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THE LYNCHING OF LEO FRANK

The following lesson is intended for secondary students (grades 9-12), and should help them explore the complex issues surrounding the Leo Frank case. Students will develop an understanding of how anti-semitism, racism, and other social forces affected life in the post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow South.

Designed by Jeff Smith

THE CASE

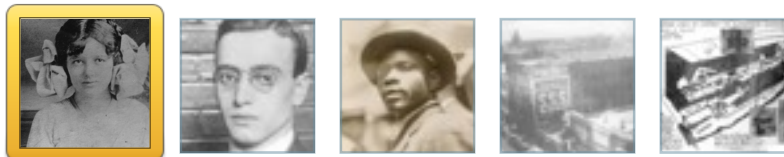
In the early morning of April 27th, 1913, the body of Mary Phagan was found strangled to death in the basement of an Atlanta, GA pencil factory. Next to her body the police discovered two semiliterate notes that seemed at first to have been written by her ("i wright while play with me," read one) but were plainly the work of someone else.

The investigation focused on two suspects: Jim Conley, the factory's black janitor who was arrested after he was seen washing out a bloody shirt a few days after the murder, and Leo M. Frank, the factory's Jewish supervisor and the last man to admit to seeing Mary Phagan alive.

After intensive interrogation, Conley claimed Frank committed the murder when the girl rejected his sexual advances. Conley added that Frank dictated the notes to him in an effort to pin the crime on another black employee.

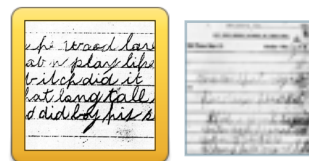
Frank and Conley were both arrested, and the ensuing trial captivated the entire city of Atlanta. The case also brought to the forefront the ugly realities of bigotry, prejudice, and hatred in the South.

People and Places



GALLERY 1.1 Murder notes found at the scene of the crime

*and he would have m
d dab n play like the
but ilch did it
t that long tall lba
and did his his s*



The trial of Leo Frank began in a brutal heat wave the summer of 1913. A massive crowd gathered and people clung to rooftops and light poles to catch a glimpse of the trial. The proceedings were highly irregular, full of hearsay testimony, lurid details, shoddy police work and contradictory statements on the witness stand.

Frank's own nervous and rambling testi-

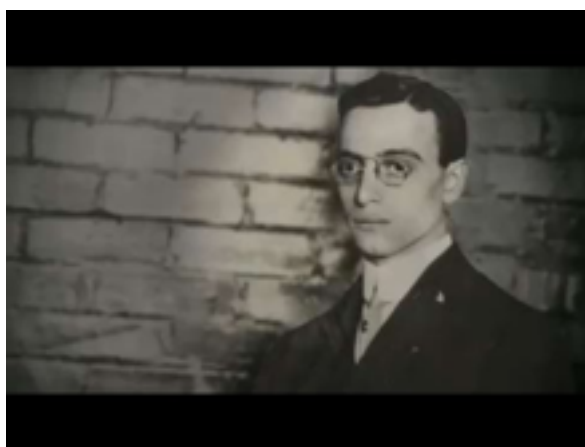


mony did nothing to help his case. Despite Conley's conflicting statements and the lack of any physical evidence linking Frank to the murder, the all-white jurors accepted the word of the Southern black janitor over that of the Northern Jewish factory superintendent. Leo Frank was pronounced guilty and sentenced to death.

THE HATRED

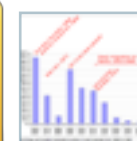
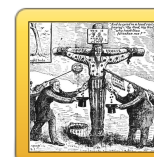
The deep-seated racism toward blacks in the Jim Crow South is well documented. Rampant lynchings and widespread institutional prejudice made daily life a treacherous affair for most African Americans. Their very survival depended on staying subservient to local white citizens.

Lynching Culture in the South



At the turn of the century, the South was still reeling from the after-effects of the Civil War, and had endured a difficult era of Reconstruction. Traditionally, the south had been an agrarian economy, and many people struggled with the transition to industrialization that accompanied reconstruction.

“Carpetbaggers” from the north had descended on the south to take advantage of business opportunities, and resent-



ment spread toward these outsiders. Leo Frank was a Cornell-educated New Yorker who had married into a wealthy Atlanta family. His arrest fanned the flames of resentment toward invading “Yankees,” and a swell of hatred built up around the case.

Much of the vitriol centered on Frank’s Jewish faith, showing bigotry in the South wasn’t just reserved for blacks. Some historians argue that prejudice against Afri-

can Americans shielded Jews in the South from discrimination. Certainly this is the case in comparison to European outbreaks against the Jews culminating in the Holocaust. Yet Jews and blacks have been linked ambiguously in the South since the mid-nineteenth century, and the periods of greatest racism coincide with rises in anti-Semitism.

