



Courtesy of the Arkansas State Archives

Pryor Center Presents:
A Symposium on the Elaine Massacre
SEPTEMBER 19, 2019

ONE EAST CENTER STREET
THE FAYETTEVILLE SQUARE

Pryor Center Presents: A Symposium on the Elaine Massacre

September 19, 2019

- 9:00 – 9:15** **Welcome**
Calvin White, Jr.
Associate Dean, Fulbright College
- 9:15 – 9:30** **Video: “Scipio Africanus Jones:
Both Intelligent and Wise”**
Scott Lunsford
Associate Director, Pryor Center
- 9:30 – 10:30** **A Family History and Recovery from the
Elaine Massacre**
Judge Brian S. Miller
- 10:30 – 10:45** **Break**
- 10:45 – 11:45** **Discovering a Hidden Past:
How Do We Know That a Massacre Occurred?**
Robert Whitaker
- 11:45 – 1:00** **Lunch**
- 1:00 – 2:15** **Damaged Heritage:
From the Elaine Race Massacre to Reconciliation**
J. Chester Johnson
- 2:15 – 2:30** **Break**
- 2:30 – 3:15** **What Is a True Ally?
An Open Conversation on True Racism**
Sheila Walker
- 3:15 – 4:15** ***Moore v. Dempsey* and the Rights Revolution**
Rayman L. Solomon

Overview:

The Elaine Race Massacre

By Brian Mitchell, Ph.D.

The Elaine Race Massacre began on September 30, 1919 and lasted until October 7, 1919. The catalyst for the massacre was the formation of a local chapter of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America (PFHUA) in Phillips County. The PFHUA was established in Winchester, a small community located in Drew County, Arkansas, by a local sharecropper named Robert Lee Hill in 1918. The union's goals were to help members obtain fair wages and treatment within the sharecropping system. The black farmers who joined the union believed that by combining their financial resources, they could afford to hire legal representation and sue their plantation owners for stolen wages and spurious accounting of their debts.

Shortly after the Elaine chapter's formation, so-called "good negroes" informed plantation owners of the union and its intentions. On September 30, 1919, as the union members met at the Hoops Spur church, a few miles from Elaine, the meeting was interrupted by the arrival of a group of law enforcement officers and a black trustee from Helena's jail. The officers would contend that their arrival at the church during a meeting was a matter of fate and maintained that they stopped due to mechanical problems with their car.

There are several conflicting narratives as to which group, the officers or the sharecroppers, fired the first shot. What is known is that one of the officers was killed, W. A. Adkins, and another wounded, Charles W. Pratt, in the incident. The trustee, "Kidd" Collins, escaped the shootout unharmed and made his way to Elaine where he reported the shooting. Local telegraph operators contacted law enforcement in neighboring towns and the governor's office. Within hours, mobs of hundreds of white men poured into the county to suppress the alleged black revolt that had been reported to them. The governor contacted the Department of War and asked if United States soldiers could be used to put down the alleged revolution. The Secretary of War directed more than 500 soldiers to go to Elaine.

The black populace of Phillips County was subjected to violence from the mobs which flooded into the county. Deputized American Legion

members, police officers and soldiers added to the violence. Without sanctuary or refuge, black sharecroppers were left with few options. Many hid in the swamps and thickets, others were said to have been gunned down in fields as they worked, and throngs of others surrendered themselves to the authorities for arrest. Held in a makeshift jail, hundreds of blacks were detained until their participation in the PFHUA could be verified. Those farmers who had not participated in the union were held until their landlords arrived to vouch for and collect them. Those fortunate enough to leave the stockade were given passes they were to show on demand and were ordered to return to the fields for work.

Scores of the union's members were charged with assault, murder and nightriding. Twelve members were charged with capital murder and sentenced to death. The massacre and the sharecroppers sentenced to death drew the attention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Through grassroots efforts, the NAACP built support for the sharecroppers, dubbed the "Elaine Twelve," and raised money for their legal counsel. It was in the defense of the Elaine Twelve that Scipio Jones, one of the lawyers for the twelve, rose to national acclaim. Scipio Jones and the NAACP's defense team worked to free the twelve defendants, who were divided into the *Moore v. Dempsey* and *Ware v. Dempsey* cases. On February 19, 1923, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a 6–2 decision in favor of the Moore defendants, maintaining the Twelve had been denied "due process" and noting the judicial proceedings had been influenced by a mob that had assembled outside of the courthouse before the men were sentenced.

Despite the favorable ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court, the Moore defendants remained in jail facing a re-trial in district court. On November 3, 1923, Governor McRae commuted the death sentences of the sharecroppers to twelve-year terms in prison, making them immediately eligible for parole. On January 13, 1925, the six Moore defendants were granted indefinite furloughs from McRae and were released from jail.

