State of Florida, *First Annual Report of the Railroad Commission*, 1 March 1898; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, vol. 1 (New York, 1887), 386; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Seventh and Eighth Census of the United States-Population*, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C., n.d., 1850 and 1860 censuses.

⁶R. Thomas Dye, "Race, Ethnicity and the Politics of Economic Development: A Case Study of Cedar Key, Florida" (master's thesis, Florida State University, 1992), 43; Floyd Monk, "Cedar Key and the Pencil Industry," transcript, Cedar Key Historical Society, n.d.

office was established in September 1870, and shortly thereafter the county opened a one-room school for white children, the "Rosewood School." The town's first church, the Methodist Episcopal Church of the South, was founded in 1878 for Rosewood's white community. An African Methodist Episcopal church was established in 1883, followed by a second one, known as Pleasant Hill AME, in 1886. The land for the building was purchased for the express purpose of "locating a church thereon."⁷

By 1890, all the red cedar in the surrounding areas had been harvested and the Cedar Key pencil mills closed, persuading most white families to move out and to sell or lease their land to blacks. The post office and school closed, relocating to the site of a new cypress mill which opened in Sumner, three miles west of Rosewood. Census records from the 1870s indicate that the Rosewood Settlement had a white majority, but by 1900 the black community had become the majority.⁸

Black-owned and -operated businesses such as M. Goins and Brothers Naval Stores Company took advantage of the white exodus and prospered by distilling turpentine and rosin from the abundant pine trees in the area. Included was company housing for labor in a section of Rosewood that became known as "Goins' Quarters." At the height of their business activity, the Goins brothers owned or leased several thousand acres of land in western Levy County. Through their efforts, the town revived economically. By 1915, the Rosewood voting precinct had an African American population of 355 (see Table 1).⁹

By 1916, the Goins family had terminated most of their Rosewood operations and moved to Gainesville to escape several lawsuits from competing white firms over land rights. Although by 1920 the black population had declined slightly from its 1915 figure, the sense of community was still strong, and a number of small, black-owned business enterprises, including a general store and a sugar mill, continued to operate. A second store in town was owned and operated by a white family. Ernest Parham, a white resident of nearby Sumner, recalled

⁷*Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 386; Alford G. Bradbury and E. Story Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices*, Handbook No. 2, Florida State Archives, 1962; State of Florida, *Complete Educational Directory of the State of Florida*, Florida State Archives, 1910; Deed Record Book C, 503; Levy County Courthouse Bronson, Florida (hereafter cited as Deed Book); Deed Book E, 781. Deed Book H, 167.

⁸Dye, "Race, Ethnicity and the Politics of Economic Development," 42-60; Charles C. Fishburne, *The Cedar Keys in Decline: 1887-1890* (Cedar Key, Fl., 1980); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States-Population*, Levy County, Precinct 9, n.d.; 1900 census

⁹Deed Record Books, 1911-16.

TABLE 1

State of Florida Census—Levy County

1885 Precinct—Rosewood Settlement

White	140
Black	84
Total	224

1915 Precinct—Rosewood

White	345
Black	355
Total	700

Source: Department of Agriculture, Census of the State of Florida, 1885, 1915, Tallahassee, Florida State Archives.

Rosewood as “a well-kept, nice, black community.”¹⁰ Mrs. Mary Magdalen Hall, a black woman born in Rosewood in 1919, remembered a small but close community in which her father, Charles Baakas Hall, ran a store. “My sister Doshia used to tell me . . . the first hat I wore was out of my daddy’s store, and she used to brag on that.”¹¹ In addition to operating a store, the Hall family also produced furniture and pine-wood coffins. Several families owned their own homes and worked farms raising hogs and poultry. Mrs. Minnie Lee Langley, a former resident of Rosewood, recalled, “My mother and grandmother made a living for us. We wasn’t begging . . . Mama didn’t rent her house—she had her own house. My grandmother would go over to white people’s house and milk cows. Mama

¹⁰*Stockton & Sons v. M. Goins & Brothers Naval Stores Business*, 1907, and several other suits against the Goins can be found in Box G, Levy County Courthouse, Bronson, Fl.; Mary Magdalen Hall, interview by author, tape recording, Tallahassee, 9 October 1993 (Ms. Hall’s father owned a sugar mill in Rosewood); Ernest Parham, interview by David R. Colburn, tape recording, Orlando, 10 November 1993.