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

In the early 20th century, daily newspapers were still the dominant source for disseminating information to the public. At the time of the Mary Phagan incident, Atlanta featured three prominent newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution, The Atlanta Journal, and the upstart Atlanta Georgian.

The Georgian had recently purchased by noted newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, who had added the paper to his national network. His business tactics had changed the industry, with much of his success coming from employing the practices of “yellow journalism.”

This type of writing featured exaggerations of news events, scandal-mongering,

and sensationalism, and proved effective when breaking into established markets and stealing readers. Where traditional journalism called for an unbiased presentation of the facts, Hearst encouraged striking and emotionally charged headlines.

These tactics he brought to the Atlanta Georgian, and, faced with dwindling readership, the established Atlanta papers were forced to follow suit.

The three galleries below feature front pages of the three major Atlanta newspapers covering events in the Leo Frank case. Peruse the documents and reflect on the following questions as you read:

- What similarities or differences are there between the coverage of the three papers?
- What elements of the case are being sensationalized?
- How does each paper depict Leo Frank?
- What kind of emotions are the papers trying to evoke?
- Identify examples of bias (going beyond just the facts)

The Atlanta Constitution



The Atlanta Journal



The Atlanta Georgian



GOVERNOR JOHN SLATON

Following the highly unorthodox trial of Leo Frank, several parties were unsettled with the result and began efforts to rectify the situation. Judge Leonard Roan, who presided over the case, himself said, “After many months of continued deliberation, I am still uncertain of Frank’s guilt.” He relied on the jury’s decision to assuage his conscience, but several lawyers involved in the case began sifting deeper through the evidence.

In particular, several oddities in the murder notes became clear in light of the testimony of Jim Conley. Key to the prosecution’s case was the notion that no “ignorant negro” could have composed the notes, arguing the use of “did” was a sign the author was white as most blacks would have used “done”. However, in his testimony Conley used “did” correctly several times, as was also featured in love letters he was discovered to have written.

Also, in his testimony Conley frequently used compound adjectives (“long, tall, lean, black man”), something featured prominently in the murder notes. There was also mention of the “night witch,” a spirit of the voodoo-folk faiths common among the black populations of the time who was said to strangle children in the dead of the night. It is highly unlikely Leo Frank was aware of this fable, which casted doubt on Conley’s testimony that Frank had dictated the notes to him.



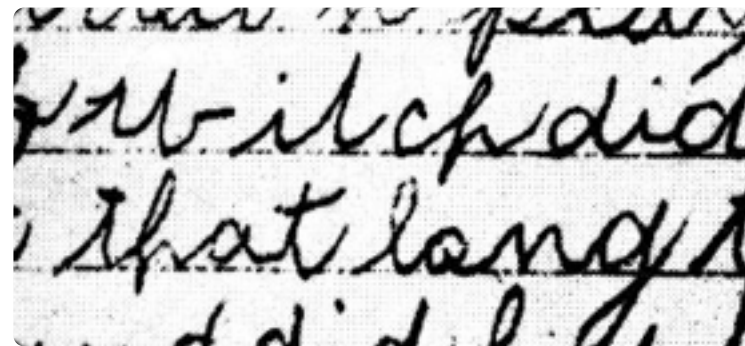
Gov. John Marshall Slaton and his wife, Sarah "Sally" Frances Grant.

Despite this new evidence, Leo Frank’s appeals to the courts were rejected, and the Supreme Court seemingly put the question to rest, ruling 7-2 against Frank. The last hope for Frank’s life lay with Georgia’s Governor, John M. Slaton, who had the power to commute his sentence to life in prison.

Slaton was deeply troubled by the case, and had unearthed evidence against Conley of his own. In his testimony, Conley had besmirched Leo Frank’s character by giving detailed descriptions of liaisons Frank had in his office with prostitutes. Conley described very particular sexual fantasies, and Slaton was shocked to read the same fantasies in Conley’s love letters. To Slaton, this was a case of “transference,” meaning Conley had ascribed his own perversions onto Frank, and called into question the entirety of Conley’s testimony.

The governor decided he had no choice and commuted Frank’s sentence to life in prison on the final day of his term as governor.

Murder notes found at the scene of the crime



Text of Gov. Slaton’s statement

“[T]he performance of my duty under the Constitution is a matter of my conscience. The responsibility rests where the power is reposed. Judge Roan, with that awful sense of responsibility, which probably came over him as he thought of that Judge before whom he would shortly appear, calls to me from another world to request that I do that which he should have done. I can endure misconstruction, abuse and condemna-

PASSIONS FLARE

Slaton's action fueled the fires of hatred once again, and the media responded with impassioned opinions. The actions of the court around the Leo Frank case generated national attention, and papers from across the country began making their voices heard. In Atlanta, still reeling from the effects of the Civil War, these articles were seen as intrusive affronts to the honor of the South, especially those from the "Yankee" papers from the North.