Source: UA at Little Rock Collections and Archives Exhibits: Center for Arkansas History and Culture and Sequoyah National Research Center.
Elaine Race Massacre: Red Summer in Arkansas
<https://ualrexhibits.org/elaine/>

Symposium Speakers

J. Chester Johnson is a well-known poet, essayist and translator, who grew up one county removed from the site of the Elaine Massacre. He has written extensively on race and civil rights, composing the Litany for the National Day of Repentance when the Episcopal Church formally apologized for its role in transatlantic slavery and related evils. His grandfather, Alonzo Birch, who became a father figure to him upon the death of his own father, worked for the Missouri-Pacific Railroad in McGehee, Arkansas, and participated in the massacre. Johnson's three most recent books are *St. Paul's Chapel & Selected Shorter Poems*, *Now And Then: Selected Longer Poems*, and *Auden, the Psalms, and Me*. He was educated at Harvard College and the University of Arkansas and received the university's Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2010.

Judge Brian S. Miller was sworn in as a United States District Court Judge for the Eastern District of Arkansas in 2008, and served as chief judge from 2012 to 2019. Before joining the federal bench, Miller served as an associate judge on the Arkansas Court of Appeals. He has practiced law in Memphis, Tennessee; served as city judge for Holly Grove, Arkansas; city attorney for the cities of Helena, Lakeview and Edmondson, Arkansas; deputy prosecuting attorney for Phillips County, Arkansas; and legal counsel for the Helena-West Helena School District. Miller serves on the Judicial Resources Committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States and on the Eighth Circuit Judicial Counsel. He is a graduate of Phillips College of the University of Arkansas, the University of Central Arkansas and Vanderbilt Law School. Four of his great uncles were among the victims of the Elaine Massacre.

Rayman L. Solomon served as provost of Rutgers-Camden and dean of the Law School for 16 years. Prior to coming to Rutgers-Camden, he was associate dean for academic affairs and curriculum at Northwestern University School of Law; associate director and research fellow at the American Bar Foundation; and director of the Seventh Circuit History Project. In 1981, he published *History of the Seventh Circuit, 1891–1941*. Born in Helena, Arkansas, Solomon graduated with a B.A. from Wesleyan University and earned a J.D. and a Ph.D. in American Legal History from the University of Chicago. He has been an active member of the Elaine Massacre Memorial Committee.

Sheila Walker is deeply committed to a reconciliation of the interracial and generational trauma associated with the Elaine Massacre. Members of her family—including her great-grandmother Sally Giles and several great uncles—were among its victims. One great uncle, Albert Giles, was one of the 12 African American sharecroppers convicted of murder immediately following the massacre. As a high school sophomore, Walker was inspired by a mentoring program offered through the University of Chicago through which she gained “a different perspective of life’s possibilities beyond poverty.” She joined the Student Nonviolence Coordination Committee and began to participate in marches, sit-ins and boycotts during the civil rights movement. After high school, she studied at Wilson Junior College and Loyola University, where she earned a degree in sociology. Walker worked for the Onondaga County Health Department Cancer Services Program, where she served as co-facilitator of a breast, cervical and colon cancer support group. Walker has served in the U.S. Army Reserves and worked in Federal Law Enforcement in New York City.

Robert Whitaker is a journalist and the author of five books. His book on the Elaine Massacre, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice that Remade a Nation*—published in 2008—won the Anthony J. Lucas work-in-progress award, and was named by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as one of the best non-fiction books of 2008. The *New York Times* credited Whitaker with paring down extraneous material and placing the massacre and the Supreme Court decision in their full legal and historical context while, at the same time, reviving the story of a great African American lawyer, Scipio Africanus Jones. Whitaker is a former Knight Science Journalism Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a former fellow of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University.

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The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History is an oral history program with the mission to document the history of Arkansas through the collection of spoken memories and visual records, preserve the collection in perpetuity, and connect Arkansans and the world to the collection through the internet, TV broadcasts, educational programs and other means. The Pryor Center records audio and video interviews about Arkansas history and culture, collects other organizations' recordings, organizes these recordings into an archive, and provides public access to the archive, primarily through the website at pryorcenter.uark.edu. The Pryor Center is the state's only oral and visual history program with a statewide, 75-county mission to collect, preserve and share audio and moving image recordings of Arkansas history.

About the J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences:

The J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences is the largest and most academically diverse unit on campus with three schools, 16 departments and 43 academic programs and research centers. The college provides the core curriculum for all University of Arkansas students and is named for J. William Fulbright, former university president and longtime U.S. senator.