¹¹Mary Magdalen Hall, interview.

had sweet potatoes, peas, and stuff like that. She had chickens, she'd sell eggs and stuff—we had our own."¹² Ernest Parham, who delivered ice to Rosewood, recalled Rosewood as a small town with "people that had nice homes and were law-abiding, and took care of themselves, and had clean, well-dressed young people."¹³

In 1920, the town consisted of three churches, a train depot building with a platform, and a large, one-room black Masonic hall. There were several plank-wood, two-story homes and perhaps a dozen four-room homes that may have included a lean-to or a half-roofed room. In addition, there were a number of small one-room cabins, some of them unoccupied. Because there was no black school in Rosewood, the townspeople organized their own. Mrs. Mullah Brown was the teacher. Once a month she went door to door collecting funds to support the school. Rosewood even boasted its own baseball team, the "Rosewood Stars," complete with uniforms and a home field. The team competed regularly with other black ball clubs throughout Levy and Alachua counties.¹⁴ Many of the men in Rosewood were employed by the Cummer and Sons Cypress Mill, located in Sumner, or at a turpentine still in Wylly, one mile east of Rosewood. Still others worked in the fur trade, trapping and hunting in a large swamp adjacent to Rosewood known as Gulf Hammock.

Rosewood's quiet community life was shattered on the morning of 1 January 1923 when Fannie Taylor, a white woman and resident of Sumner, claimed she was attacked by a black man in her home. Whether she was raped has never been determined, but most of the white residents in Levy County—including her husband, James Taylor—believed that she had been sexually assaulted and that an escaped convict, Jesse Hunter, was responsible. In 1993, Willard Hathcox, a former white resident of Sumner, stated unequivocally that "that nigger raped her!"¹⁵ However, the black community of Rosewood maintained that Mrs. Taylor's assailant was her white lover, a railroad employee who came to see her that morning after her husband had left for work.

¹²Stephen F. Hanlon, Atty., "Sworn Deposition of Minnie Lee Langley," 5 May 1992, 12, Miami; the author would like to thank the Holland and Knight Law firm for providing the depositions of Minnie Lee Langley and Lee Ruth Davis.

¹³Ernest Parham, interview.

¹⁴Minnie Lee Langley, deposition; Lee Ruth Davis, deposition; for information on plank houses in Levy County during this period, see Ruth Verill, *Romantic and Historic Levy County* (Gainesville, 1976); Annette Goins Shakir, "Rosewood Family History" (manuscript, Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Miss., 1993), 1.

¹⁵The condition of Fannie Taylor was described in the *Washington Post*, 6 January 1923; *Jacksonville Times-Union*, 3 January 1923; Willard Hathcox, interview by R. Thomas Dye and William R. Rogers, Cedar Key, 10 November 1993, notes in possession of the author.

Aided by local men from the towns of Cedar Key, Chiefland, Otter Creek, and Sumner, Levy County Sheriff Elias Walker assembled a posse. Bloodhounds procured from a nearby prison work camp traced a scent from the Taylor house to the home of a black man named Aaron Carrier, who lived on the outskirts of Rosewood. Carrier was not at home, but he was immediately thought to have assisted Hunter's escape. When Carrier was later located at his mother's home, the posse prepared to issue a summary punishment. Carrier's mother pleaded with the men not to harm him as he was escorted outside. Mrs. Langley described the subsequent scene: "Mama [Mrs. Langley was raised by her grandmother and referred to her as 'Mama'] was crying and going on, telling, 'Aaron ain't your boy, don't lynch my child—he don't know nothing about it.'" Before the men could lynch Carrier, Sheriff Walker intervened and took him into protective custody. Walker realized that the situation in Levy County was rapidly becoming unmanageable; local vigilantes were organizing, and armed whites were heading for Rosewood. Walker spirited Carrier to the Alachua County jail in Gainesville 40 miles away, having decided that the closer jail in Bronson was not a reliable sanctuary.¹⁶