The following documents were written by two prominent figures of the time: [Tom Watson](#), who would later become a U.S. Senator from the state of Georgia, and [Adolph Ochs](#), a Jewish American and publisher of the New York Times.

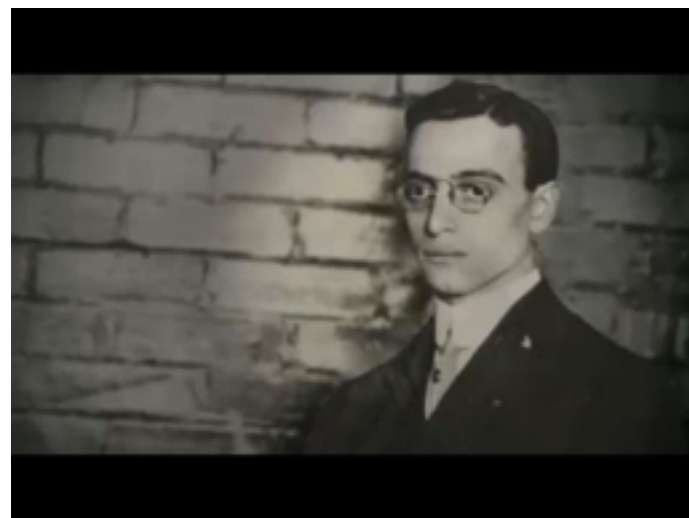
Peruse the documents and reflect on these questions as you read:

- What similarities and differences can you identify between the two pieces?
- What sorts of inflammatory language is used?
- What reasoning does each author employ to support their opinions?
- How do the authors refer to the facts of the case or the ideas communicated by Gov. Slaton?

GALLERY 1.2 Tom Watson - The Jeffersonian



Watson vs New York Times



GALLERY 1.3 Adolph Ochs - New York Times



THE LYNCHING

Images of the Hanging

Just a few days after Gov. Slaton commuted Leo Frank's sentence, people enraged by his decision began plotting to exercise their own form of justice.

Among the conspirators were a judge, solicitor general, and an ex-governor; the elite of Georgian society.

On August 16th, 1915, in the dead of night, 25 armed men kidnapped Leo Frank from prison. They wore no masks and didn't fire a shot, yet were able to get Frank out of a state prison in ten minutes. They drove him over a hundred miles to Marietta, Georgia, Mary Phagan's home town. Underneath an oak tree across from Mary's home, the Judge among them delivered the court's death sentence, and Leo Frank was hanged.



Perhaps even more troubling than the lynching itself was the reaction of the community. As news spread of the hanging, a crowd began to gather around the body. In fact, a party of sorts began in Marietta's town square, where more than a thousand people gathered to celebrate the occasion.

Souvenirs from the scene were also collected. The rope was cut into pieces and sold off, and photos of the scene became prized mementos and were prominently displayed in general stores and other public places.

At Leo Frank's funeral more than 15,000 people filed by to see the body. How many came to pay their respects is another matter entirely.



The Abduction and Lynching
of Leo Frank



ALONZO MANN

In 1982, at 82 years of age, Alonzo Mann couldn't take it any more. After years of silence, he began confiding in his friends the events he saw on the night of Mary Phagan's murder. Mann had been Leo Frank's office boy at the pencil factory when he was just 13 years old, running errands and filing papers for \$8 a day. That fateful night, he witnessed Jim Conley carrying the girl's lifeless body down to the cellar. Conley threatened the young boy, and Alonzo's mother urged him to remain silent throughout the affair.

Alonzo Mann's account (from NYT article):

Alonzo was working with Mr. Frank in the office that Saturday morning. He had encountered Mr. Conley early that day when the burly black janitor asked to borrow a dime for beer. Mr. Mann, who is white, did not lend him the money.

Source

Mann's story was picked up by the Nashville Tennessean, and soon after his sworn affidavit was the key evidence in a new appeal trial for Leo Frank. "Many times I wanted to get it out of my heart," Mr. Mann said in an interview. "I'm glad I've told it all. I've been living with it for a long time. I feel a certain amount of freedom now. I just hope it does some good."

In 1986, the state Board of Pardons and Paroles admitted that officials failed to protect

Alonzo Mann



Frank and prosecute the members of the lynch mob that killed him. However, the board avoided the issue of Frank's guilt or innocence.

The state Board of Pardons and Paroles admitted in 1986 that Georgia officials failed to protect Frank and prosecute his suspected killers, a lynch mob that included many of Marietta's elite. But it sidestepped the issue of his guilt or innocence.