During the winter of 1922-1923, two other incidents in Florida contributed to the charged atmosphere in Rosewood. The murder of a white schoolteacher in Perry and the subsequent execution of the suspected black man in December had escalated into a small-scale riot. All black public buildings in Perry, including a church and school, were destroyed. On the day before the alleged attack on Fannie Taylor, the KKK sponsored a large regional rally and parade in Gainesville. In 1923, the KKK was well organized in Florida and in Levy County. Willard Hathcox recalled, "Back then, the Klan was big in Cedar Key."¹⁷ The local press described the Gainesville rally as "the largest crowd in the history of the city," with "many [people] from different parts of the country." Parading in full regalia, the procession included a burning cross and a sign reading, "First and Always Protect Womanhood."¹⁸

The militancy of local whites revealed itself when Sheriff Walker attempted to take Carrier into custody. Jason McElveen, a white posse member, recalled Walker saying, "This crowd wants blood."¹⁹ Later that afternoon the mob targeted another black man, 45-year-old Sam Carter. Carter was returning home in his wagon, and the mob assumed he had transported Jesse Hunter to some unknown location.

¹⁶Minnie Lee Langley, interview by author, tape recording, Tallahassee, 9 October 1993.

¹⁷Willard Hathcox, interview.

¹⁸"Ku Klux Klan in Gainesville Gave New Year Parade," *Florida Times Union*, 3 January 1923;

¹⁹Cedar Key Historical Society Oral History Project, "Interview with Jason McElveen," Cedar Key, 1982.

Carter was abducted, tortured, and killed in an effort to learn Hunter's whereabouts. The AP wire service reported that Carter, before he died, had confessed to aiding Hunter. Carter's mutilated body was strung up on display within the town of Rosewood as a warning to the black community. Former Rosewood resident Ms. Lee Ruth Davis testified, "They hung him on a tree and shot him all to pieces."²⁰ A coroner's report attributed Carter's cause of death to "being shot by an unknown party."²¹ Seventy years later, 90-year-old Ernest Parham testified before a special hearing at the state capitol that he had witnessed the torture and death of Sam Carter. Parham's recollection of the incident sparked a 1993 investigation by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.²²

At the time of Sam Carter's death, Sheriff Walker and Cummer Mill supervisor W. H. Pillsbury were attempting to keep roving bands of vigilantes from attacking black workers at the Cummer plant in Sumner. McElveen claims to have advised Walker to "keep them out of the colored quarters in the mill . . . If we could keep them niggers in the mill we could keep them straight, but we knew if we let them out of there the farmers [vigilantes] would get them."²³ Pillsbury stated, "I want to keep everything quiet here in Sumner. The important thing for us is to keep our own negroes busy at work, and prevent any spreading of the trouble."²⁴ The black community in Rosewood fully understood the ramifications of the alleged rape on Mrs. Taylor and anticipated more violence by whites. Rosewood families congregated in large homes for protection, and children were kept inside.

On Wednesday, 3 January, a rumor circulated among the white crowd gathering in Sumner that blacks in Rosewood were protecting Hunter, and that a black man, Sylvester Carrier, had made racist statements and threats. Sylvester, Aaron Carrier's first cousin, had a reputation in Levy County as an independent black man, and local whites considered him arrogant and disrespectful. He was also recognized as a man not to be challenged. Friction between whites and the Carrier family had occurred on previous occasions. Thirteen years earlier, Sylvester and his father, Haywood Carrier, had been arrested for "changing animal marks," a charge associated with

²⁰Lee Ruth Davis, deposition.

²¹Verdict of Coroner's Jury, 1923, Box C, Levy County Courthouse, Bronson, Fl.

²²Richard Hixon, *Special Master's Final Report Regarding HB 591 (Rosewood)*, Florida House, Tallahassee, 24 March 1994; Florida Department of Law Enforcement, *Report to the Legislature of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Investigation of the Rosewood Violence of 1923*, Tallahassee, 17 January 1995.

²³Jason McElveen, interview.

²⁴*Jacksonville Journal*, 5 January 1923.

poaching cattle. Both men were sentenced to a term in Florida's brutal state convict lease system. Sylvester was well respected within the black community for his refusal to adhere to the codes of Jim Crowism. He was active in Rosewood's AME church and devoted to his wife and family. Known to be an excellent marksman, he made his living as a fur trapper and gave music lessons.²⁵

The *New York Times* quoted Sylvester as saying that the rape of Mrs. Taylor was "proof of what negroes could do without interference."²⁶ Cedar Key resident Jason McElveen recalled the message from Sylvester as a challenge. "He said that they had 'em, and that if we thought we could, to come get 'em. That be just like throwing gasoline on fire . . . to tell a bunch of white people that."²⁷

There is conflicting testimony as to how this rumor originated and what, if anything, was actually said by Carrier. One story attributes the rumor to a female friend of Fannie Taylor who overheard black residents discussing the rape when she went to Rosewood to pick up some clean laundry. It is possible that the story was contrived by one of the more militant vigilantes to provoke action. Regardless of their validity, the press reports and rumors provided a catalyst for an attack on the town.

On Thursday evening, 4 January, 20 to 30 armed vigilantes resolved to go to Rosewood and settle the matter. Some Cedar Key residents, including the town barber, refused to participate. One man declined to take part or lend his gun because he said that he did not want to "have his hands wet with blood."²⁸ With their courage fortified by moonshine whiskey, the vigilantes went to the home of Sylvester Carrier's mother, Sarah, where Sylvester and possibly Hunter were reported to have been. McElveen stated, "A bunch of us gathered up and went up there [to Rosewood]. I didn't have anything but a 12-gauge gun, a pump gun, plenty of buckshot, and most of them had the same thing."²⁹

The *Gainesville Sun* later editorialized, "What occurred at the death house was inevitable . . . We are told that bootleg liquor was at the bottom of that. What a shame!"³⁰ As the white mob approached the Carriers' large, two-story frame house,

²⁵State of Florida, Prison Record Book No. 3, Tallahassee, Florida State Archives; Minnie Lee Langley, interview; *Jacksonville Journal*, 5 January 1923; *Florida Times-Union*, 6 January 1923; Jason McElveen, interview.

²⁶*New York Times*, 5 January 1923.

²⁷Jason McElveen, interview.

²⁸George De Cergueira Leite Zarur, "Seafood Gatherers in Mullet Springs: Economic Rationality and the Social System" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1975), 51.

²⁹Jason McElveen, interview.

³⁰"Not Justifiable," *Gainesville Sun*, 8 January 1923.

they shot the family's dog. Poly Wilkerson, a "quarters boss" at the mill, kicked in the front door. Sylvester Carrier was armed and ready, standing under the stairwell, taking cover in a wood bin. He shot Wilkerson and another mill supervisor, Henry Andrews, as they broke into his mother's home, killing both men instantly.³¹