This dark chapter in the history of the South is still alive today. The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution became co-owned in 1950, officially merging in 2001 as The Atlanta Journal Constitution. 100 years later, the paper continues to publish articles about the case, and recently printed an opinion calling for Leo Frank's official pardon:

[Atlanta Journal Constitution Article](#)

THE ASSIGNMENT

Gov. Slaton and Alonzo Mann faced difficult choices as the Leo Frank affair unfolded. Slaton had the courage to correct the injustice he perceived, while Mann took 70 years to face up to his conscience.

- What would you have done if you were in their situations?
- Would events have played out differently?
- How might the world be different today?

Your assignment is to write a 2-3 page essay answering these questions and reflecting on courage in your own life. Your paper should include:

- A discussion of the courage of Gov. Slaton, Alonzo Mann, and in the Leo Frank case in general.
- An example of a hard decision you've had to face in your own life, and the courage you showed (or didn't show!).
- A discussion of how the courage of individuals can affect the lives of others. Either draw from historical examples or discuss your own example.

SOURCES

All video clips are from the film: [The People vs. Leo Frank website](#)

Photos in The Case: [Mary Phagan](#), [Leo Frank](#), [Jim Conley](#), [Pencil factory](#), [Crime Scene diagram](#), [Courtroom scene](#), [Frank in court](#)

Photos in The Hatred: [Anti-semitic cartoon](#), [Graph of lynchings](#)

Photos in Newspaper Coverage: [Constitution](#), [Journal](#), [Georgian](#)

Photos in Governor John Slaton: [Slaton and wife](#)

Photos in Passions Flare: [Tom Watson](#), [Jeffersonian article](#), [Adolph Ochs](#), [NYT article](#)

Photos in The Lynching: [Lynching photos](#), [Marietta celebration](#)

Photos in Alonzo Mann: [Young and old](#), [headline](#), [illustration](#), [at Rich's dept store](#)

REFLECTION BY JEFF SMITH

As I began thinking of topics for our document-based lessons, my mind immediately went to a topic with a strong family connection. My great-grandfather, William Smith, was one of the lawyers involved in the trial of Leo Frank.

However, this dark chapter in the history of Atlanta, Georgia and the Jim Crow South is heavy material, dealing with racism, bigotry, prejudice and lynching. All are certainly important issues worthy of a lesson, but the incident is not the most light-hearted affair. I thought I might prefer to investigate in-depth a more approachable topic, but my family ties made the subject too attractive to ignore.

I was indeed correct in the difficulty of the material, and, as I dug deeper, ugliness after ugliness bubbled to the surface. The topic also began to touch on a broad range of issues in the South, and focusing my lesson on specific documents and skills became an problem. I decided to focus on media coverage of the event, comparing the coverage of competing local papers and the unseemly journalism that was practiced.

The most frustrating part of my research experience stemmed from the controversial nature of

A close-up photograph of a bronze statue, likely a reclining figure such as a deity or a noble. The statue is positioned diagonally across the frame, with its head at the bottom left and its body extending towards the top right. The bronze has a weathered, patinated appearance with various shades of brown, green, and blue. The background is dark and features vertical architectural elements, possibly columns or door frames, which are slightly out of focus. A white rectangular box containing text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

FROM EXPLORING HISTORY: VOL III

Available free at [iTunes](#)

This eBook is a collaborative project of Peter Pappas and his Fall 2015 Social Studies Methods Class [School of Education](#) ~ University of Portland, Portland Ore.

Graduate and undergraduate level pre-service teachers were assigned the task of developing an engaging research question, researching supportive documents and curating them into a DBQ suitable for middle or high school students.

For more on this class, visit the course blog [EdMethods](#)
For more on this book project and work flow tap [here](#).

Chapters in chronological order

1. *Finding Egyptian Needles in Western Haystacks*
by Heidi Kershner
2. *Pompeii* by Caleb Wilson
3. *Samurai: Sources of Warrior Identity in Medieval Japan*
by Ben Heebner
4. *The Declaration of Independence* by David Deis
5. *Reconstruction in Political Cartoons*
by EmmaLee Kuhlmann
6. *Regulation Through the Years*
by Chenoa Musillo Olson / Sarah Wieking
7. *Battle of the Somme* by John Hunt

8. *The Lynching of Leo Frank* by Jeff Smith
9. *The Waco Horror* by Alekz Wray
10. *The Harlem Renaissance* by Monica Portugal
11. *A Date of Infamy* by Mollie Carter
12. *Anti-Vietnam War Imagery* by Felicia Teba
13. *Examining the Ongoing Evolution of American Government* by Eric Cole

Peter Pappas, editor

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His popular blog, [Copy/Paste](#) features downloads of his instructional resources, projects and publications. Follow him at [Twitter @edteck](#). His other multi-touch eBooks are available at [here](#). For an example of one of his eBook design training workshops tap [here](#).

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Cover image: Door knocker

Amsterdam NL Photograph by Peter Pappas