Surrounding the house, whites riddled it with rifle and shotgun fire. As adults and children huddled in the upstairs bedrooms under a mattress for protection, a shotgun blast killed Sarah Carrier. The whites outside later insisted that they were facing an army of well-armed blacks, but it was unlikely that they were dealing with more than three men, and Sylvester may well have been the lone gunman. The shooting continued for over an hour. Four white men were wounded, including Henry Odem from Otter Creek. Cummer Lumber Company officials reported that he "lay dying."³² The *Florida Times Union* reported that a man subsequently wounded in the head had worked his way across the open space between the firing line and the house and climbed through a window, switching the light on the crouching negroes and shouting to his friends to "shoot." The three other wounded white men were Bryan Kirkland, Sepsis Studstill, and Mannie Hudson, all from Sumner. The shoot-out ended when the vigilantes had expended all of their ammunition. Leaving their two dead companions on the front porch of the Carrier home, they returned to Sumner to rearm and regroup, but not before torching one of the town's churches and several empty houses.³³

The idea that blacks in Rosewood had taken up arms against the white race was unthinkable in the Deep South. Armed whites descended on Levy County from across the state to seek retribution for the deaths of Andrews and Wilkerson. Both white and black witnesses reported that people from Gainesville, Starke, and Perry arrived in Sumner by early afternoon on Friday. On foot, by horseback, in wagons, and driving Model T's, a mob of more than 200 went to Rosewood. The Klan rally in Gainesville on New Year's Eve provided a ready-made legion of eager participants, as did the recent racial violence in Perry.³⁴

Events in Rosewood were carried in most of the nation's major newspapers. The *Miami Daily Metropolis* headlined the story with, "Many Die in Florida Race War."

³¹Minnie Lee Langley, interview and deposition.

³²*St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 5 January 1923.

³³*Florida Times-Union*, 8 January 1923; *Miami Herald*, 8 January 1923; *Miami Daily Metropolis*, 6 January 1923; Jason McElveen, interview; Minnie Lee Langley, deposition; Lee Ruth Davis, deposition.

³⁴Minnie Lee Langley, deposition; Lee Ruth Davis, deposition (Davis and Langley do not recall seeing any Klan regalia among the white vigilantes who came into Rosewood); *Miami Daily Metropolis*, 5 January 1923; *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 January 1923; Ernest Parham, interview.

Some of the newspaper accounts were exaggerated and added to white hysteria, in one case describing a gun battle between whites and 25 or more heavily armed blacks.³⁵ The African American press also covered events in Rosewood, but from an entirely different perspective. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that "within their improvised fort the little colored group put up a defense that will bear comparison with many of the bravest feats on Flanders Field. . . . Finally, their ammunition almost exhausted, the little band decided to emulate the action of the Guards of Cahill and . . . with clubbed muskets made a rush through the besieging forces."³⁶ Other black papers stressed the willingness of blacks to defend their homes. The *Pittsburgh American* insisted that Rosewood should "make negroes everywhere feel proud and take renewed hope. For our people have fought back again! They have met the mob with its own deadly weapons, they have acquitted themselves like free men and were not content to be burned like bales of hay."³⁷

As white vigilantes entered Levy County, they engaged in random acts of violence against local blacks. One long-time Cedar Key resident claimed that for two weeks after the shoot-out it was "open season on niggers around here."³⁸ Mingo Williams, a black turpentine worker, had the misfortune to walk along the road leading to Rosewood a few miles south of Bronson when a carload of angry vigilantes shot and killed him for no apparent reason.³⁹

On the morning of 5 January, Governor Cary Hardee telegraphed Sheriff Walker and offered to send the National Guard to Levy County, but Walker declined the offer and assured the governor that he "feared no further disorder." Walker may have felt secure with additional law enforcement officers provided by Sheriff P. G. Ramsey and his deputies from neighboring Alachua County. After receiving Walker's message, Hardee left the governor's mansion for an afternoon of hunting on one of Tallahassee's plantations, leaving his secretary, Professor L. B. Edwards, to monitor the situation. Thus, the governor was not available when reports reached Tallahassee of more burnings and deaths in Rosewood.⁴⁰

³⁵*Miami Daily Metropolis*, 5 January 1923.

³⁶*New York Amsterdam News*, 10 January 1923.

³⁷*Pittsburgh American*, 19 January 1923; see also *Chicago Defender*, 20 January 1923 (the *Defender* carried photos of the destruction of Rosewood); *Baltimore Afro-American*, 19 January 1923.

³⁸Brooks Campbell, interview by R. Thomas Dye and William W. Rogers, Cedar Key, 10 November 1993, notes in possession of the author.

³⁹*Washington Post*, 6 January 1923.

⁴⁰*Florida Times-Union*, 6 January 1923; *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 January 1923; *Tallahassee Democrat*, 6 January 1923.

The roles of both Governor Hardee and Levy County Sheriff Walker in the affair remain clouded. Despite 24 lynchings during his governorship from 1921 to 1925, and the race riot at Perry, Hardee never criticized racial violence in the state until the northern press condemned the destruction at Rosewood and the failure of state leaders to protect innocent black residents. Sheriff Walker told the press that further trouble in Rosewood "appeared imminent," yet he declined assistance from the governor. Like other residents of the area, Walker was well aware that large bands of armed whites, who were drinking heavily, roamed through Levy County searching for blacks involved in the Rosewood violence. A few months after the Rosewood riot, Walker inexplicably resigned from office before completing his full elected term.⁴¹

Elements of the mob descended on Rosewood before dawn on Friday morning, 5 January. Wilson Hall, who was nine years old at the time, remembered his mother urgently trying to hide her family. "When they started coming you can see lights from automobiles for miles, but when my mother looked out the window upstairs she saw the cars coming, then she went and got all the kids up and said, 'Y'all, let's go, they are coming!' . . . We all headed for the swamp, but before we got started, she started counting her kids and found out one was missing." A family friend ran back to the house and rescued Hall's sister. Hall's family members made their way through 15 miles of swamp to the town of Gulf Hammock.⁴² Meanwhile, arsonists tossed kerosene on the remaining buildings and set Rosewood aflame. The press reported that the bodies of Sylvester and Sarah Carrier were discovered inside the Carrier home. The family, however, steadfastly maintained that he escaped.

As homes burned, most of the town's people fled into the swamps, but a few residents remained behind. Lexie Gordon was too old and infirm to run. Flames and smoke forced her out the back door of her burning home. As she stumbled outside, seeking refuge in a stand of heavy brush, she was struck down by shotgun fire to the face. A brother-in-law of Fannie Taylor later claimed credit for her murder. As armed whites rampaged through the town, the people of Rosewood remained hidden in the surrounding swamps. Minnie Lee Langley recalled, "Jesus, I will never forget that day. It was so cold . . . None of the children out there in the woods had on no clothes. We was about naked."⁴³

⁴¹State of Florida, *Report of the Secretary of State*, part 1 (Tallahassee, 1923), 122.

⁴²Wilson Hall, interview by Maxine Jones, tape recording, Tallahassee, 9 October 1993.

⁴³Brooks Campbell, interview by William R. Rogers and R. Thomas Dye, tape recording, Cedar Key, 11 October 1993; Minnie Lee Langley, interview and deposition.

On Sunday a crowd of 200 to 300 returned to Rosewood, burned the remaining structures, and continued searching for black residents. The *Florida Times-Union* reported, "The burning of the houses was carried out deliberately, and although the crowd was present all the time, no one would say he saw houses fired." An elderly black man, James Carrier, Sylvester Carrier's uncle, was murdered by roaming vigilantes a short distance from Rosewood. Unable to run, Carrier was attempting to find his former white supervisor in Sumner when he was caught by a gang and accused of taking part in the big shoot-out the night before. It is unlikely that James Carrier, old and partially paralyzed from a stroke, could have participated in the defense of the Carrier home. He was taken to the site of two freshly dug graves containing his nephew Sylvester and his sister Sarah and executed for refusing to reveal the names of those in the house during the shoot-out.⁴⁴

Although the homes of all black residents in Rosewood were destroyed, the homes of two white families remained untouched. One of the families protected black residents and their children from further violence. John Wright and his wife, who operated a general store, offered refuge in their home to a number of black children. For days after the riot Wright acted as a liaison to blacks hiding in the swamps, providing them with food. Lee Ruth Davis was seven years old when she watched her home burn to the ground. She managed to elude a white pursuer before making her way to the Wright store. "I was laying that deep in water, that is where we sat all day long. . . . We got down on our bellies and crawled. We tried to keep people from seeing us through the bushes . . . We were trying to get back to Mr. Wright's house. After we got all the way to his house, Mr. and Mrs. Wright were all the way out in the bushes hollering and calling us, and when we answered they were so glad."⁴⁵

Black residents were also assisted by two white train conductors on the local railroad. Brothers John and William Bryce, who had come to know all the residents of Rosewood over the years, brought the train to Rosewood to evacuate the women and children who were staying at the Wright house. As the train departed Rosewood, it moved slowly up the tracks, blowing its horn as a signal to those who were hiding in the woods. The Bryces refused to stop for men, however, fearing that white gangs in the area might attack the train.⁴⁶

The survivors of the riot who escaped on the train were taken in by Gainesville's black community until family members could be located. Davis recalled the kindness extended to her. "We pulled into the Gainesville Seaboard

⁴⁴*Florida Times-Union*, 8 January 1923; *Gainesville Daily Sun*, 7 January 1923.

⁴⁵Lee Ruth Davis, deposition.

⁴⁶Minnie Lee Langley, deposition.



Home of store owner John Wright, who assisted a number of the town residents in escaping from white vigilantes. His house is the only remaining structure of what was once Rosewood, Florida.

Station. It was jammed packed. You know, everyone was hollering and crying, and saying that they put us on the train. So many sheets covered with blood around them and everything. So people started saying I am going to take five or six. To take them to their homes and give them a place to stay. . . . Gainesville really looked out for us.”⁴⁷

The actual number of dead and wounded at Rosewood is difficult to determine. Local accounts by Cedar Key’s residents are varied, with estimates of the number of blacks killed ranging from 6 to 27. Black residents who fled the area have maintained that more whites were killed than were ever reported in the press. Minnie Lee Langley reported fleeing the Carrier house and stepping over a pile of white bodies on her aunt’s front porch. The death of six blacks can be documented, including James Carrier, Sarah Carrier, Sylvester Carrier, Lexie Gordon, Mingo Williams, and

⁴⁷Lee Ruth Davis, deposition.

Sam Carter. Two white men were confirmed dead, Poly Wilkerson and Henry Andrews. Henry Odem may have died within a few weeks from his wound. Three other whites were wounded, as well as an undetermined number of blacks, including the wife of James Carrier, who was wounded in the hand.⁴⁸

No arrests were ever made in the Rosewood murders. Three weeks after the riot, Governor Hardee dispatched State Attorney George A. Decottes to collect evidence. State Attorney A. S. Crews of the Eighth District normally would have been responsible for the investigation, but his failure to win a conviction after a recent lynching in Newberry apparently damaged his credibility with the governor. Hardee was concerned about how the northern press would perceive the grand jury investigation. His orders to Decottes stated, "It has been officially known to me that certain high crimes have been committed by unidentified parties of persons in the counties of Alachua and in the county of Levy, in the state of Florida [I]t is essential to good government that the laws be respected and upheld . . . [and to] apprehend and punish the perpetrators of these crimes."⁴⁹

The all-white grand jury convened in the Levy County Courthouse in Bronson during the second week of February. R. C. Philpott, a prominent farmer from Judson, was selected as foreman. Judge Augustus V. Long of Florida's Eighth Judicial Circuit, a former state legislator, instructed the jurors to "make every effort to fix the blame where it belonged and to see that the guilty parties were brought before justice."⁵⁰ The press reported that Decottes had difficulty locating certain key witnesses, and the jury recessed for two days while Decottes traveled to Gainesville looking for more evidence. The grand jury listened to the testimony of 25 witnesses, including 8 blacks, before rendering a decision. On 15 February, foreman Philpott reported to Judge Long that there was insufficient evidence to make any indictments in the case, and Judge Long dismissed the grand jury. His only action was to issue a statement "deploring the actions of the mob."⁵¹

⁴⁸Minnie Lee Langley, interview and deposition; Lee Ruth Davis, deposition; *Florida Times-Union*, 6 and 8 January 1923; *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 January 1923; Florida Department of Law Enforcement, *Report*.

⁴⁹*Gainesville Daily Sun*, 2 February 1923; *Florida Times-Union*, 30 January 1923.

⁵⁰"Rosewood Probe May Continue Through Weekend at Levy County Seat," *Gainesville Daily Sun*, 13 February 1923.

⁵¹*Gainesville Daily Sun*, 14-16 February 1923; *Florida Times-Union*, 16 February 1923. A primary focus of the 1993 investigation by the historical team was to find the Rosewood grand jury records. The records have never been located.

The fate of Jesse Hunter has never been determined, although Cedar Key residents claimed that he was eventually captured and killed several days after the riot. On Friday, 5 January, local authorities in Lakeland had removed a black man fitting Hunter's description from a train. Four citizens from Levy County went to Lakeland to identify the man and concluded that, although there was a close resemblance, the suspect was not Hunter. The police chief in Lakeland opted not to free the man, however, in case the citizens from Levy had erred, and held the prisoner over on "other charges."⁵²

Events in Rosewood were symptomatic of racial patterns and tensions that existed throughout Florida, the South, and, to a lesser degree, the nation in the post-World War I era. Some whites reacted violently to efforts by black Americans to secure the rights and freedoms that were guaranteed in the federal constitution. When black citizens in Florida took steps to secure these freedoms, whites resisted by joining the second Ku Klux Klan and by pressuring blacks through various legal, economic, and political initiatives to maintain segregation and white supremacy. Rumors of alleged racial attacks against white women that permeated news stories during this time only added to white anxiety and hostility. The dramatic rise in lynchings and riots revealed the extent of white determination to "keep blacks in their place."⁵³

When blacks sought protection against this climate of violence by arming themselves, whites viewed their response as a direct threat to the very nature of southern society. Sylvester Carrier's killing of two prominent white citizens could not be tolerated. In its own small way, Carrier's action stirred up white fears of fearful conspiracies dating back to Nat Turner's rebellion. Even though Carrier was only protecting his property and the lives of those close to him, many whites in the region saw it as a direct assault against the foundations of southern life. The response was immediate, violent, and designed to convey a message to the local African American community as well as other African American residents of Florida and the South that such action would not be tolerated.⁵⁴

The Rosewood incident had a profound impact on subsequent developments in Levy County. Rosewood itself disappeared completely. Prior to the riot, Cedar Key's population was 37.7 percent black. Today there are no blacks living in Cedar Key,

⁵²St. Petersburg Times, 5 January 1923.

⁵³Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, 172; Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 336-40; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, passim.

⁵⁴Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York, 1975), 144-45.

making it one of only two incorporated cities in Florida with an all-white population.⁵⁵ Whites who remain in the county deny the role of their relatives and neighbors in the violence, calling it a minor incident and blaming much of it on whites from other areas. The historical evidence clearly implicates local residents, however, and reveals that many were present when the most violent episodes occurred during that first week of January in 1923. Rosewood, like the events that occurred throughout the South and the nation, was a tragedy, and revealed the powerful commitment to racial exception in a nation committed to democracy and freedom.

⁵⁵Information provided to the author by the Florida League of Cities, Tallahassee. The other all-white city is Jay, Florida.